

PSALM 138

Of David.

- ¹ I give you thanks, O LORD, with my whole heart;
before the gods I sing your praise;
- ² I bow down towards your holy temple
and give thanks to your name for your steadfast love and your faithfulness;
for you have exalted your name and your word
above everything.
- ³ On the day I called, you answered me,
you increased my strength of soul.
- ⁴ All the kings of the earth shall praise you, O LORD,
for they have heard the words of your mouth.
- ⁵ They shall sing of the ways of the LORD,
for great is the glory of the LORD.
- ⁶ For though the LORD is high, God regards the lowly;
but the haughty God perceives from far away.
- ⁷ Though I walk in the midst of trouble,
you preserve me against the wrath of my enemies;
you stretch out your hand,
and your right hand delivers me.
- ⁸ The LORD will fulfil God's purpose for me;
your steadfast love, O LORD, endures for ever.
Do not forsake the work of your hands.

The process of writing a psalm meditation begins on the Saturday morning for me, and it continues all the way to the following Friday when the eblast goes out. On this Saturday morning, there has just been a coronation of King Charles, monarch over the commonwealth of which Canada is a part. Of the many symbols on the King's crown, attire and other paraphernalia are those that point to the great King David of the Hebrew people, and the royal lineage that leads to messiah/King Jesus. Psalm 138 like many psalms is attributed to David (David didn't necessarily compose it, but it reflects something of what a righteous ruler before God would pray). Whatever it is that Charles may have prayed as he prepared for his day, this psalm provides some important principles.

In the first set of verses (1-3), the ruler gives thanks to God with their whole heart for God's steadfast love and faithfulness. What is fascinating to note for me is that there is nothing here in these opening verses about thanksgiving because of personal success and triumph as a ruler. Rather, the focus is on God. God is the one who must be exalted above all, not the ruler. What the ruler gains from such practice of thanksgiving and exaltation is "strength of soul."

Strength of soul is about inner confirmation, assurance and a deeper rootedness in being one with God who is the true sovereign over all.

This focus on God as the true sovereign rather than on the ruler themselves is taken further in the second set of verses (4-6). Here the ruler praises God because God is a God for all rulers and peoples. The Hebrew ruler and peoples are not especially privileged. God's glory is in God's universality of steadfast love and faithfulness accessible to all peoples. This also means there is no place for "haughtiness" (arrogance and presumptuous superiority) in those truly aligned with God's will and ways. Humility is a principle value for a genuine ruler and humility means one never imagines one is more deserving of God's favour than anyone else be they ally or enemy.

And once we truly appreciate verses 1-6, we can properly read verses 7-8. For here, finally, the ruler prays to God more personally for protection against their enemies and for preservation. We can understand this prayer, now, as not being about humiliating and crushing their enemies and vaunting one's victory and success. No. Rather, it is more about self-defence and protection.

To understand this better let's ponder the situation of Ukraine. The patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church is praying for the victory of Putin and Russia. But Ukrainian leaders and people are praying the same thing on behalf of Ukraine. God is a God of all, and yet, must God's justice not take sides at times? Psalm 138 privileges self defence over conquest and protection over subjugation and domination. Ukraine is defending its territory not seeking to expand it. Ukraine is not seeking to harm Russia and Russians but to defend its people and borders. This is very different than Putin's campaign of expansion by invasion at all costs.

God is a God of all peoples, but God's justice does take sides. The faithful ruler(s) must ensure that God is the true sovereign and any rule they are granted must be faithful to God's vision for all peoples. Even as the ruler must resist tyranny, they themselves must never become tyrannous. They need to listen and follow what is good for the people even when that means sacrificing the privilege and power to do what one wants in one's own interests. The interests of the people, especially the most vulnerable, are the interests of God. Finally, all of this requires a strength of soul and a humility of spirit.

And isn't some of his also true for each of us? How do we become little tyrants with those around us? How do our needs and wants oppress those around us and mother earth who must sustain our carbon footprint and the garbage we produce? How do we fail to recognize God as true sovereign over our lives?

PRAYER: May those of us who have responsibility and power over others learn how to care and serve, O God. May we learn to listen and share what we have. May we learn to give as much as we hope to receive. May our hearts open in humility rather than presume our way is

the best way, the right way and the only way... Do not forsake us, O God. Come to our aid.
Grant us strength of soul. Make us more humble. In Jesus' name; Amen.