

PSALM 127 GOD MAKES ALL THE DIFFERENCE!

[Chelmsford 21 August 2011]

Has it ever occurred to you that God and religion are not one & the same thing? Indeed, if God were simply concerned about religion, then we might as well pack up and go home. For religion is essentially about church, whereas God is about life.

Don't get me wrong: I believe there is a place for the church – I wouldn't be a Christian minister if I didn't believe that.

But God didn't send his Son into the world that we might go to church.

God sent his Son into the world that we might live.

Indeed, Jesus himself once said: **"I have come in order that you might have life – life in all its fullness"** (John 10.10). And the life of which Jesus was speaking was not simply 'pie in the sky when you die' – but life in the here and now.

Yes, as Christians, we are not into religion – we are in to life: and when we say life, we mean life before death, and not just after death.

Our experience teaches us that God can make a difference to life now.

With this thought in mind let's turn to Psalm 127 where the Psalmist speaks of the difference that God can make to our living.

1. GOD CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE TO FAMILY LIFE

"If the Lord does not build the house, the work of the builders is useless" (v1a)

The Psalmist is not talking about constructing a building, but about raising a family.

To *'build a house'* is a Jewish expression for having kids & bringing them up.

So the Psalmist goes on: **"Children are a gift from the Lord, they are a real blessing. The sons a man has when he is young are like arrows in a soldier's hand. Happy is the man who has many such arrows"** (vv3-5)

The Psalmist clearly believed that the more children the merrier.

Some of us might have our doubts.

Mark Twain surely was on to something when he said: *"When a child turns 13, stick him in a barrel, nail the lid on top & feed him through the knot hole. When he turns 16... plug up the knot hole"*.

Children can be a pain – its not for nothing that a best-seller by Robin Skynner & John Cleese was entitled *Families And How to Survive Them*.

There is nothing new about the problems of family life.

You only have to think about David's difficult relationship with his son Absalom to be aware of that.

And yet the Psalmist could still regard children as being a blessing. Why was that?

For the Psalmist the reason was obvious: A man blessed with children **"will never be defeated when he meets with his enemies in the place of judgement"** (v5).

In ancient society, it made a world of a difference if you had a family to be around you when you came to court – for justice was not always meted out fairly - widows & orphans had a hard time in standing up for their rights.

It was with this thought in mind that children are likened to “**arrows in a soldier’s hand**” (v4). Children are meant to be the front-line of the God-ordained defence for the family in times of need. As an archer with a quiver-full of arrows is not without defence, so too a father of many sons won’t be without a means of support. And there is truth in that. ***Children can & should be a support to their parents.***

Of course, when the Psalmist was speaking of children, he didn’t have in mind young children – but children in their 20s, 30s, 40s, 50s & even 60s.

The Bible teaches that we are to honour our parents not just when we are dependent children, but when we are independent adults too.

One of the great scandals of British society is the way in which so many adult children fail to take responsibility for their ageing parents – in this respect African families put us to shame by the way in which they honour and care for their elderly relatives.

“**Children**”, says the Psalmist, “**are a real blessing**”

But, as some of you will know to your cost, the mere fact of having children is no guarantee of future happiness or stability.

That is why we must not separate vv3-5 from v1: “**If the Lord does not build the house, the work of the builders is useless**”.

The thrust of the Scripture is this: If we would know the secret of happy family life, we must make room for God.

How do we make room for God in family life?

There is no one way – so much depends on what stage our children have reached.

- At this moment for Christian and Debbie it perhaps means reading Bible stories to their children, teaching them to say grace, worshipping together as a family every Sunday, and so on.
- Later, when the children are in their teens, it will mean encouraging them to attend whatever youth activities the church will then to offer. It will mean ensuring that there are regular times in the week when the family eats together and talks together - and ensuring that the talking will include thinking through how the Christian faith impacts itself on such issues as money, sex, drink and the like.

To attempt to raise a family without God’s help is folly.

A home without God, where God is allowed no role, is a home asking for trouble.

‘*Goodness!*’, someone might say, ‘*Are you suggesting that a home where God is honoured is trouble free?*’ No. Caroline & I know from our own experience what it is like to raise four independently-minded children – each one of them has given us cause concern at different times.

But we have sought to ensure that God has been at the centre of family life.

And God has blessed us.

The rabbis used to say: “*A child has three parents: God in addition to father and mother*”. I.e. without God there is no such thing as a complete family.

So, to those of you with children, let me encourage you too to ensure you too to include God in your family life together – for God can make all the difference.

2. GOD CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE TO WORK LIFE

For some people work is a fairly un-stressful occupation – it is what they do between 9 and 5 with decent coffee, tea & lunch breaks all thrown in.

But for many of us work today is incredibly stressful.

On the one hand, there is no such thing as a secure job today – that makes for stress.. On the other hand, there are those long hours which many have to work. Certainly true of commuters who leave Chelmsford station around 7 am & don't return much before 7 pm – and that is when the trains are running on time! Once you've got home and had a bite to eat, it's almost time to go to bed. It's tough earning a crust today

It was equally tough in ancient society.

True, there was no commuting – but there was also no 37-hour week, with five weeks of paid holiday together with all the other benefits we enjoy.

Earning a living from the land was not easy

In such a context the Psalmist wrote: **“It is useless to work so hard for a living, getting up early and going to bed late”** (v2).

The Psalmist was not having a go at work itself – he accepted, we all need to work.

But he was having a go at those who allow work to totally take over their lives.

In our terms he is speaking to the workaholics who are as addicted to work as compulsive drinkers are addicted to alcohol – they arrive at the office before everyone else, remain after the others have left, and even then when they do go home, take work back home in their briefcase.

“It's useless...For the Lord provides for those he loves, while they are asleep” (v2b)

I.e. for those who have entrusted their lives to God, God is working on our behalf even while we are resting.

We can see the truth of this in an agricultural economy: while the farmer is asleep, God is watering the ground, causing the crops to grow.

But this can also be true in a 21st century urban community: the Lord provides for those he loves while they are asleep.

The vital factor in life, says the Psalmist, is not the number of hours we work, but rather our dependence upon God.

Overtime and worry won't necessarily solve any problem – we will only end up with a heart attack or a stomach ulcer.

What is needed is that having done an honest day's work we trust God to provide – to provide not necessarily all that we desire, but all that is truly needful.

“The Lord provides for those he loves, while they are asleep”

Some versions speak of God giving **“sleep to his beloved”**. And that is true too. Those who trust God may know the sleep of a good conscience – contentment – freedom from anxiety – a sleep that is more dreamless and peaceful than that induced by any drug.

Yes, in the nitty-gritty of work, God makes a difference

If you don't believe it, then put God to the test. Try him – and discover the difference

3. GOD CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE TO OUR NATIONAL LIFE

And don't we need God to make a difference. Just think what we have experienced these last two weeks – the breakdown of civil society in some of our large cities, the riots, the looting. Without seeking to be political, David Cameron is surely right in maintaining that we live in a 'broken society'. Something needs to be done.

In this context we need to heed the words of the Psalmist: **“If the Lord does not protect the city, it is useless for the sentries to stand guard”** (v1b)

The Psalmist is here asserting that when it comes to life in our towns, cities & communities, the spiritual dimension is ultimately what counts.

The reason why our country is in a mess is that we as a nation have turned our back upon God and his ways.

Today we live for ourselves – and we are paying the consequences.

Many years ago William Sangster, a leading Methodist minister, preached a sermon which made the national headlines. Entitled ‘*What would a religious revival do for Britain?*’, the sermon gave 10 assurances. “*A religious revival would...*”

- *Pay old debts*
- *Reduce sexual immorality*
- *Disinfect the theatre*
- *Cut the divorce rate*
- *Reduce juvenile crime*
- *Lessen the prison population*
- *Improve the quality & increase the output of work*
- *Restore to the nation a high sense of density*
- *Make us invincible in the war of ideas*
- *Give happiness and peace to all people*

Does that sound old hat? The language perhaps may be dated, and yet Sangster was right. For all Sangster was doing was amplifying what the Psalmist says in Ps 33.12: **“Happy is the nation whose God is the Lord”**

Alas, few of our leaders & opinion-makers are prepared to take God seriously. Political parties today are to a large extent motivated by power rather than principle. The media is more about entertainment than about truth.

OK, we may disagree on the way to which Christian principles are applied to life. Some of us believe the coalition is doing a good job – others no doubt strongly disagree. But we can agree at least on this: God must come first – religion cannot be separated from the world of politics; it cannot be separated from the world of entertainment or of work; it cannot be separated from any area of our national life.

Unless we allow the Lord to **“protect the city, then it is useless for the sentries to stand guard”** (v2). Unless we as a nation are prepared to take God seriously, then we should not be surprised to see our society slowly disintegrate.

But if we were to take God seriously, if we were to include him in our national life, then God would make all the difference.

So to return to where I began: God and religion are not one and the same thing.

God wants us to experience life in all its fullness – but we can only experience the difference that God makes if we make room for him in our lives
We need to include God in!