

Bennoch Church: 11th September 2016

I have recently started to watch a drama on TV called *Someone knows my name*. It is about the slave trade from Africa to America in the 18th century. As you might imagine some of it is a hard watch. It makes you wonder how people can be treated so badly. It is part of our history. As a nation, we were involved in the dehumanisation of others. To be a slave is not to be treated as human. One of the great challenges of scripture is that it does not directly condemn slavery. It was another world. One we have in some senses moved on from. But think of what happened in South Africa during apartheid, people were dehumanised and some denominations of the church there even gave apartheid scriptural support.

I would like to say that world of exploitation lies in the past, but we all know that would be a lie. Modern day slavery is witnessed in the sex trade of women and children across the globe, including in the UK, and in the criminal gangs who traffic refugees for a price. We have all seen these pictures of human misery where human life is not seen as important or having any value. I think such practices we would class as evil. We would use that word, and there would be a common understanding of what we meant by it.

The writer of psalm 51 says to God, "*wash away all my evil and make me clean from my sin!*". Now we are getting personal. I

wonder how that statement makes you feel? How do you respond to the accusation that our failures in the sight of God, make us evil? I think we are happy to talk about God's great mercy and his love, and to receive it, but do we recognise the language of the Psalmist, who clearly saw himself as having sinned and that was evil in the sight of God.

The language here is uncomfortable. We might say, that was OK for the world of the psalmist, but we live in a totally different world, and in many ways that is true.

I suppose it depends on how we understand who God is. What image do we have of God. One image of Psalm 51 is that of God as judge. The psalmist says to God, you have every right to judge me. There seems to be an agony of heart in the world of the psalmist. He wants to be right with God, his creator, and in his mind there is only one solution, to be open with God, accept his failures, acknowledge them and receive God's forgiveness.

As with so many of the psalms we have no idea what is going on in the life of this individual, but to me it does not sound good! The language of the psalm talks about him feeling crushed and broken, and notice this, he clearly indicates that this hardship comes from the hand of God. Whatever is going on in his life, he believes it comes directly from God. I am not sure we have the same understanding of God today. But the psalmist is not bitter

about it. He understands that you cannot disconnect any aspect of life from God. He sees beyond his distress to happiness. I don't believe for a moment that he is asking God to take away what is causing his pain. His sense of well being or wholeness would come as a direct result, of being forgiven by God. Forgiveness is the key here, which is only valid of course, if you believe you have done something wrong in the first place!

This psalm is about a man's relationship with God and it is love and compassion that shines through, not judgement. That is starting point. Without God's constant love there can be no forgiveness. Can we forgive ourselves without first being forgiven by God. Can we love ourselves without first being loved by God. The psalmist clearly says, this is not something I can do. Only God forgives.

We don't live in the world of the psalmist. A society that accepted God without proof. It was part of their DNA. Who they were as a people. part of the identity of the nation of Israel. Life came from God, so God was seen in all aspects of life. But we do live in a world where people are seeking meaning and purpose. Trying to make sense of their place in the world.

So even if God is vague, unknown, ignored or rejected, deep down in all people, there is a longing to be known and accepted. As individuals, we all want to belong somewhere. Be part of something. I believe we are all spiritual people. Many would never use the language of the psalmist, but for many people

there is a sense of emptiness. Life is incomplete. Something deep within the soul is missing.

I wonder if we can give people a language to speak. Words to listen to and hold onto. Can we be people who live by and who point to the presence of compassion, equally and justice in the world and say, there is God. It may not be your language, but it has been your experience. Where people have known love, we can say to them, there is God in your life. When people make mistakes, and we have all made plenty of them, we can say, God offers his forgiveness and his peace.

It is never the power of words, but the love of God that changes lives. It is not the persuasion of our language that transforms, but the peace of God. It will never be, even the greatest poetry of the psalms, that will allow people to hear the silent whispers, the still voice or the loud cries of God, only an encounter with Word made flesh.

He is Jesus. He spoke to the psalmist. May we listen.

He is Jesus. He forgave the psalmist. Let us receive his grace and his love.

He is Jesus. He met the psalmist. May Christ meet with us, Amen.