

Whoso doeth these things shall never fall Psalm 15 and Daniel 3

None of us, I suspect, can have failed to have been moved by the events that have unfolded in Paris this weekend.

The loss of life, the senseless carnage, the turning upside-down of peoples lives have struck at the very heart of our beings.

No matter how hard we try, none of us can really make sense of the purpose behind such acts which achieve little more than fuelling the commonly held misconceptions of a faith which sadly the terrorists have distorted beyond recognition.

And I for one have huge admiration for those followers of Islam who have said publicly 'Not in my name' thereby standing firm to the principles in which they believe and hold dear.

And it perhaps worthwhile at this point, setting out for you the Five Pillars of Islam.

First Islam teaches that there is no God but God and Mohammad is his prophet.

Next, a follower of Islam is expected to pray five times a day; before sunrise, at midday, late afternoon, at sunset and during the night. On Friday, Muslims are expected to perform the after midday prayer together in the mosque.

Thirdly, a Muslim is expected to fast during Ramadan as a means of taking stock and being reflective.

The fourth pillar demands a tax, usually 2½%, be levied on every Muslim such that the community can support the needy.

And finally, Islam expects that every Muslim who can afford it makes a pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in their lifetime.

And there are huge numbers of Muslims who do their level best to live their lives by these principles.

But as with all religions, there are those fanatics who choose to ignore these principles and instead superimpose on them their own interpretation of what is fundamentally a peaceful faith.

And I am convinced that no normal follower of Islam would ever see what happened on Friday as being part of their faith.

In that regard, Muslims are no different to us as Christians.

They, and we, have to accept that there comes a point at which we each have to decide whether or not we are going to stand up for what we believe in or whether we are going to allow our values to be overridden.

Taking a stand is something that runs as a theme through the offerings from the Old Testament tonight.

Let's start with that wonderful and amazing story from the time of King Nebuchadnezzar.

As we heard, Nebuchadnezzar was a very vain man and he had a huge statue made of himself; it was a 30 metres high and 3 metres wide. Everybody had to worship it whenever he told the band to play a fanfare.

There were, however, 3 Jewish prisoners Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego who refused to do as Nebuchadnezzar demanded because they worshipped their own God who they believed to be the one true God.

And for their refusal Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were thrown into the furnace and left to their fate.

But, as the story runs, God sent an angel to care for them and much to Nebuchadnezzar's surprise, they were unhurt.

The moral of the tale is clear; Shadrach Meshach and Abednego were saved because they refused to go against what they believed.

They stood up for what they believed to be true.

There is an echo of that principle in tonight's Psalm. You might like to have it front of you as I speak.

There are a few Psalms crisper than Psalm 15.

In it and in just five verses the author of it manages to provide a character study of the person who is entitled to '*dwell in God's tabernacle*'.

And he does it by focussing on such a person's deeds, words and thoughts.

So let's look briefly at each in turn.

Firstly then, this person '*doeth what is right...*'

Here then is someone of principle. Someone with strong beliefs about what is right and what is wrong. Moreover this person makes a sincere effort to live according to these convictions.

He or she has learned to say 'No' to temptation.

The trouble is that we live in a world which is awash with moral chaos, a world where decisions are dictated by an amalgam of self-interest, the impulse of the moment and a vague notion of 'what everybody else does'.

We should not be surprised then to find that petty cheating, fiddling and lying are regarded as being acceptable forms of behaviour by a great number of people.

Here the question for each one of us is 'are we any different' to that norm?

Next then, are these person's words.

The psalmist says that the person who is entitled to '*...dwell in God's tabernacle*' '*...speaketh the truth*'

Our language, that most extraordinary and wonderful of God-given gifts to mankind, was designed to facilitate the communication of truth.

But tragically, in the mouths of advertisers, politicians, terrorists, persuaders and preachers even, and that is not to mention ordinary everyday people, it has become something different.

Language is often used to disguise, distort or even hide the truth. Speech, as a servant of truth, so often gives way to speech that is the tool of self-advancement or self-gratification.

Note also that the person envisaged by the psalmist will have nothing to do with gossip - and I once read that gossip is defined 'as confessing other people's sins for them'!

This person who is entitled to '*...dwell in God's tabernacle*' is thus a person of restraint; he or she keeps their mouth shut unless what has to be said is necessary, true and kind.

Is that true of us?

And lastly, this person who is entitled to '*...dwell in God's tabernacle*' is someone whose thoughts appear to be pure - the verse in question is verse 4.

Our translation has it as:

He that setteth not by himself, but is lowly in his own eyes and maketh much of them that fear the Lord

But other translations render the verse as '*He despises a vile man, but honours those who fear the Lord*'.

And here is the only jarring note in the whole psalm.

After all Jesus has taught us not to judge others - the parable of the wheat and tares that made up our New Testament lesson tonight makes that very clear, judgement is not ours to give, judgement is the preserve of God, but perhaps we could see this last attribute as being a polemic against those who are indifferent to God's law and who are cheerfully unethical in their dealings with others - someone perhaps who sails as close to the wind as they dare - a wide-boy perhaps.

And let's face it, if we are someone of integrity, we are likely to see such a person for what they are and steer well clear.

But is that you?

And it does not end there; the Psalmists points to other attributes.

The person who is entitled to *'...dwell in God's tabernacle'* keeps their word, he or she is untainted by greed, is happy to lend without hope of gain and refuses to take advantage of the vulnerable.

So, the 64 Million Dollar question is 'Of how many people can all these things be said?'

I guess the answer has to be not many.

More importantly, how many folk who know us would view us in this light?

Sadly, in trying to describe such a person we find ourselves reaching for words which are perhaps no longer in vogue in our 21st Century culture; words like uprightness, integrity, honour and godliness - and modern society has a tendency to mock a person who displays all these traits.

But against that, never forget that such a person has the one consolation that really matters. In God's sight they are precious.

God came to rescue Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego from what seemed a certain fate because they held firm to what they believed.

So let me leave you to ponder on that and on the last words of Psalm 15.

Whoso doeth these things shall never fall.

... and let me ask 'How do you measure up?'

Are you someone '...who is entitled to live in God's tabernacle?'

And will you join your Muslim brother or sister to roundly condemn those who distort the way of truth in our world for I am convinced that the truth is, what I have said here in this place of Christian worship tonight would find no dissent were it to be said in an Islamic mosque.

Amen

Mike Rogers

