

**Lent IV, 2021: Psalm 23 and Matthew 5:1-12.**

***'Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me, all the days of my life.'***

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The Psalms, it is traditionally held, were written by David. David – the shepherd boy with the sling and the harp, David the giant killer, the greatest of all Israel's Kings. And, let us not forget, David who pretty successfully wrecked his own life, and that of many others. The King who thought he could have what he wanted, even when that was another man's wife, Bathsheba. He got her pregnant, and when he couldn't cover it up, he had her husband Uriah – one of his best and most loyal officers – killed. The child then died - and David, at least, understood that as God's judgement. Later his whole family would fall apart, and David's own son Absalom, having killed his brothers, rose against his father in rebellion. That ended in a pile of corpses, and Absalom himself hanging from a tree and run through by David's general. The rebellion was broken, but so was David, uttering some of the most moving words in Scripture: 'O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would that I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son.'

Goodness and mercy shall follow me, all the days of my life.

If David *did* write the Psalms, what on earth can he have meant by that? Goodness and mercy shall follow me, all the days of my life.

He cannot have meant that only good things would happen to him. Awful things happened to David, things that would break anyone. And God doesn't stop awful things from happening to us. I look around this church and I know many of us, most of us, know that from direct personal experience. God doesn't keep you safe. Whatever the words mean, they can't mean that.

And when he speaks in particular of *mercy*, he can't have meant that God was soft and kind and lovely and never punishes. Remember, David thought that many of the things that went wrong in his life happened because he himself had gone wrong. That it was his lust, his greed, his murder that lay at the root of his disasters. It doesn't always work that way, of course. Bad stuff happens to good people, and the wicked often prosper. David's Psalms are full of *that* observation. But he's also honest enough to know that much of the time, it is true: bad actions have bad consequences. Life won't let you off the hook; God won't let you off the hook. David knew. He knew that if you consistently break God's law, then at the very least, God lets the consequences happen. In the end He says to us, very well then: *your* will be done.

That incidentally is a good way of thinking about what the Bible means when it talks about God's wrath and anger, things Roland touched on last week. It's not that God is an unpredictable, moody tyrant – although there certainly are some texts you could read that way. Overall, though, the picture is more that He made us, and the world, to run in a certain way – the way, fundamentally, of love. And if you go on pushing against that way, then eventually you end up with a broken world, and a broken you. You end like David: 'my son, my son Absalom!' God won't stop us from sliding into that pit. He won't stop greed, violence, and selfishness having their natural, catastrophic consequences.

So what can Psalm 23 mean? Goodness and mercy shall follow me, all the days of my life.

It means this. When this world began to slide into the pit, and when each one of us, in our different ways – and they are legion – began to slide there, God had a choice. God could have said, as indeed the Noah story speculates he did say, you know, I'm sorry I made them at all. I should never done it. And now I should just *undo* it. Creation has failed. It's over.

Or he could say: I will follow them, all the days of their life. Where they go, I will go. Even into the pit, into the ruins. I will make it so that there is no failure so deep, no death so total, that I'm not already there. I will *always* be there, and that means that despite everything, the creation need never fail. There will be nothing, *nothing*, that can't be touched, and healed, and turned around. And that's what the coming of Jesus, and his death on the Cross, is all about. *Goodness and mercy shall follow us, all the days of our lives.* All the days of our lives, and even into our death.

What David knew, and what became flesh in Jesus, is that we are surrounded by the mercy of God. Whatever the disaster we have made of ourselves, it is disaster surrounded, embraced, and nursed by mercy. God never hates us, however hateful we have made ourselves. He never wants to destroy us. He always, always wants to bring us home. That doesn't mean of course that he always succeeds. Perhaps there are, terribly, some who refuse him so deeply and firmly that his great wanting doesn't work. That's what we mean by Hell, and is a topic for another day. For today, know only this, his mercy follows us wherever we go, all the days of our life. His good-will towards us is simply indestructible.

That's the Gospel. We are surrounded, embraced, nursed by mercy. We are immersed in mercy.

So now ... what? If that's the truth, how do we live? And here's where I wish, for neatness' sake, that the Gospel reading was ever so slightly different. It says, blessed are the merciful, for they shall have mercy shown to them. Now, far be it from me to tell Jesus what he *should* have said (I do, you'll have noticed, have some ego issues!), but ... deep breath ... if you read the whole sweep of the Gospel and the New Testament, that thought, 'blessed are the merciful' needs, at least, some qualification. Because how do you get to be merciful? Likewise, we might ask, how do you get to be a peace-maker? Truly humble, poor in spirit? Truly pure in heart? Left to ourselves, remember, we are in the pit. There's no point just *telling* us to be these things. That's like telling babies to play Mozart. Or like telling a cripple to take up his bed and walk.

The thing is, though, that the Beatitudes are really less like instructions, and more like promises. You *will* be like this, says Jesus: I'll make you like it. It's not so much 'blessed are the merciful' – at least not straight away. It's more: blessed are those who have received great mercy. Blessed are those immersed in mercy. Blessed are those who are only merciful, because they have been filled with mercy, filled from beyond. Mercy is not something we produce, it's something poured into us. And poured into us, to flow through us, and into the world. The 'now what?' to the Gospel of mercy is that we give mercy to those around us.

So how can you, right now, practise giving mercy?

Two thoughts. First, having started with one monarchy in trouble, David's, let's talk about another – our own. Most people, it seems, have got fairly strong opinions on what's gone on this week. Are you Team Sussex, or Team Windsor? Is the Royal Family racist? Has it got no compassion for people with mental health struggles? Or are the Sussexes a pair of over entitled woke whingers? Many of us – myself included – have taken part quite enthusiastically in those debates this week. Even those who profess lofty indifference seem to have talked quite a lot in doing so.

Well, here's a thought: perhaps if we were merciful, we'd shut up. The Royal Family does not need our opinions. It does not need our pointing fingers, our moral certainties, especially given that none of us actually know them at all. We're not their loved ones, we're not even their friends. And yet we presume to pontificate about and dissect their lives in a way we could not bear if it was done to us. Some of us, at least, claim to love the monarchy but treat the actual people involved with no mercy at all. As if they were *entertainment*, 'the national soap opera.' But they're not actors: they're real people, in real pain, whatever the rights and wrongs of it. And all that we, who do not know them, should do is pray that somehow they can know the goodness and mercy that surrounds them, that there can be some grace and healing in their lives.

We can't do much more for the Royal Family. Shutting up and praying is probably our best bet. So here's one a bit closer to home. I'm prepared to bet that there are things that really quite annoy you about your family at the moment. Or maybe your workplace, or on Abbots Langley Matters, or, perhaps even the church. Maybe there's someone who always seem to speak to you in a funny, not especially nice kind of way. Or perhaps it's really irritating that technology, and the human beings operating it, seem to foul up so often. Perhaps things have got forgotten, or not been done quickly enough, or not in the way you would like them, and you'd really quite like to say so. And to say so quite plainly and sharply. Oh, that would feel good.

Well, mercy says: don't. Or at least don't straight away. Wait until you've thought about the human being on the other side of that criticism. Wait until you've thought about what life is like for them right now, and what it has been like over this nightmare year. Wait until you're sure that you're not just venting whatever's been hard for you out on them. And once you are sure, wait some more, till you know how to say your piece in a way which is gentle and kind and does not hurt. Remember how much you are loved. Remember the mercy that surrounds you, bears you, nurses you, even when you don't deserve it. Remember that, and let it pass through you to your neighbour, even if they don't deserve it. In a year which has left all of us a bit bruised and battered and exhausted, can we not just please cut each other some slack?

Goodness and mercy shall follow me, all the days of my life. Whoever we are, whatever we've done, we are surrounded, embraced, nursed by mercy. Immersed in mercy. Let us breathe it in deeply, and share it with the world around us – especially the bits that, like us, don't deserve it. And then indeed, we'll be truly blessed.

Amen.