

My theme today is the Beauty of God. Of all possible themes, the beauty of God might seem the most indulgent and the most irrelevant to the viral pandemic facing us today. What possible use would the contemplation of God's beauty serve? How would recognising God's beauty help us; we who may find ourselves swinging between distraction, complacency and panic? And besides, is there not a fundamental problem with such a quest in the first place? That is, if God is Spirit, and therefore without a body, in what possible sense could God possibly be said to be beautiful if he is invisible to the eye? In which case, when the psalmist expresses the desire to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord; is he deluding himself?

He may be; or he may not be. Although we commonly associate beauty with what we see with the eye and which pleases us; there is another beauty in addition to the aesthetic, and that is moral beauty, or beauty of character. A person who is kind, thoughtful and compassionate could be justifiably said to have a beautiful character, regardless of appearance. And if such a person were able to offer us comfort when we were afraid, and give us confidence when we were despondent, we might rightly say that this person had done something beautiful for us.

This brings us closer to the kind of beauty that the psalmist seeks from the Lord. And the reason the psalmist seeks the Lord's beauty in his temple is because, it seems, he is afraid. As we said together as our call to worship, the Psalmist asks:

The Lord is my light and my salvation;
who shall I fear?
The Lord is the stronghold of my life;
of whom shall I be afraid. (Ps. 27:1)

The psalmist then goes on to give an indication of what, or who, he is afraid of: enemies who seek to destroy him; an army that would make war against him. One of the commentators I consulted when preparing this sermon is the late George Knight. When writing from retirement in New Zealand in the early 1980s, he comments that if it was King David who wrote this psalm, he encountered many enemies, and had to face an opposing army more than once. But what about us today? In what form might our enemy confront us?

Today, without sounding far-fetched, our enemies might even be a host of destructive viruses. We have only recently been discovering how viruses can reproduce themselves by the million like living beings and how they depend upon their own biological ingenuity to recreate themselves in ever more destructive forms.¹

Regrettably, the threat posed by destructive viruses no longer seems far-fetched today. The Covid-19 coronavirus continues to reproduce and threaten the health of millions of people worldwide.

The psalmist seeks refuge from his enemies in the temple; he asks that he be allowed to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord. (v. 4)

¹ George AF Knight, *Psalms*, Volume 1, The Daily Bible Study Series, Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press/Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1982

This focus upon the *Lord* is the main point of the psalm. The psalmist is praying—and the whole psalm is a prayer—that despite the threat posed by opponents and enemies, there is One to whom he, and we, may look for strength and shelter. The Lord. The threat is still there, but we do not have to face it alone. Rather, when we trust in God, we find that he gives us light to see by. When we trust in God, he saves us from being consumed by anxiety. This is a beautiful thing that God does for us.

That we no longer have to face our problems alone; that we no longer have to be afraid, this is a revelation that comes from the God of light and beauty. A word that is often associated with revelation in the Bible is ‘glory’. Glory is the manifestation of God’s character in the world. This revelation of God’s glory has shape and form. Karl Barth writes:

If we can and must say that God is beautiful, to say this is to say how He enlightens and convinces and persuades us. It is to describe not merely the naked fact of His revelation or its power, but the shape and form in which it is a fact and is power. It is to say that God has [a] superior force, [a] power of attraction, which speaks for itself, which wins and conquers...[because God] is beautiful, divinely beautiful...as the unattainable primal beauty, yet really beautiful...He acts as the One who gives pleasure, creates desire and rewards with enjoyment. And He does it...because first and last He alone is that which is pleasant, desirable, and full of enjoyment.²

Barth’s point here is that the way in which God acts among us has a shape and form: he persuades and attracts us by his beauty towards that which is pleasant, desirable and enjoyable. But how does God do this? He does it through his Word and Spirit, through his Creation, and through those who represent God’s beautiful nature in their attitudes and actions.

The hymn that was sung at the beginning of worship today, ‘O matchless beauty of our God’ (*Rejoice and Sing* 101, by Colin Thompson) is based on a famous passage in the *Confessions* of St Augustine. Augustine confesses to God that he used to be captivated by the beauty and pleasure of the external world; but in his formerly unlovely state, he did not recognise that all things that are truly beautiful and lovely reflect the glory and beauty of God. He writes:

The lovely things kept me far from you, though if they did not have their existence in you, they had not existence at all. You called and cried out loud and shattered my deafness. You were radiant and resplendent, you put to light my blindness. You were fragrant, and I drew in my breath and now pant after you. I tasted you, and I feel but hunger and thirst for you. You touched me, and I am set on fire to attain the peace which is yours.³

As well we know, it is very difficult to avoid be captivated, at least momentarily, by a person we consider to be stunningly beautiful. Makers of television, film, and especially advertisers know this, which is why externally beautiful people populate our screens, magazines, and billboards. Augustine’s point is that original beauty is found in God, and all created beauty that is truly beautiful reflects God’s character: which is the beauty of holiness, the beauty of mercy, the beauty of grace. God’s holiness is the purity of his being unmixed with sin; God’s

² Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1, *The Doctrine of God*, 650-1, Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1957, TF Torrance & Geoffrey Bromiley (eds.)

³ Augustine, *Confessions* X.xxvii (38), p. 201, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993, Henry Chadwick (trans.)

mercy is the compassion he shows to those bowed down that raises them up; and God's grace is the help he gives those unable to help themselves. God's beauty is the form of his glory that shows forth these divine perfections. Yet because God is ever giving and generous, he does not reserve these qualities for himself alone, but shares them with all those who dare to reflect his glory and beauty in their attitudes and actions. When we give up trying to face our problems alone, and call upon God for help, he liberally pours out the power and beauty of his Word and Spirit, enlivening our spirits, heightening our confidence, causing us to rejoice, giving us clarity of vision, making us, above all, thankful for the many gifts we enjoy and full of awe at the wonder and the gift of life itself.

The final hymn that will conclude today's worship is written by Benjamin Waugh. It begins, "Now let us see thy beauty, Lord" (*Rejoice and Sing* 411) Benjamin Waugh was a Congregational Minister, who, in the 19th century co-founded the London Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, which was the predecessor of the NSPCC. When Waugh first ministered in the slums of Greenwich, he was appalled at the deprivations and cruelties suffered by children. Critical of the workhouse system, the Poor Law, and aspects of the criminal justice system as it affected children, he urged the creation of juvenile courts as a means of diverting children from a life of crime. What, in addition to the desire to prevent cruelty to children, motivated Waugh? It was his passionate conviction that God is good and loving, and, above all: beautiful. In his hymn, Waugh writes:

Now let us see Thy beauty, Lord,
as we have seen before;
and by thy beauty quicken us
to worship and adore.

Our every feverish mood is cooled,
and gone is every load,
when we can lose the love of self,
and find the love of God.

Let us, then, share in God's renewing work, showing the loveless that they are loved and therefore beautiful.

Thanks be to God.

I invite you to respond to the Word of God by praying with me the following prayer:

**O God of light and beauty,
there is much we should fear if we had to face our problems alone.
But you have promised to be our Helper and Saviour,
our Stronghold and Shelter, our Shield and Defender.
Come alongside us and give us the strength and faith we need.
Reveal to us the beauty of your holiness, mercy and grace.
Call us again to share in your renewing work,
showing the loveless that they are loved and therefore beautiful,
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen**