

Sermon: God cares for us

Psalm 147

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Introduction

It is about time to finish the book of 2011. What have we accomplished? What went wrong? What troubles did we face? How has God blessed us?

And what can we expect of the New Year? Many of us have great worries about our situation as Christians in this country.

Bishop Kyrillos in Nag Hammadi is asking for prayers as he has received many warnings of attacks on his churches in the days ahead. And after 2011, it is very easy to end on a negative note. But why should we?

I propose that right now, we focus on God, and we do so based on the Psalm we read this morning – Psalm 147; he is worthy of our praise. Read again Psalm 147:1

Praise the LORD. How good it is to sing praises to our God, how pleasant and fitting to praise him!

Before turning to particular matters for praise, the psalm pauses to consider the delightfulness of praise itself. Praising God is pleasant; it is liberating because it turns our eyes away from ourselves, or our problems, even from this world, to God. Let us also do this now. Turn our mind and our heart to God. He is worthy of our praise!

God is our helper and our mighty creator

Why is God worthy of our praise? Psalm 147 is clear about this. It is because:

The LORD builds up Jerusalem;
he gathers the exiles of Israel. (Ps 147:2)

The fact that this psalm praises God for bringing Israel back from exile suggests that it was composed when Israel began to return from its exile in Babylon; this was around the year 500 before Christ.

The people of God had been in deep problems for 70 long years; enemies had beaten them and taken over their land, destroyed their temple, even taken them into exile. Where was God? But in the midst of their need, God did not leave his people. He is Immanuel – God with us.

Before the writer of the Psalm goes deeper into whom God is for us, he speaks of the power of God in creation. The God who cares for you, is the almighty Creator of heaven and earth. Psalm 147:4 says:

He determines the number of the star
and calls them each by name.

The Jews had been living in Babylon, where the Babylonian religion and its leaders oppressed the people of God. The stars of heaven, the sun and the moon were seen as gods by the Babylonians. But the Creator of heaven and earth laughs about all so-called 'gods'. He is the one who created the stars and gave them a name. If we want to know the future, it is useless to gaze at the stars. They are just created blocks of stone or burning gas... No need to take those Babylonian 'gods' seriously.

God laughs about all false religions. Only our Lord God is great and mighty and He knows all things. Psalm 147:5 says:

Great is our Lord and mighty in power;
his understanding has no limit.

What a reason to praise our God! None is like him. Therefore the Psalmist sings to God. Read again Psalm 147:7-9

Sing to the LORD with grateful praise;
make music to our God on the harp.
He covers the sky with clouds;
he supplies the earth with rain
and makes grass grow on the hills.
He provides food for the cattle
and for the young ravens when they call.

This great God is our God. Nature is in his hands; and he will take care of you.

Sometimes you hear people argue: 'Such a big God, why should he be interested in my small affairs?' Derek Kidner, who wrote a commentary on the Psalms [*Psalms 73-150*, (1975, 2008), p. 523:] has some wisdom about this:

The one who marshals the host of stars is certainly able to solve the problems of his people. This Psalm turns upside down the familiar argument that in so great a universe our small affairs are too minute to notice.

This majestic Creator cares about us.

That same God is the keeper of his people

The Psalm rejoices in how this great Creator cares for his people – both collectively and also individually. He builds up the city that was destroyed; he cares for the walls of the city; he cares for the Church. But he also cares for the persons individually.

See how tenderly God 'heals the broken hearted and binds up their wounds'. (Psalm 147:3). Church father Cassiodorus (c. 485 – c. 585), a

Roman statesman and writer and later a monk, in his *Exposition of the Psalms 146.3* says:

Much like a medical doctor, God binds up the battered hearts of the penitent with the bandages of his love in order to restore them to their original condition.

Have you had a difficult time? God comes to you – to heal your wounds. To bless you and care for you. The powerful God who created the universe – He cares for you. ‘He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds’ - this reminds me of Isaiah 61:1-4. Read Isaiah 61:1-4.

The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me,
because the LORD has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim freedom for the captives
and release from darkness for the prisoners,
to proclaim the year of the LORD’s favor
and the day of vengeance of our God,
to comfort all who mourn,
and provide for those who grieve in Zion—
to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes,
the oil of joy instead of mourning,
and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair.
They will be called oaks of righteousness,
a planting of the LORD for the display of his splendor.
They will rebuild the ancient ruins
and restore the places long devastated;
they will renew the ruined cities
that have been devastated for generations.

Here we hear similar language. God comes to heal those who are devastated and to restore them fully. Jesus claimed that He was the one fulfilling these words. To him all power in heaven and on earth is given, to sustain his own people.

Now you would think that the powerful God likes powerful people. That he is close to people who are strong. The opposite seems true. Psalm 147:6 says:

The LORD sustains the humble but casts the wicked to the ground.

Not the powerful, but the humble may expect God’s support. This is a concept we see throughout the Bible. Remember for instance how St Paul, in 1 Corinthians 1:26-31 explains that people who boast in their own abilities are not God’s choice; he chooses the foolish, weak, the lowly.

If presently you feel less than able to cope with issues in life, you qualify for God’s salvation! He sustains the humble. This is also underlined in Psalm 147:10-11.

His pleasure is not in the strength of the horse,
nor his delight in the legs of the warrior;
the LORD delights in those who fear him,
who put their hope in his unfailing love.

The strength of a horse, or the strong legs of a man, these are words about warfare. But this is not how we can save ourselves from our problems. Weapons, or clever tricks, or strength, will not help us. What helps us – is God himself. He delights in people who fear him and who trust in his love.

If 2011 was not so good, will 2012 be better? Who knows. But God promises to sustain the humble. Humble people are those who fear Him and who put their hope not in their own strength, but in the unfailing love of God. No wonder the Psalmist again and again praises God, and he calls the people of God to praise Him. Psalm 147:12-14.

Extol the LORD, Jerusalem; praise your God, Zion.
He strengthens the bars of your gates
and blesses your people within you.
He grants peace to your borders
and satisfies you with the finest of wheat.

We get a very idyllic picture here of the people of God, of their city Jerusalem, of peace, and of a great meal with the finest of wheat. This promise goes far beyond what we will ever experience on earth; the ancient church therefore read in these words the promise of eternity with God. Through times of problems and hardship we will get there, and God sustains us through those times if we hold on to Him in faith.

St Augustine, bishop of Hippo (354-430) in his sermon on our Psalm (*Sermon 130.5*) tells us:

Whatever pains and difficulties we may have endured in this world, everything that comes to an end is in fact nothing. Good things are coming that will not come to an end; it is through toils and troubles that we come to them. But when we get there, no one can tear us away from them. The gates of Jerusalem are closed; their bars are also put in place. [...] No friend can go out, no enemy come in. There we are to enjoy true and real security, if here we have not let go of true reality.

True reality, that is, of course God.

Many of the church fathers point to the ‘finest of wheat’, promised in Psalm 147:14, as a pointer to the eternal meal we will celebrate in heaven, but also to our present Holy Communion, that points forward in time to that eternal feast with God. Or rather: it is God breaking into our world from the future with a foretaste of that meal.

Through the Word

How did God create our world? And how does he sustain the universe? How does he sustain us, small people? The last part of the Psalm focuses on God’s *Word*.

He sends his command to the earth, his word runs swiftly. [...] He sends his word and melts the snow. (Psalm 147:15, 18).

The powerful word of God is clearly personified here. God speaks, and his Word becomes an effective agent of God. That is why some see a Trinitarian aspect in this Psalm: it speaks of God, of His Word, and even of the Spirit, or the Wind of God – in verse 18: ‘He stirs up his breezes and the waters flow’.

And just as God sustains his creation through His Word – do we have to think here of Jesus Christ, the Son of God? – he also sustains his people through his Word. Read Psalm 147:19-20.

He has revealed his word to Jacob,
his laws and decrees to Israel.
He has done this for no other nation;
they do not know his laws.

Here we see how unique our relationship with God is. We have his word in our hand, in our mind, in our heart. And this word is personified in our Lord Jesus Christ.

God gave his Word to his people, his written word that guides us and helps us. He even came personally to his people, in his eternal Word, Jesus

Christ who came to us with Christmas. Because we have celebrated Christmas, we can look now with confidence to the future. Our God, He cares for us. Through his own Son He sustains us.

Conclusion:

What a reason to praise him! Let us therefore with our mouth testify to the goodness of God! But not only with our words. St Augustine in his *Commentary on the Psalms* (146:1), he writes:

Your tongue gives praise for a while; your life should give praise to God all the time.

Not only with our words, with our whole life we praise our Lord. He sustains us and stands beside us.

And our eternity is secure. The eternal meal is awaiting us.

And while as pilgrims on the way, God the Father gives his Word to us, Jesus Christ, to heal our broken hearts, and the Spirit of God enables us to hold on to Him, to fear God and to put our hope in his unfailing love.

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