

The Voice of the Lord - Psalm 29

Series: Psalms of Praise

Date: 6 October 2024, 19th Sunday after Trinity

Location: St George's Battery Point

Texts: Psalm 29, John 1.1-5

One of the things I miss from my childhood is the rain. Growing up in PNG we had the most incredible tropical storms. You would see flashes of lightning lighting up the horizon and count the seconds till you hear the boom of the thunder. I remember one storm when I was in year 6 and boarding with some family friends. It was so violent that they brought their 2 german shepherds inside. There was a flash and an almighty thunderclap simultaneously as lightning struck maybe just up the street. Being in a storm can be terrifying, but also exhilarating as you see the raw power of nature on display. You have a sense that you are small and powerless.

Today we're starting a new series on Psalms. And we're particularly looking at Psalms of praise. Our Psalm for today is psalm 29 by king David, Israel's greatest king and poet. David uses the experience of being in a storm as a way to speak about God's power and majesty as the one who is king over creation. The Psalm is one of the oldest in the Bible and uses some of the pictures from the mythology of the surrounding cultures. David repurposes these myths to both undercut the gods of the surrounding nations and at the same time to praise Yahweh, Israel's God, the one who created the heavens and the earth. The Psalm has 3 sections. Verse 1-2, Give (or Ascribe) to the Lord. Verses 3-9 the Voice of the Lord, and verses 10-11, The Lord gives. Let's look at each in turn.

1-2 Give to the Lord

Have a read with me from verse 1.

- 1 Ascribe to the LORD, you heavenly beings,
ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.
- 2 Ascribe to the LORD the glory due to his name;
worship the LORD in the splendour of his holiness.

I've entitled this section "Give to the Lord", because that's another way you could translate the word rendered "ascribe". It pops up again in the final verse 11. Three times there is the invitation to give to the Lord. Who is this addressed to? The heavenly beings, or literally "sons of god". There's a wonderful ambiguity in that phrase. We might think of angels or spiritual beings. But the sons of God is another way of speaking about us as human beings. Finally, it's also a way of speaking about the "gods". The picture is of God's heavenly throne room where all the celestial beings are called to come and worship him. This could include say the gods of the surrounding nations like Baal. It's a poetic strategy to actually undermine the power and authority of the gods of the surrounding nations and to show their impotence before the LORD, Yahweh, the God of Israel.

So the sons of God are called to give Yahweh the glory due to his name. Far from being gods to be worshipped themselves, they are called to worship him alone. He is the one who is strong, a mighty warrior. He is the king over all the gods, robed in majesty. And there is a further irony for the surrounding nations - this song is being sung by God's people, and they are calling the heavenly council to praise his name. David's song echoes down to us inviting you and me, along with all the sons of God to worship him.

3-9 The Voice of the Lord

The second stanza of the poem revolves around the "the voice of the Lord". Read with me, and see how many times that phrase is repeated.

The voice of the LORD is over the waters;
 the God of glory thunders,
 the LORD thunders over the mighty waters.

4 The voice of the LORD is powerful;
 the voice of the LORD is majestic.

5 The voice of the LORD breaks the cedars;
 the LORD breaks in pieces the cedars of Lebanon.

6 He makes Lebanon leap like a calf,
 Sirion like a young wild ox.

7 The voice of the LORD strikes
 with flashes of lightning.

8 The voice of the LORD shakes the desert;
 the LORD shakes the Desert of Kadesh.

9 The voice of the LORD twists the oaks
 and strips the forests bare.
 And in his temple all cry, 'Glory!'

The picture here is of an almighty thunder storm. David pictures the voice of the Lord first as thunder, in verse 3.

The voice of the LORD is over the waters;
 the God of glory thunders,
 the LORD thunders over the mighty waters.

4 The voice of the LORD is powerful;
 the voice of the LORD is majestic.

How is that power seen? Verse 5

The voice of the LORD breaks the cedars;
 the LORD breaks in pieces the cedars of Lebanon.

This verse reminds me of another storm when I was staying at a village on the coast in PNG, where the lightning danced outside. We woke up the next morning to find the tops of several coconut trees completely shattered.

Verse 6 reminds me of looking out my window and seeing the hills around lit up by flashes of lightning, each flash gives a different impression. Here the mountains of Lebanon are dancing in the light.

6 He makes Lebanon leap like a calf,
Sirion like a young wild ox.

It's only in verse 7 that we actually get the mention of lightning.

7 The voice of the LORD strikes
with flashes of lightning. (literally flashes of fire).

Then in verse 9 and 10 the picture switches from thunder and lightning to the gale force winds.

8 The voice of the LORD shakes the desert;
the LORD shakes the Desert of Kadesh.
9 The voice of the LORD twists the oaks
and strips the forests bare.

This is perhaps a little more of a Hobart style storm, like we had through September. Howling winds that snap trees like twigs. The storm in this Psalm has swept from Lebanon to the north right through Israel to the desert of Kadesh in the south east.

Ok, so we get a sense of the picture that David is using. But he also is drawing upon the mythology of the surrounding cultures. I had great plans in my long service leave last year to read some big books. That didn't happen. But I did listen to an absolutely fascinating podcast from the Bible Project on dragons in the Bible. Maybe appropriate for me as the minister of St George's. So this is where I'm getting this from, although it's also in the commentaries on this Psalm.¹ Yes, dragons are there in the Bible. You may know the dragon in Revelation. But actually they are there right from chapter 1 in Genesis. There's a dragon slaying myth that we told and retold in the Ancient Near East - in Canaan, Babylon, Assyria and so on. In these cultures, dragons we're flying reptiles, they were primarily sea monsters. The sea was a place of chaos and destruction. It threatened to undo the peace and life on the land. This was personified in the figure of the sea monster or dragon, a beast of chaos that threatens to undo the order of creation. In these ancient myths the storm god who rules over the land would fight and slay the sea monster.

The storm god of the Israel's immediate neighbours, the Canaanites, was Baal. The god of the sea was Yam. So, how does this Psalm use those mythological pictures? We see this in verse 3: The voice of the LORD is over the waters;

the God of glory thunders,
the LORD thunders over the mighty waters.

Here you have Yahweh depicted as the storm god thundering over the waters. And then again in verse 10: "The LORD sits enthroned over the flood."

¹ <https://bibleproject.com/guides/dragons-in-the-bible/#how-the-bible-uses-dragon-imagery>

But, David takes this mythological picture and subverts it. Here, both the storm and the sea are subject to the LORD. Yes the storm has subdued the sea. But the sea and the storm are not rivals to Yahweh, they are his servants.

Further, David also alludes to the account of creation in Genesis 1. Did you count how many times these verses use that phrase “the voice of the Lord”? Seven. Just like the 7 days of creation. And how did God create in Genesis 1? By speaking. And if you remember back to Genesis 1.2 it says, “Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.” Here the Spirit of God is brooding over the waters of chaos before God brings order to the world and fills its emptiness with life. Now in Psalm 29.3 it’s the *voice* of God that hovers over the waters of chaos. And just as in Genesis out of the chaos God brings the order of creation through speaking, so here in Psalm 29 king David depicts God’s voice as ruling through the power of the storm - it’s thunder, lightning and wind. Yahweh, the God of Israel, is sovereign over his creation. He is victorious over the flood and he is Lord even over the terrifying power of the storm.

The second great moment of the victory of the God of Israel over the sea was in the Exodus. There after having rescued Israel from slavery to Pharaoh through signs and wonders, Yahweh then carves a path through the sea so that his people can pass through on dry land. Pharaoh has become the dragon seeking to devour God’s people, but God then uses the sea dragon to swallow Pharaoh and his army and rescue his people. And so in Exodus 15 Moses and Miriam sing a song of Yahweh’s victory over and through the sea. There we read, “The LORD is a warrior, the LORD is his name.”² So now as David sings of the voice of the LORD over the waters, and the LORD sitting enthroned over the flood, this Psalm too recalls God’s power displayed in his rescue of his people, and bringing them to the peace and safety of the promised land.

Having heard and seen the awesome voice of the Lord, how does this stanza end? “In his temple all cry, ‘Glory!’” It’s as though we sit with Elijah after the fury of the wind, the earthquake and the fire, and in that still silence all we can do is fall before Almighty God in worship. And with the angels and all the sons of God cry “Glory!”

10-11 The Lord gives

That brings us to the concluding verses of the Psalm. Have a read with me verse 10.

The LORD sits enthroned over the flood;
the LORD is enthroned as King for ever.

So far the Psalm has been entirely focussed on God, his power, his glory. But then in the final verse comes a turn of sublime sweetness.

11 The LORD gives strength to his people;
the LORD blesses his people with peace.

² Exodus 15.3

The Psalm began with a call for all the sons of God to give the Lord the glory and worship due to his name. Now as the Psalm ends it is the Lord Almighty himself who gives. And what wonderful gifts he gives. This Psalm has been all about God's awesome strength, especially seen in the terrifying power of the thunder, lightning and wind of the storm. Now the Almighty gives *strength* to his people. If the Psalm has been about God as the warrior, victorious over the chaotic waters of the flood, now having triumphed, the King blesses his people with peace.

I hope you've enjoyed dipping your toe into the world of ancient imagination as we've meditated on this psalm. How might we read it this side of the cross of Jesus. The key theme of this Psalm has been the voice of the Lord in and over creation. When we read the beginning of John's Gospel we discover that it is through the eternal Son, *the Word*, that the Father has made all things. This Word has become one of us in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. So read as Christian Scripture, the voice of the Lord in Psalm is none other than the voice of Christ himself. He is the one who stilled the raging wind and waves with a word. He is the one who walked upon the paths of the sea, demonstrating his power over creation. What is more, in his death he entered into the belly of the dragon to slay it from the inside and in his resurrection he rescues us who all our lives have been held in slavery by the fear of death. He shatters those who stand tall in their pride. He speaks by his Spirit to all find themselves in dry and thirsty land. The voice of his Spirit shakes us out of our comfortable but empty existence. Will you hear his voice today? Will you worship him and give him the glory due his name?

It is this Almighty Word who gives strength to his people. So when you see lightning dancing on the hills, join with the heavenly host and cry "Glory!" When you face the storm, you need not be afraid for he is near. He is Lord of the storm and he is your strength. You can persevere. It is this Victorious Word who blesses his people with peace. Amidst the sound and fury you can be still, because he is with you. Lift your eyes to him, trust him, worship him, hear his voice calling, come to me all you who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest.