

Sermon Given by

Tony Heywood

At the 9am Service on 6th June 2010

“The Divine scrutiny”

Great to be looking at Psalms 11, 12 & 13 with you the next 3 weeks. The more I read the psalms the more I see how wonderfully they reflect the range and depth of Christian experience. Whether you're full of joy or full of doubt, whether you're depressed or fearful or perplexed the psalms give voice to your feelings. The more I read them, I'm struck too by the way that the psalmist feels very much at home in the Lord's presence; in fact he writes in psalm 84: **“How lovely is your dwelling-place, O Lord Almighty! My soul yearns even faints for the courts of the Lord...”** And when you live in a happy home, you tend to say anything that comes into your mind – you feel quite unembarrassed and uninhibited; you express your natural fears and your natural hopes. As you read the psalms it's so refreshing to discover how the psalmist doesn't hold anything back from God his Father. He talks to Him about everything and here in psalm 11 he is very open about his fear and his temptation at a time of crisis and yet above all the psalm is a psalm of trust – it's one of the great trusting psalms.

I want to start our study of it by asking a question: **Where do you go when your world is falling apart?** That's the question asked of David in v3: **“When the foundations are being destroyed what can the righteous do?”** Most likely this was asked by David's advisers, whose speech starts at the end of v1 and goes through to the end of v3. We're not told how exactly David's world was falling apart; we don't know the historical circumstances. Maybe it was the rebellion of his son Absalom – perhaps more likely it was during one of those times a bit earlier on in his life when, like we heard in our first reading, King Saul was determined to kill him. We can't know for sure but what we do know is that whatever the precise situation, v3 the foundations were being destroyed – his world was falling apart. And the question this psalm raises for us is where do we go when our world is falling apart? We can think about this on a very personal level. When we or a loved one are suddenly diagnosed with a terminal illness or a relationship breaks down or we get the sack or we're bereaved – and our world falls apart – where do we go? On a community level, when a gunman kills 12 people in Cumbria one sunny Wednesday morning in June and the foundations of that whole region are taking a pounding - where do they turn? Or what about the banking crisis of 2008; I remember a friend at church who works in the City saying how for many City folk it was as if the foundations had been destroyed. What had always seemed so strong and dependable was now in tatters. On a more specifically Christian level think how godly believers in this country felt when in the mid-1550s under Queen Mary 100s of evangelicals including many of their leaders were burnt at the stake and the cause of Jesus Christ was, humanly speaking, severely hampered. Or for Christians in Morocco today as the government there forces the missionaries out. Or think of the church in Western Europe today, it's hard not to conclude that moral and theological foundations that once seemed so secure are now being dismantled. As a denomination we're at a crisis point over the whole homosexual question. ECUSA – the Episcopal Church of the USA has recently consecrated their 2nd openly and actively gay Bishop. The denomination is at breaking point – the foundations are being

destroyed, what can the righteous do? David's situation was serious – whether v2 is to be taken literally and there were real assassins out to get him or whether it should be read more metaphorically I'm not quite sure but whatever the situation his world was falling apart. V2: **“For look, the wicked bend their bows; they set their arrows against the strings to shoot from the shadows at the upright in heart.”** In the UK we might not face physical arrows aimed at us but regularly books get published which strike at the foundations of Christianity, be it Bishop Robinson's “Honest to God”, Dan Brown's “The Da Vinci Code”, Dawkins' “The God Delusion”. They might not be a challenge to the believer but they leave an impression on millions of non-believers, including millions who haven't even read them but have just read a review or chatted to a friend who's read them and they leave an impression that there's a good deal of doubt about the foundations of Christianity. It confirms people in their unbelief and gives them a reason not to bother with Christianity. A Christian friend was at the 1st Test Match v Bangladesh last week and he told me how it sickened him to hear this man behind him speaking to his friend of how he'd always been agnostic but that having read Dawkins' book he was now a convinced atheist. Books like that do damage. And v3 when the foundations are being destroyed what can the righteous do? For David's advisors, the answer to the question was obvious; end of v1: **“Flee like a bird to your mountain.”** In other words they were saying, “Do a runner David, save your bacon, keep your head down!” And that was David's temptation, to flee. And that's so often the temptation before us because we all have a tendency to run, to escape. Naturally we're all spiritual rabbits – that is, as soon as danger appears, we dash down into our burrows. When a personal crisis comes, the temptation will be to flee, for some it might be fleeing a tough conversation that needs to be had, for others it will be flight to the bottle or to shopping or to some other form of pleasurable escape. When ECUSA consecrate a 2nd actively gay Bishop will the wider Anglican Communion side with the clear word of God or with political correctness and theological liberalism. When we hear people mocking Christianity do we go for the easy option of flight – keeping our head down and our mouths shut or do we speak up. The advice of flight appears so reasonable and perhaps this was some mountain retreat or hideaway that David had been to before but wonderfully David doesn't listen to this advice to flee. In fact David highlights in the 2nd line of v1 the sheer absurdity of flight. Can you see that? He says v1 **‘How then can you say to me, ‘Flee like a bird to your mountain.’** “How can you tell me to do a runner?”

David highlights the sheer absurdity of flight because he had already fled, he was already hiding in one sense. The first line of the psalm sums it all up. **“In the Lord I take refuge.”** That's where David fled to, that's what he did when his world was falling apart, when the foundations were being destroyed. **“In the Lord I take refuge.”** David had hidden himself in the eternal security of the Covenant Lord. To have fled to a mountain, would have been to deny who he was. He'd have been saying by his action: “God is not enough for me in the crisis of my life.” He'd have been saying to the world: “God is good when all is well in life but in tough times don't flee to Him, flee to the mountain.” And as we're thrilled and strengthened by the trust and faith that David models to us in Psalm 11 it's worth mentioning that God will often come to his children and shake us; sometimes it seems in very hard ways. But he shakes us in love, he shakes us in order to get our fingers free from the security we cling on to.

All of us by nature cling on to people or things or experiences for security but God shakes us because He wants us to cling to the ultimate security of Himself. There is no other final security; when the waters rise and those things we trusted in are swept away, God isn't swept away. David resists the very real temptation that in different ways we all face - to flee and instead he seeks his shelter and refuge in the Lord. And for the rest of our time this morning we're going to look at v4-7 and see the theological convictions that enabled him to trust in God when his world was falling apart. We see first of all that though the foundations were being destroyed and his world was falling apart – God was there; He hadn't done a runner. V4 ***“The Lord is in his holy temple; the Lord is on his heavenly throne.”*** He was still in residence. It must have been very grim to have been in Holland in 1940 and to have walked past the residence of the Queen and see that she had had to leave to go to the West and freedom. Many kings and queens at that time in Europe had to flee and leave their countries to the invader. It must have been deeply discouraging and demoralizing for the people. Not, of course, that the monarchs could have done much if they had stayed. How wonderful for David and for all of us to know that whatever our crisis, no matter how bleak things look, we can know for sure that v4 ***“The Lord is in his holy temple; the Lord is on his heavenly throne.”*** He hasn't fled but rather He is the all powerful Lord and it's this God who is untouchable and unassailable in his sovereignty that we, like David, can take refuge in. David took refuge in God because he knew that God was there. God was on his heavenly throne and he also took refuge in God because he knew that God saw everything.

V4b ***“He observes the sons of men; his eyes examine them. The Lord examines the righteous...”*** And for the person who is going through the mill; whose world is falling apart that is a wonderful comfort and reassurance. One of the great agonies of suffering is that awareness that no-one else really understands what we're experiencing. Perhaps you can remember someone saying to you or even you yourself saying: “You have no idea what I'm going through.” The believer, like David, can be greatly helped and comforted by the fact that God does know exactly what we're going through. V4b ***“He observes the sons of men; his eyes examine them. The Lord examines the righteous...”*** He sees every arrow pointed at us. So in our time of crisis, God is there, He sees everything and the next comfort for David is that He will judge the wicked. V5 ***“The Lord examines the righteous but the wicked and those who love violence his soul hates. On the wicked he will rain fiery coals and burning sulphur; a scorching wind will be their lot.”*** One commentator on this psalm made the observation from the end of v5 that you don't hear that many sermon series these days on God's hatred – there are plenty on God's love but the Bible tells us not just that God is righteous but that He is wholly opposed to evil and to evil people. We love to say “God hates sin but He loves the sinner” but that's not actually a distinction that Scripture makes. End of v5 ***“but the wicked and those who love violence his soul hates.”*** And therefore God must and will judge all wickedness and the language he uses in v6 has clear overtones of the judgment that came on the notoriously wicked men of Sodom and Gomorrah. V6 ***“On the wicked he will rain fiery coals and burning sulphur; a scorching wind will be their lot.”***

Our 21st Century Western ears find v6 quite hard but for David as he endured violence and injustice from wicked men and for countless believers today as they are the victims of horrific crimes, how great to know that justice is coming. The police in their country may turn a blind eye to the violence done to them but God doesn't. The wicked will be paid back – they will get what they deserve.

David doesn't flee to the mountain but rather he takes refuge in God and he does so because God is there, God sees, God will judge and lastly, one glorious day, believers will see His face. V7 ***“For the Lord is righteous, he loves justice; upright men will see his face.”*** For the believer who perseveres in trusting in Christ we have glory to look forward to and the best thing about heaven will be that we will live by sight and no longer by faith – we will see Jesus.

I'd like to end by telling you about William Dyke; a young man who was blind from the age of 10. At university he fell in love with an admiral's daughter and they got engaged. Not long before the wedding, William had some surgery on his eyes in the hope that his sight would be restored. He insisted on keeping the bandages on his face until his wedding day. Because if the surgery was successful, he wanted the first person he saw to be his bride. Well the wedding day arrived. His bride was walked up the aisle by her father the admiral. At the moment as they came to stand next to each other at the front of the congregation, William's father removed the gauze from his eyes. Until this moment no-one knew whether the surgery had worked or not. When the last strand of the gauze was taken away, William Dyke was face-to-face with his bride. The wedding party was speechless and breathless. Then as William looked at his bride in amazement he said to her: "You are more beautiful than I ever imagined." And for those Christians who persevere to the end it'll be a bit like that when we see Jesus. Though we love him now, he is far more wonderful – far more awesome than we could ever imagine. When we see him on that day, we'll marvel at him, speechless with admiration and joy. You see at the moment, we, the Bride of Christ see very dimly but in glory when we stand before our Bridegroom at the Wedding Feast, and the veil is removed, the scales will fall away, and we will see Him face-to-face and know Him even as we are fully known. And He will be more beautiful than we ever imagined. V7 ***“upright men will see his face.”***

Audio versions of the sermons can be freely downloaded from the All Saints Little Shelford website, <http://www.allsaintslittleshelford.org>. These are available in two formats, mp3 and wma.

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)