

Protecting God

Psalm 27:1-6; Luke 13:31-35

A sanctuary, in its original meaning, is a sacred place, protected by ecclesiastical immunity. By the use of such places as a haven, by extension the term has come to be used for any place of safety. Churches, chapels and cathedrals have for centuries been places of sanctuary, of safety. Fugitives from justice, soldiers from the battlefield, slaves, could find sanctuary in churches. It was recognised in law until the C16th and C17th, though after then, and today, there is no legal status connected to the idea of sanctuary.

However, as a spiritual sanctuary, as a place of refuge, as a safe place to come to, to sit in silence, prayer, or simply wait, churches still have a function. For one older person I knew, as their dementia developed they often would become confused and lost. They had some kind of spiritual homing instinct that brought them here to Church, and I would sometimes get a call to drop in and chat and listen, and help would come to take the person home. For that person this was their safe place; this was their sanctuary. This was where they found the protecting love of God that welcomed and accepted and calmed.

I know for every positive story there is one to counter it, but that doesn't make the positive stories any less true or any less real. The power of the protecting God is at work today, through places like this, and through people like us. It is no accident that when we gather to worship God on Sunday we are not simply doing this in a Church building, we are doing it in a sanctuary. A safe place for many. One of the places, not the *only* place, but *one* of the places where our protecting God is to be found.

In a world teeming with broken relationships, personal disappointments, public scandals, political nonsense, cultural lack of respect and the threat of a trade war, and worse war, sanctuaries, safe places become more and more important. Sometimes they are places to hide away in; sometimes they are places to go to where we can lick our wounds, or cry our eyes out, or complain loudly or quietly about the awfulness of the world; sometimes they are places where we can take stock and plan a way forward, a way out. Safe places, sanctuaries, in my opinion, are places for a time, for a season, before we launch out again, if we are able, into the world.

To speak out when someone needs to say something. To stand up and be counted. To begin that process of change in our world that will make it a better place wherever we have opportunity.

But sometimes we need the protection of God. The healing touch, the gentle voice, the comforting presence, the reassuring love that will steady us for as long as it is necessary until we are able to stand up and move onwards.

As Christians sit together in the diverse seasons of life, Psalm 27 uniquely speaks to the person who faces difficulty and yet has found, maybe to their surprise, the easing of initial pain. While perhaps callous for one in the throes of grief and insufficiently challenging for someone comfortable to the point of needing a reminder that hope is in God and not in self, Psalm 27 offers companionship and subtle guidance to anyone scared or uncertain about the future. Whether someone has had a diagnosis of cancer, or is a cancer survivor; whether someone has been wiped out by the death of a loved one; whether someone is struggling with poor mental health; whether someone is noticing the first signs of early onset dementia in a family member; whether someone is struggling at school, or university, or work, or life. Psalm 27 maintains gritty honesty as it dances back and forth between fear and trust.

Yes we can be strong. Yes we can often sort out many of the problems we face. But sometimes we need places, we need people, we need God, who will protect us and keep us safe. Sometimes we need that shelter, those covering wings, that reassurance that alongside us others will be there to support us and comfort us and have our backs if necessary. It is rarely a sign of weakness to ask for help. In fact, it is more often a sign of strength to recognise when you are not coping and you reach out in the hope that someone will take your hand; call out in the hope that someone will hear your voice. Some of you might know the 1972 Bill Withers song, "Lean on me". We all need somebody to lean on, even if it means swallowing our pride, and just as we need to lean on others at times, it will be the case that they will need to lean on us. We find that protection in community; we find that protection in the sanctuary of a Church; and we find that protection from God.

Not magic, waving away the hurts and the pains and the wrongs of life, but the kind of protection that shelters for a while and then helps us to stand up, maybe with others, and work together to sort out the things that are holding us back, or doing us down, or making life harder than it ought to be. Lean on me, says God.

I remember a pastor from a South Sudan church addressing the General Assembly a few years ago. A tall, quiet, dignified man who had seen such evil, so many atrocities around his home, around his church. He talked about the women and men who provided help and shelter, who provided courage and strength. People to lean on, who responded to calls for help and did what they could from their meagre resources, even when the world had forgotten all about a civil war which had been sputtering on for years. He talked about the protecting presence of God, even in the midst of the horror, and many wondered how he could say this, let alone believe it. But he did. He did not explain away how some were sheltered and others not, but he believed that

sheltering had taken place, and when it failed, it was not God, but humans who caused the breakdown. As we so often do.

We are called to partner with God. God gives us the wherewithal. It is often by our choices that things succeed; or fail. The reason the world is in the mess it is in at the moment is not due to God's failure to protect. It is through humanity's decisions not to work with that protection and extending it to those who need it most.

The recent decision to cut overseas aid, and maybe even to cut social benefits in order, it is being argued, to boost the defence budget is one of those hard decisions that no Government of any political party wants to make. It is an almost impossible choice. I simply comment that isn't it nearly always the case that resources are taken from those who are the weakest, the most vulnerable, the ones with significant needs in our country and in other parts of the world? They feel the pinch first and suffer the consequences of cuts before anyone else. The ironically called protectionist tariffs being slapped on as punishment and retaliation only cause concern to the wealthiest when they see their profits under threat and fail to see the human misery caused by higher prices and redundancies to those further down the economic food chain. Societies and individuals within them are judged in many ways, but one of them is how they treat the most vulnerable, the weakest, the poorest. Where, in the current trade wars with tariff and counter tariff, is the thought being given to the small producers and businesses? Everyone suffers but it is those at the lowest levels of the economy who suffer the most.

God's protection is for all, but His particular passion is for the poorest and neediest, who often have no-one else to turn towards. So often the wounds caused to humanity are caused by humanity ignoring the protecting God Who continues to reach out.

The city of Jerusalem is central to the story of Jesus, and it is to Jerusalem He has turned in what we call the season of Lent as He prepared for the final showdown with human evil. Jesus is driven at this moment to one of the most emotional declarations recorded in the Bible. *“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!”*

God through Jesus reaches out to protect, to shelter, to provide sanctuary and safety. Do we turn away or block the way? Do we as individuals and a world find ways to reject what God offers? The wings of God’s protective love reach out, when you need help, will you be humble enough to go there? When you try to help others, will you be faithful enough to take them there, because it is there that you know protection, for a while, can be found. Until, strengthened, scarred, healed, we emerge out from underneath this feathery God, ready to face the world all over again.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen