

Sermon: Pleasures in God's Presence
Isaiah 61.1-4, 8-11; Psalm 16; 1 Thes 5.16-24; John 1.6-8, 19-28
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We live in the month of Advent – looking forward to the feast of Christmas and also to the return of Christ our Lord. During these weeks we experience the same expectations and the hope of Israel that is so often expressed in the Old Testament. Our Lord God is coming for our salvation!

Today we look at Psalm 16, and how King David waited for the coming of God, to save him from his enemies. **Read again Psalm 16:11**; this verse will be our guide today. In the midst of our daily life, we can experience the 1) **pleasures** at God's right hand, the 2) **presence** of God, while we walk on the 3) **path** of life. David was often surrounded by problems and enemies; how could he persevere in the midst of all that?

David praises his Lord that he gives him eternal pleasures. This suggests that the life of someone who follows our Lord is absolutely not boring or sad. It is marked by pleasure. This is remarkable, because the circumstances of David were not easy. The cup of sorrows he had to drink was deep and unpleasant. **Read Psalm 16:1 again.**

At the time when he wrote this song, had to pray for his safety. In his prayer he speaks of people who run after other gods in his land – and he is fully decided to not worship those gods. This suggests that this was really a major issue: pagan religion was everywhere.

Then, David was also facing death. **Read Psalm 16:9-10.** There was the real possibility of death, but David's heart was glad. Enemies, and other gods, the fear of death – but David speaks of pleasures!

Paganism, problems, persecutions, they are no excuse to become negative and downcast. The command most often used in the Bible is: 'fear not.' And one of the commands we often hear from our apostle Paul is: 'rejoice!' But what is the secret of these pleasures David speaks about? The central answer to this question is that David speaks of *eternal* pleasures, *at God's right hand.*

Church Father Cassiodorus, a Roman statesman who became a monk in the year 540 AD. After his conversion he worked a few years on a commentary on the Psalms. In his explanation of the Psalm 16 he writes:

Let us meditate on the immensity of the gift of salvation that this Psalm offers for our instruction. It gives us confidence in suffering and promises eternal glory in hope, so that through this teaching of our future happiness we do not fear the hardships of the

present. This is heavenly schooling, learning for life in the lecture hall of truth.

The confidence and joy of King David was not natural; it was supernatural. It had to do with eternity and God. He looked beyond this life for his confidence, security, and joy. He found it in God.

The manner in which David describes this trust in God was so unique, that both St Peter and St Paul saw in these words of David – that God would not abandon him to the grave and that his body would not decay - a reference to the great King of Israel who would one day be born, our Lord Jesus Christ, the expected Messiah.

St Peter preached on the day of Pentecost, just weeks after Jesus had risen from the death: **Read Acts 2:24-31.** A few years later, in Acts 13, St Paul used the same Psalm to speak of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

There are more reasons in this Psalm to look beyond David for understanding it. In verse 8 we read that David says that he will not be shaken, because God is at his right hand. The right hand is the place of honour.

Strangely, in verse 11, David says that God fills him with eternal pleasures while David himself is at the right hand of God. David has the place of honour now! Many Church Fathers saw this also as a sign that David is here really speaking through the Holy Spirit of the Son of God.

Church father Hesychius of Jerusalem, 5th century monk in his *Large Commentary on Psalms 16:7*:

Do you see the equal worth of the Son with the Father? Sometimes the son is said to stand or to sit on the right; now they grant the right to the father, so that you may say that there is one power.

So what now? Is this Psalm about Jesus Christ, or is it about David? Is it about the Son of God, or can we also learn from it? Actually, because it is about the Son of God, it also has value for us, and it is also a Psalm about us, human beings.

It is only thanks to the coming of our Lord, who became a human being, who died for us, who rose from the dead, that the way to God is open for us. That is exactly why we can also rejoice in the eternal pleasures at God's right hand! That is why we can also with confidence say that the grave is not our destination. That is why our hart can be glad, even today, irrespective of our circumstances.

This joy we read about, is linked to the presence of God. 'You will fill me with joy in your presence'; the eternal pleasures we read about, are also in the presence of God, at his right hand. All good things we may desire, are related to God himself.

Do not think, that this presence of God is only a matter for eternity, for later, and that we can only rejoice in God when we are in heaven, later. If we, by faith, are attached to our Lord Jesus today, we are already connected with eternity, and with the presence of God. Today we can experience the great joy of Gods presence. This is clearly what David in this Psalm also described.

Read Psalm 16:5 again. The writer of the Psalm does not only look forward to eternity for his satisfaction in life; he is also deeply joyful about his present state, now. Today. David thanks God for his inheritance in the land of Israel. But actually, I think David goes deeper. **Read Psalm 16:2:** 'Lord, apart from you, I have no good thing.' Not the land, not his palace, not his money, not his security in this life, was what David desired. He desired God himself. 'Beside you, I have nothing that is worthwhile'.

St Augustine, in one of his sermons (*Sermons* 334.3) on Psalm 16, said:

[David is saying:] O Lord, why give me some other inheritance? Whatever you give, it isn't worth much. You be my inheritance; I love you. I love you with all my soul, with all my mind I love you. What can it mean to me, anything you give me apart from yourself? That is to love God freely, to hope in God for God, to hasten to be filled with God, to be satisfied with Him. He, after all, is enough for you; apart from him, nothing is enough for you.

Only our Lord Jesus Christ truly and fully desired God; no wonder: he himself is God. In the blessed Trinity there is perfect harmony in the mutual enjoyment of Father, Son and Spirit.

And we, who are by faith attached to our Lord Christ, will one day enjoy that same joy for God in its fullness when we are united with him. But even in this life, to the extent that we desire Him, we can already have a foretaste of this love and peace and joy. A foretaste of the eternal pleasures that are with God and in God.

This is why in our vision statement as churches of St Michael, we say:

St Michael's Anglican Church exists for the worship and the enjoyment of God.

How can we today enjoy this foretaste that is sweeter and more beautiful than all things in life? How can we already be with God and enjoy this foretaste of the eternal pleasures that are with him? David says in his Psalm that God has made known to him the path of life – the path of God. How can

we rest secure in God even in our present life? David hands us three secrets:

He begins with taking his refuge in God, because nothing else on earth is good compared to the Goodness of God. St Teresa of Avilla, in one of her poems (*Poems*, 30) said:

He who has God wants for nothing. God alone is enough.

If we think that the deep desires of our life can be satisfied by people, or by things, or by beauty, we are dead wrong. People, things, beauty and all these things are extremely important, but they are gifts of God. Our satisfaction can only come from the giver, not from his gifts. God is our satisfaction; all other things are secondary.

But then, focussing on God alone, David can also enjoy all those people who have a similar desire for God. Desiring God creates community with others who have a similar desire. **Read Psalm 16:3.**

It is this community of the saints where we already experience a foretaste of the eternal joys that God is offering to us. Our Christian community is Gods creation; it is a reflection of the community that exists in God himself.

In our vision statement we therefore say:

St Michael's Anglican Church exists for the worship and the enjoyment of God. It is a community of people who desire to follow Jesus Christ as Lord and who invite others into this community of faith.

The third secret of David: **Read Psalm 16:7-8.** David's desire is for God, his community is the people of God, and in that context, he also listens to God to obey him. David seems to speak here of a systematic lifestyle. Even in dark moments, in the night God is able to speak to David, because David sets God always before him.

David envisions God. He makes sure he does not forget. Is this hard? Not if our desire is for God and if we are encouraged to desire God in the community of his people. But it does demand our full dedication. We have to set the Lord always before us. That is an act of the will. It demands our whole heart, our full mind, all of our strength. But is that not how our Lord Jesus told us to love God? With complete singlemindedness? With all of our life? This is normal behaviour, as children of God, our Father.

Charles Haddon Spurgeon, the great Baptist 'Prince of Preachers' from the 19th century, in his commentary on Psalm 16:

As children of the Father who is in heaven, we inherit, by virtue of our joint heirship with Jesus, all the riches of the covenant of grace; and the portion which falls to us sets upon our table the bread of heaven and the new wine of the kingdom. Who would not be satisfied with such refined diet? Our shallow cup of sorrow we may well drain with resignation, since the deep cup of

love stands side by side with it, and will never be empty.

Love and desire God alone; enjoy the community of His people above all else; set him before you every day. That is the path of life that leads to the enjoyment of God himself, and love, joy and peace will follow in the slipstream.

This path of life saves us from sin, from great fear, from unnecessary worry. It makes the cup of life that we have to drink bearable - because God himself is the one who quenches our thirst.

+In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen