

Sermon Given by

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At the Evening Service on 15th August 2010

Psalm 16 - "Safe as Houses"

I wonder whether you have heard of the phenomenon called 'choice fatigue'. This is a well-documented marketing idea which says that when it comes to having choice, more is actually less: having more choice is often less helpful than you might imagine.

The studies have focussed particularly on the number of choices open to consumers: according to the Los Angeles Times, Starbucks offer a bedazzling 87,000 drink combinations to their customers. The result, of course, is that many customers always have exactly the same drink.

If like us you're still on an old terrestrial tv with only 5 channels then I wonder how would you feel if you were in the States with Comcast, the nation's largest cable provider offering you 1000 channels.

Anyway, some studies show that having to make too many decisions can leave people tired, mentally drained and more dissatisfied with their purchases. It also leads people to make poorer choices -- sometimes at a time when the choice really matters.

But what about the whole matter of the increasingly wide choice in the religious supermarket?

I don't know that it has been as well documented, but I suspect that something similar operates there. We are a global village, with many, many belief systems jostling side by side on our high streets and in our minds. That causes for many people a similar choice fatigue and clouds our judgements so that we don't necessarily choose well.

And the language of a Psalm like Psalm 16 is not often heard in our world. The idea which unites the Psalm is that of exclusive loyalty to the God of the Bible. A good example is verse 2: ***I said to the Lord, 'You are my Lord; apart from you I have no good thing.'***

If you aren't yet a Christian, you might take some convincing that it is best to limit your options to one spiritual option like that. Isn't that terribly arrogant, backing your choice and by definition condemning lots of other peoples' chosen path through life?

Even those of us who are Christians are affected by the multi-choice world we live in. We're reluctant to put all our eggs in one basket and live as if Jesus alone is all we need or want.

That is why a Psalm like this is such a help to us. We don't need learned psychological articles about Choice fatigue! The first half of the Psalm gives us a portrait of exclusive loyalty to God and the second half shows us the blessings which flow from that. So we'll consider the psalm under those two headings.

A) Exclusive Loyalty.

I have three sub-headings: **No other God:**

It's important straight away to acknowledge that this is not an ivory tower reverie for David. Perhaps it's possible to croon about being single-minded and devoted to the Lord when everything is going well and life's a bed of roses (although when that is the case of course we often forget God then – prosperity can be just as much a danger spiritually as adversity.

But verse 1 leaves little doubt that adversity is the situation David is facing here.

**¹ Keep me safe, O God,
for in you I take refuge.**

That is David's prayer...

He can't guarantee his own safety so he turns to God for refuge. In fact the title of the Psalm may be making just that point. You can see the heading there: this is a miktam of David. That heading is not like the normal NIV translation headings; it is part of the Hebrew text and, according to many scholars it is the original text of Scripture.

I am keen that when we have a Bible reading from a Psalm and there is a superscription like that it should be read (even though we shouldn't normally read the other headings which are just our Translator's stab at breaking up the text. Miktam is different – or at least it would be if we could be sure what it means!

The root of the word has the idea of covering, I'm told. In total there are six miktams of David, all of them biographical and three are dated more precisely to the period when he was a refugee - on the run from Saul, hiding out in caves or taking refuge amongst the Philistines.

The best stab at a definition of a miktam is that it is a prayer uttered with a hand **covering** the mouth: ***a silent, secret prayer in a situation of danger.*** I think we will see as we go through the Psalm that fits pretty well.

You might not feel that it is a good fit with your situation, necessarily. We are not normally on the run for our lives! But of course many Christians around the world are. According to the World Evangelical Alliance, the persecution of Christians is the largest human rights violation in today's world. Over 200 million Christians in at least 60 countries are denied fundamental human rights, solely because of their faith.

Perhaps we should have them in mind as we read this Psalm. They regularly need to pray verse 1:

**¹ Keep me safe, O God,
for in you I take refuge.**

And every day they will be tempted to ditch an exclusive loyalty to God and hedge their bets by sharing their religious affections with other world views, religious or otherwise. This Psalm is reality for them.

And it may well be reality for us as well before we know it. not long ago I read some chilling words from Mulla Krekar a Kurdish Islamist radical from Iraq, who has been granted asylum in Norway about 'Muslim growth' in Europe. 'We're the ones who will change you...' he said. 'Just look at the development within Europe, where the number of Muslims is expanding like mosquitoes. Every western woman in the EU is producing an average of 1.4 children. Every

Muslim woman in the same countries is producing 3.5 children. By 2050, 30% of the population in Europe will be Muslim... Our way of thinking will prove more powerful than yours.'

If that still seems remote, then of course there are numerous situations where the pain and danger may not be from physical persecution, but they are real nonetheless - when we face illness or family hostility or financial need, for example. Remember this Psalm in those situations – because when pressure comes we are always tempted to wriggle out of an exclusive loyalty to God.

Well, look at David's resolve in verse 2: ² ***I said to the LORD, "You are my Lord; apart from you I have no good thing.***

He puts it on record: I belong to God – he is my God.

It isn't left as a creedal statement. 'I believe in God the Maker of heaven and Earth'. He expresses the truth to God himself in prayer. I said to the Lord: You are my God. Apart from you I have no good thing. Not because God needed to hear that, but because he needed to say it to God. Martin Luther said that the essence of Christianity lies in the use of personal pronouns: ***You*** are ***my*** God.

If we analyse a Psalm like this but stop short of praying it – we have missed the point: it is all about a relationship which David is determined not to give up on. Apart from you, I have no good thing. As if to say I value my relationship with God higher than any other lovely thing in the world. No other god.

A similar point is there in **verse 3-4: No other associates**

³ ***As for the saints who are in the land,
they are the glorious ones in whom is all my delight.***

If he has fastened his loyalty on God, then of course God's people are his chosen friends. We sometimes say: a friend of his is a friend of mine – and that is true spiritually. If we love the Lord then we should love no group of people as much as we delight in his saints: which simply mean his chosen, set apart followers.

Let me quote John Calvin: 'We ought, therefore, highly to value and esteem the true and devoted servants of God and to regard nothing as of greater importance than to connect ourselves with their society; and this we will actually do if we wisely reflect in what true excellence and dignity consist and

do not allow the vain splendour of the world and its deceitful pomps to dazzle our eyes’.

This test is worth applying as we review our midweek meetings as a church – will I match David’s delight in other believers in **my** commitment to fellowship with other Christians? Because I delight in the Lord, will I also delight in his people?

I hope it is OK for me to repeat my view that only in exceptional circumstances can it be right for Christians to meet with other Christians only on Sundays. For what we can give and receive, we should all be delighting in our fellowship with other Christians midweek – and even more than that – all the time: ‘they are the glorious ones in whom is **all** my delight’.

It is all about securing our loyalty to the Lord... So by contrast, David will not cast in his lot with those who have different religious loyalties. Look at verse 4:

***4 The sorrows of those will increase
who run after other gods.
I will not pour out their libations of blood
or take up their names on my lips.***

David has the clarity of vision to see that if the Lord is the true God, then other gods are false Gods and he cannot join forces with their followers. There is no easy-going tolerance here. Following those Gods is damaging. I wonder if we have the courage to view other religions that way, or for that matter the modern secular atheism: to be clear that the end of that road is sorrow, multiplying sorrow...

Hence his refusal: in David’s dangerous situation, he might easily feel that to spread his bets a bit would make sense. Why ally yourself to the no-hopers; why not join forces with people who are doing better, whatever their beliefs. Maybe he’d been offered all sorts of sweeteners, if he would only embrace the Philistine religions. In the same way that persecuted Christian converts in militant Islamic or Hindu countries can have job security or police protection... at a price. They just have to rejoin their family’s religion...

And a wholehearted loyalty meets that with a flat refusal: ‘I will not...’ No other god and therefore no other associates.

One other sub-heading under this first section. In verses 5-6 we see David resolving he will have no other home...

No other home

⁵ ***LORD, you have assigned me my portion and my cup;
you have made my lot secure.***

⁶ ***The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places;
surely I have a delightful inheritance.***

The language there goes back to the time when the people of Israel had just conquered the land of Canaan under Joshua and the twelve tribes were all ready to see which tribe would end up living where in the land.

Joshua and the priests had to divide up the land by lot. So they draw lots and the tribe of Benjamin gets this section of country and the tribe of Judah get this bit – the whole map of Canaan was parcelled out.

And David says: my life isn't a lottery – everything about it is God-ordained: my food and drink, even my address – which if this is when he was refugee with no fixed abode is pretty remarkable.

In fact there is a telling moment in the narrative of 1 Samuel from the time when David was a refugee. He's been anointed king but Saul isn't giving up the kingdom lightly: he is hunting David down to kill him and David rebukes Saul with these words ***'They have driven me out that I should have no inheritance, saying: go serve other Gods...'*** **1 Samuel 26:19** If he is exiled from the land then by definition he is being driven into the arms of paganism.

Is David saying here that even without any real estate in the land, he has no other home? Like Queen Mary saying that Calais was written on her heart, Israel is written on David's heart: that is his inheritance and if he can't have the land at the moment he can at least still have the God of the land.

The question for us is where do we belong? In the New Testament age there is no geographical kingdom to which we belong. Lovely though it is to live in England and this particular corner of England, I wonder if we prize above all our place in the kingdom of God. No other home...

I hope we get the portrait of this exclusive loyalty: no other God; no other associates and no other home. It seems to be shutting an awful lot of doors.

But I hope that a brief look at the remaining verses of the Psalm will convince us all that it opens the door to wonderful blessings. I'll mention just three

God's counsel is mentioned in verse 7

***⁷ I will praise the LORD, who counsels me;
even at night my heart instructs me.***

If David is on the run when he wrote this then it is remarkable: because in his day the way you received God's counsel was through the priests and Levites at the tabernacle. And presumably David did not have that option open to him.

But strikingly he can hear God's voice on his own without priests and ephods and sermons. How so? Presumably because he knew God's Word and by his Spirit God was speaking to him from that wonderful deposit of words from God. He might not have had the Word of God in print, but he had it in his heart!

I love the idea of David at night, when everyone else's voices fall quiet, listening to the most intimate voice he can hear – God's voice. Sleeplessness isn't a curse if it gives us the stillness to hear from God. I wonder if we have committed enough of the Bible to memory for God to bring Scriptures back to our mind to counsel and instruct us.

Secondly: God's presence

***⁸ I have set the LORD always before me.
Because he is at my right hand,
I will not be shaken.***

Again, David may not be at the tabernacle, but wherever he goes God is with him – so he consciously takes that to heart. I've set the Lord always before me.

To have a protector at your right hand was an expression reserved for tough situations like a courtroom or a battle field. There beside you is someone strong on whom you can count 100%. David knew that God was present with him all the time: it gave him the ultimate stability: 'I will not be shaken'.

I wonder if we are able to recall God's presence in seemingly unlikely places: at work; on the beach on holiday; in the bank – and particularly in the most

challenging places, wherever the **court-room** or **battleground** equivalents are for us. If we give him our loyalty 24/7, we will have the joy of knowing him present everywhere and all the time.

I've mentioned two great blessings – **God's counsel** and **God's presence** but the psalm ends with something, literally, out of this world: **God's future**: Let me read vv 9-11

*⁹ Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices;
my body also will rest secure,*

*¹⁰ because you will not abandon me to the grave, ^[c]
nor will you let your Holy One ^[d] see decay.*

*¹¹ You have made ^[e] known to me the path of life;
you will fill me with joy in your presence,
with eternal pleasures at your right hand.*

When we read the Psalms it's important to realise that David isn't just anyone.

He's not just any godly person, he's not just a pious Israelite – so this prayer is not just an example of a faithful prayer.

Tucked away in verse 10 is a title of David's which reminds us that he is more than just your average pious Israelite. He is God's 'Holy one' – the Lord's Anointed. So the 'I' of the psalm is not, first off, you and me: he is God's King - the Christ. David's point is that he might be in danger but God's Holy One cannot be abandoned to the grave. He will be vindicated.

You will be aware from our first reading that Peter on the day of Pentecost saw this as a prediction of Jesus Christ, the great descendant of David. His reasoning goes like this: David's tomb is here in Jerusalem and his bones are still there today; so it can only be in a secondary sense that David spoke about **his** body not being abandoned to the grave.

The person of whom this is most clearly true is Jesus, reasoned Peter. **His** body really didn't see corruption and **his** tomb is really empty.

Of course the parallel with Jesus fits the rest of the Psalm as well. He was also hounded and persecuted; but he stayed loyal to God. He 'set the Lord always

before him’ – or as 1 Peter 2 puts it – ‘he committed himself to him who judges justly’. And just as David was finally acknowledged to be king, so three days after he died, Jesus was vindicated.

This Psalm makes most sense if you view it as about Jesus Christ. But because Jesus rose from the grave, **David** can beat the grave... And **we** can beat the grave as well...

There is a lovely story about the Great Victorian preacher, Rabbi Duncan. In 1839 his wife died after the birth of their second daughter. He took a friend with him to look at her lifeless body.

They stood motionless and then after a pause very solemnly he just repeated the answer to Question no 37 in the Westminster Shorter Catechism: ‘The souls of believers are at their death made perfect in holiness and do immediately pass into glory; and their bodies, being still united to Christ do rest in their graves till the resurrection’.

We aren’t abandoned to the grave – physically we will be raised and spiritually we enjoy his presence in glory right away. And there is only one way to describe that: eternal pleasures at your right hand...

So here is an answer to Choice fatigue. If you ask me why we should narrow our choices and give Jesus our exclusive loyalty – here is one answer which it’s hard to beat. Jesus is the only religious leader who has beaten death – why ever would you follow one who has no ultimate answer to death – they are dead themselves.

As the only one who has come back from the dead, he is the only one who can give that life to others. ‘Solid joys and lasting treasures none but Zion’s children know’.

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.)