

MAY 28, 2021

Psalm 8: 1,3-6,9

*O lord, our Sovereign,
How majestic is your name in all the earth!*

*You have set your glory above the heavens...
When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
The moon and the stars that you have established;
What are human beings that you are mindful of them,
Mortals that you care for them?*

*Yet you have made them a little lower than God,
And crowned them with glory and honour.
You have given them dominion over the work of your hands;
You have put all things under their feet...*

*O Lord, our Sovereign,
How majestic is your name in all the earth!*

This psalm is one of the more famous ones. In the Western world, many a poet and songwriter have based their lyric on some variation of this psalm. Why? What makes it so special? It's the contrast between the extraordinary and the ordinary, the transcendent reality of all that is and the everyday reality we live and breathe. It's also about the contrast between the "grandeur and misery of man." This quote, inspired by psalm 8, is taken from the reflections or "*Pensées*" of the great 18th century French Philosopher and Mathematician Blaise Pascal. Even as Pascal wrote very little, and the brand of Roman Catholicism he embraced was sidelined by the hierarchy, he became an important influence on Protestant theology in the 20th century and beyond, especially in his savouring of the paradoxical nature of truth and reality.

What Pascal's statement does is capture a profound insight about the human condition. As human beings, we are spirit, infinite in passion and potential. But we are also creatures of the earth, limited, vulnerable and mortal. But more than that. Unless we absorb our mortality and vulnerability and learn to dance with it, so to speak, our vulnerable humanity becomes our "misery." As the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr wrote: While we humans can rise up to commit great acts of loving sacrifice and service

beyond any other creature of the earth, we humans can also sink to committing the greatest acts of cruelty beyond any creature of the earth.

What this psalm can inspire in us is the kind of awe and gratitude at what we have been created capable of as human beings, especially as we are also very much part of this earth in all its fragile vulnerability and finite mortality. Out of such awe and gratitude ought to emerge some humility and “reverence for life” (Albert Schweitzer). This earth is our home and we are all siblings with all life in it. Even as the psalm uses the language of ‘dominion’, the intent is not domination, but humble care and stewardship accountable before “The Lord, our sovereign.”

May our grandeur and infinity of spirit complemented by a humble acceptance of our finitude and mortality keep us focused on the love and care we can all give in all our infinite potential and which we also need to receive in all our vulnerable creaturehood.

PRAYER: We come, O God, with an infinity of passion and desire in us. Awaken what has fallen asleep. Illumine what has become dulled and darkened. Resurrect faith in us if we have lost our hope. We are made for more as your creatures. Rouse us to where we have yet to go. At the same time we are earth-formed creatures, O God, part of the dust and matter that surrounds us. Keep us mindful of our shared life with all life around us. Keep us grateful in our vulnerability which may yet teach us how to reach out and receive as much as we may give. May a renewed “reverence for life” frame our remaining days with thankful hearts; Amen.