

## **A prayer of praise and thanksgiving**

God, through your might and power the world was created, and through it now the world is changed, and ever changing.

We read in the Scriptures of how you changed people's lives. We hear it in the stories of saints old and new.

We know it through the experience and lives of our own communities.

We thank and praise you for all that you have done through the changes you have made – and are still making – in our lives.

We thank and praise you for the gift of your Holy Spirit who gives us – your people – strength, and the blessing of peace.

**Amen.**

## **Read Psalm 29**

### **Sermon by Revd Peter Lyth**

In November 2009, Cumbria was hit by severe flooding. It started with a severe warning on 18<sup>th</sup> November. By the next day, forecasters were predicting 8.2 inches of rain. 20<sup>th</sup> November saw Cockermouth submerged by 8 feet of water and 200 people had to be rescued by the Emergency Services. The Met office described the rainfall as some of the heaviest on record and the Environmental Agency described the level of flooding as “unprecedented”. On Friday 21<sup>st</sup>, tragedy struck in nearby Workington as father of four, PC Bill Barker was swept away as the bridge on which he was standing collapsed. He was on duty directing motorists off the bridge. The disruption continued for many days afterwards as people lived in makeshift centres, their homes destroyed by the floods.

Further from home, the effects of the floods in New Orleans in 2005 were catastrophic and the tide marks on buildings were clearly visible some years later. Greta Thunberg's 18<sup>th</sup> Birthday a few days ago provides a timely reminder that climate change has exacerbated events such as these and her campaigning will ensure that this issue will remain in the public consciousness.

This power of the elements that ultimately we seem powerless to stop is something that preoccupied people thousands of years ago. There are many places even today where the reliance on the cycles of the weather is total. A bad summer or growing season can easily lead to food shortages, collapsed local economies and even starvation. It is no wonder that the weather was the subject of Psalms and poetry.

In Psalm 29, the focus is on the strength and power of God exhibited through the storm. Over the last few years, we have been subjected to passing storms that now are named. Here in the Psalm, they are a revelation of the power of God himself.

There are three elements to this psalm that stand out to me.

The first is water. At the beginning of the creation story at the start of the Old Testament, “God created the heavens and the earth. <sup>2</sup> Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.”. The waters represent chaos and lack of order. In due course, God brings order to the water. In the book of Genesis, water is weaponised in the story of Noah where much of the earth is destroyed. We can testify to the destructive power of water as it overwhelmed the towns of parts of Cumbria leaving chaos in its wake. Yet by the time that the New Testament comes along, water has a new significance. Instead of being the enemy, wild, unable to be tamed and destructive, it becomes a symbol of God’s grace. In many churches, this Sunday celebrates the baptism of Jesus. Baptism symbolises the washing away of human sinfulness, God’s forgiveness of the dark side of human nature. It has been tamed by God and put to new use. God has mastery over it.

The second thing is the symbolism of the power of God as he reveals himself. There is a technical term for this – Theophany. In many ancient cultures, thunder was associated with the voice of deity. Even before the Jewish people arrived, the Canaanites associated thunder with the voice of their god Baal. So the image is the approaching thunder as God approaches. The writer conveys the image that God approaches with great power – so much so that he rules over the forces of chaos. But this divine voice is so powerful that it breaks down the great cedars of Lebanon – trees that symbolised great strength in their own right. The imagery of the storm continues as Sirion (another name

for Mount Hermon) “skips like a young wild ox” and shakes the wilderness of Kadesh. Even the oak trees whirl – a particularly good image for trees in a gale-force wind. It is a strong image for the power of God.

We often focus on the vulnerability of Christ on the cross and it is right to do so. But it is also good to focus on the majesty and power of the Lord, as we do here. After all, he is the creator of all things and deserves worship and awe.

It is this worship that is the third of the elements of this psalm. The first two verses contain commands to “Ascribe” – in other words we are told to acknowledge that God has power and strength, then that his name is glorious. At the end we return to the theme of worship as “all in his temple say Glory”. So God is worthy of praise both on earth and in heaven.

God’s throne sits over the flood – God rules over the powers of chaos and tames them. These are reassuring words as we contemplate several more weeks of lockdown and the Covid virus is seemingly out of control. This is true of many situations over the years – the floods of Cumbria being just one. As God later showed in the Easter story, He is Lord of life and death and prevails over all. Even when we feel overwhelmed by what may seem to be irresistible forces, God will ultimately prevail.

And our reassurance is completed in the last couple of verses. May God give strength to his people – strength to hang on when things seem impossible. And may we be blessed with peace – God’s peace.

### **A prayer of confession**

Lord, when you came into the world, things changed. When we came into a relationship with you, things changed. Life became filled with a new sense of purpose and peace. But, Lord, sometimes we let you down by doing wrong things or failing to do right things.

**We are sorry, Lord.**

Sometimes, Lord, through pride, stubbornness or fear we build barriers and keep others at arm’s length – even you, Lord.

**We are sorry, Lord.**

At times we give in to our weaknesses and temptations, failing to draw on your strength. At times we are troubled by difficult situations and find it hard to

trust you.

**We are sorry, Lord.**

Help us to turn such things around and turn to you. Help us to learn from the past and, drawing on your strength and peace, make a better future.

**Amen.**

**A final prayer**

Lord, help us to be open to your prompting  
as we seek to discover what you would have us be and do.  
Remind us again and again that you have promised to be our  
guide and companion on our journey.

Help us to look forward with renewed commitment,  
and bless our thinking and speaking and doing.

In your name.

**Amen.**

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