

'Talking straight'. Sermon first preached by Dr Christine Hoffman at FUMC, Palmetto, 13th June 2010

I wonder if the last verse I've just read from the appointed psalm this morning struck you as at all odd. It did me.Why does the Psalmist ask God to lead him 'because' of his enemies?' And why does he link this with asking God to make his way straight? I believe it's because the psalmist is a straight-talker. He is determined to 'call a spade a spade'. So the writer of our psalm does not hesitate to call an enemy an enemy. He does this because he knows that this is how he and other members of the faith community experience some people. From the point of view of walking the walk of faith, there are people who constitute enemies to us.

Who are our enemies, I wonder? (Sports and taking sides. World cup? Didn't really matter to me, but the other week I was watching a sport I cared a bit more about. Tennis match – French Open. A popular French player against an Italian – never heard. Match had to be called off because of bad-light. By this time, a lot of bad feeling. The French crowd in Paris were booing the Italian. Now you may be used to people booing in sports fixtures, but I'm not. But I ended up booing the booers! Why? They became my enemies.)

This is a trivial example and our psalmist is not being trivial. He has a list of enemies: they are the boastful, evildoers, liars, those who shed blood and deceive. I'm reminded of a list that a self-righteous Pharisee has as he addresses God in the temple. According to this parable of Jesus, the Pharisee says: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.'

You might have come across this saying: 'Just because I'm paranoid doesn't mean they're not out to get me'. Think about it. It's funny because it's true: 'Just because I'm paranoid doesn't mean they're not out to get me.' There is a little bit of the paranoid in all of us, don't you think? We have this uneasy feeling that we've got some enemies out there somewhere. There are people who not only criticize us but also even want our downfall.

(Recent tragic shootings in the English Lake District. Possible grudges, especially of his twin-brother – inheritance, taxman; fellow cab-drivers ... assaults from passengers?? Who knows? May never know. All we know for certain is that this 52 year-old cab driver 10 days ago went out and shot dead his twin-brother and their attorney, a colleague..... and then himself. Maybe various people were in some way out to get this man. Maybe they weren't. Either way, it seems at the very least plausible, from some accounts, that for some time this man was resentful, was nursing grudges, was fearful that he would be brought down.)

Well, we say: What's this to do with you and me? Don't get overdramatic. We're not going to go out murdering people. Do you remember what Jesus said in the same Sermon on the Mount in which he spoke of our attitude to our enemies? Let me remind you: 'You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, "You shall not murder"; and "whoever murders shall be liable to judgment." But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment.' (Mt 5:21-2). Whatever can Jesus be saying to us here?

Nursing hatred or anger, even just what may seem like a little bitty grudge is the first step towards uncontrollable rage. Nurse it to keep it warm and it can break out at any time and in any way. The poet, William Blake, has a short but powerful poem, entitled *A Poison Tree*:

Yes, anger unchecked can so take over our hearts and minds that we destroy others and in the bargain ourselves. If you read the Book of Psalms in its entirety you could be forgiven for thinking the writer or writers are positively obsessed with their enemies. Do you know someone who has ever been eaten up in relation to a family will, sibling-rivalry, jealousy over financial success? If the answer to this question is 'no' then congratulations. I dare to suggest that you're a rarity. Perhaps after all we're not so far removed from the so-called 'gunman' in the Lake District tragedy.

Our psalmist knows how close he is to following his perceived enemies down the path of lies, bloodthirstiness, and deceit. Or does he? Is he in some way self-deceived? I think at least he is making a strenuous attempt at self-examination in his prayer to God. Living a life of faith is under threat from the so-called enemies. The life of the faithful is never without opposition. The psalmist knows that to live a life of faith demands a response of commitment. His enemies display an attitude to life which is the exact opposite. It is marked by arrogant self-confidence whilst he needs insight and strength to walk along the road God has mapped out for him. He needs to be challenged and sustained by what he knows to be true of God's nature and of the way in which God acts. And so do we. So the psalmist prays earnestly: 'Lead me, O LORD, in your righteousness because of my enemies; make your way straight before me.' We need to pray the same prayer for divine guidance. This is not only because of the reality of hostile enemies, but also because we know that we ourselves, just like the psalmist, must take care to avoid the way of the wicked. As one commentator puts it: 'The prayer for protection is not only for protection *from* wicked persons, but also a prayer for protection *from* becoming *like them*.'¹

I heard the other day whilst attending our Church's Annual Conference that a survey reveals very little difference in lifestyle between believers and non-believers. We were challenged to ask ourselves what it means to be a Christian, a disciple of Christ. You may recall that Jesus did some very straight talking about enemies. He told anyone and everyone who would be his disciple to love

¹ P Craigie, *Psalms 1-50*, 89

their enemies. 'You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy." But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven.' Oh dear! Must I? Psalm 5 says of God: 'You hate all evildoers. You destroy those who speak lies.'

At this point, I'm reminded of Simon the Pharisee in our gospel reading this morning. Simon has already decided that the woman who lavishes such extravagant hospitality on Jesus is a bad lot. She is a sinner. We can imagine then just how shocked Simon is to be challenged on this judgement. He is challenged, not because she isn't a sinner, but because he does not recognize that he is a sinner too. He is so very clear about who God's enemies are. So the writer of Psalm 5 is in serious danger of being a little too clear on God's response to these so-called enemies.

Simon is very sure who the sinners are. Think back to our imaginary Pharisee in our parable who stands thanking God that he is not like other people. In particular, he is not like the tax collector who stands beating his breast, asking for God to have mercy on him, a sinner (Luke 18:11,13). But, wait a minute, what does Jesus go on to say in this portion of the Sermon of the Mount? Jesus says: 'Love your enemies For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? Be perfect, therefore as your heavenly Father is perfect.' (Mt 5:43-48). Oh now, come on Jesus, don't ask us to go after perfection. Come on now, John Wesley; don't ask us to go the path of perfect love. Fair-to-middling love, maybe, but not perfect love.

Unfortunately for us as Christians, we have thrown in our lot with a God of perfect love, with a Savior of perfect love and we, as Methodists, confess John Wesley's doctrine of perfection. I don't think our psalmist has quite made it, but before we condemn him and congratulate ourselves, perhaps we should each ask ourselves today who, deep down, do we believe is our enemy. Who do we think is opposed to what we have, what we hold dear – be it materially, emotionally, or spiritually? Who do we feel is out to get us?

Can you think of another psalm which mentions enemies. You have rather a lot to choose from as 'enemies' is one of the psalmist's favorite words. So fond is he of talking straight. But there is one occurrence in particular that I bet you know well. Do you recall the mention of 'enemies' in Psalm 23? 'You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies'. The whole psalm, you remember, celebrates God's comforting presence in the darkest of valleys, in the worst of experiences. To be in the presence of your enemies is surely one of these. This then is the reason why the psalmist goes in for talking straight. He knows the challenge of enemies to a life of faith.

The psalmist talks straight because he has a real sense of how difficult it is to walk a straight path. There are verses to this effect in the Book of Proverbs:

'Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.' (3:5-6) Just as in our Psalm 5, it is God who makes the way or the path straight for us. And our Psalm 23, you may recall says that God 'leads me in right paths for his names' sake' (verse 3). It is God's righteousness, not ours. It is God's standards by which we are measured. So Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane prays: 'Not my will but yours be done.' I once heard a Christian musician say that he particularly disliked having to play at memorial services the song: 'I did it my way.' Apparently, this is quite a popular choice and perhaps I should be careful if case there is somebody here who has chosen it for a loved one. The musician who was talking to me, however, found that for him it expressed the opposite of this humble way of being led my God. Rather the song seems to put all the emphasis on my calling the tune, calling the shots.

I know many of you use a global positioning system when driving. Stephen and I have both told stories about our GPS before. According to the accompanying manual, our GPS is called Jill. I've got over my early jealousy of Jill but I still tend to believe everything she says, even when she is clearly having a meltdown and is sending us astray. I feel a bit let down when she makes a mistake. She should be utterly reliable in taking us straight to our destination. In the case of our spiritual destiny, says the psalmist, God *is* utterly reliable. But we do have to keep turning on and following God's positioning system. We have to put in the right address and we do have to keep following the ways in which he leads us. The way through life may, at times, seem anything but straight, plain, or obvious. But the psalmist asks for himself, and we ask for ourselves, the confidence, the trust, the faith to be led by God, to keep on following God's directions.

It is, after all, when we feel attacked by others that they begin to feel like our enemies. It may even constitute a crisis. Then it is there is a need for clarity, for the way to be made straight so that we know which way to go. I don't know how much attention you to pay to the fire directions, for instance, if you stay in a hotel or are in a large building, or on an aeroplane for that matter. Where is the nearest exit? If there is a fire, then it is not time for a conference on the best way to exist. You simply need to find the best way to get out and away from the danger. So the psalmist requests clarity in order to do the right thing when it becomes hard to see straight.

Many of us, of course, do tend to call God in in times of crisis. By that time, like the psalmist, we have already passed judgment against are enemies. Even though we are supposedly asking and watching for God's judgement, we tell God just whom He should hate and destroy. We plead for vindication and divine retribution as if we have no responsibility for our part in a conflict.

'Lead me, O LORD, in your righteousness because of my enemies; make your way straight before me.' This last phrase may remind you of the words of the prophet Isaiah who urges those in exile in Babylon to: 'make straight in the desert

a highway for our God.' The word 'straight' come from the Hebrew root *yashar* which means 'be straight, honest, firm, right'. Sometimes, we religious folks are so very busy talking straight, being honest, standing firm, being right that we are simply not open to any directing or redirecting from God. Whatever our psalmist still has to learn about his enemies, he can at least teach us that when we feel battered by the chaos of the world in which we live, our best bet is to come into the presence of God. 'If we stay in a state of prayer long enough, and truly do keep watch for God's answer to our prayer, we may find that God is calling us to change our positions and attitudes.' Who are you quite happy to describe as enemies or evildoers? Who do you have real difficulty including in God's grace? Are they undocumented immigrants, homosexuals, Moslems? Rest assured, every single one of us present this morning will, if we are as honest at the psalmist, have some person or group of persons where we want to draw the line, where enough is enough, where we arrogantly put a limit on God's love. Out of fear, out of conviction, out of all manner of good reasons, we align ourselves with those Pharisees who were so sure of their own goodness that they stood apparently to worship God whilst all the time talking to themselves and patting themselves on the back. If we are not careful, we fall into calling Pharisees the enemies. As William Blake and the writer of Genesis chapter 3 knew only too well, we keep taking the fruit from the poison tree, we keep seeking to be God, thinking we know perfectly good from evil.

Yes, let's talk straight and recognize our struggle with those who somehow seem out to deceive us, to cheat us, to get us. Let's call a spade a spade, an enemy an enemy. But heaven help us if we stop there. If we stay stuck in our enmities, we will destroy not only others but also ourselves. This surely is why the psalmist prays: 'Lead me, O LORD, in your righteousness because of my enemies.' The psalmist knows that only God sees the whole picture, only God knows each of us through and through, only God has truly got it straight. This is why Jesus spends so much of his ministry, both in action and in teaching, challenging the conventional wisdom of the religious of his day. Jesus could not talk much more straight to us than when says: 'I say to you: Love your enemies and prayer for those who persecute you. ...Be perfect ... as your heavenly Father is perfect.' Not only in the Garden in Jerusalem in his last days but in the hills of Galilee throughout his ministry, Jesus withdraws in prayer to his Father who is perfect. We read of his going, like the psalmist, early in the morning, to pray. We know that the Book of Psalms was Jesus' hymnbook, Jesus' prayer book. And we know, therefore, that he needed to pray in the words of the psalmist: 'Make your way straight before me'. Jesus needed to talk straight and he needed to go straight. I think we can assume that this was hardest for Jesus in the presence of his enemies. Yes, Jesus did have enemies. And they did get him. But till his final breath he prayed for his enemies and he was able to do this because God answered his prayer: 'Make your way straight before me.'

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen