

“Why Do the Nations Rage?”

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For an Evening Service on the Canada Day Weekend

Psalm 2; Acts 4.23-31

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Psalm 2 is about nations. We are celebrating our nation this weekend. But does Psalm 2 fit for Canada Day?

The Psalm talks about raging nations. We have our moments of grumpiness, for which we are sorry. The Psalm talks of conspiring leaders? We dig at our politicians but, truthfully, we've been served reasonably well by leaders of all political stripes. The Psalm talks of plotting peoples? Look at our history. We don't do rebellion well.

By no means are we a perfect confederation. We celebrate Canada Day here on traditional territories of the Attawandaron, Haudenosaunee, Wyandot, and Mississauga First Nations. We have a lot to do to be right with them.

Still, we're Canada. Psalm 2 comes from a different time and place. Thinking of that world, instead of countries I picture a swarm of street gangs fighting turf-wars. They are pledging alliances and backstabbing allies. They have smouldering grudges and long-remembered slights. They chest-thump and trade bravado. They explode in murder and massacre

How different is that from our world today? They didn't have Twitter!

Into the midst of this God placed God's People, Israel.¹ God called them, as God calls us, to shine God's light among the nations, for all the peoples.

But when the nations are raging, and the peoples are plotting . . . well, it's hard to notice a candle in the midst of a forest fire.

In this international inferno, what's God's good news?

II

God laughs! Look at those rulers strutting. Can you hear God snicker? God mocks! Look at those strategists plotting. Can you hear God saying, “Really?” God rages! When you see the poor trampled, migrants refused, children starving at the gate, and bombs crashing from the sky, I hope we can hear God steam.

Then, God says this: Look at My king! That's God's answer: Look at My king!

During his coronation, the king was anointed. So “anointed” means king. The Hebrew word for “anointed” is *mashiach*. Messiah!

¹ Actually, by this time they'd already had a civil war and split in two countries: Israel and Judah.

“Look at My messiah,” says God.

Picture the scene. The old king, tested and experienced, dies. His son becomes “messiah,” king. Not because he’s applied and been found qualified. Not because he has a resume of solid experience. Not because he got the most votes. Only because of who his daddy was. So everyone is wondering about this new guy. Does he have what it takes? What sort of “messiah” will he be?²

So God says, *“This is my king. From now on, he is my son. So respect him. Honour him. If you need protection, come to him. If you are up to no good, fear him.”*

This is the message of Psalm 2: in this dangerous gangster world we live in, God has given a king. God endorses him. God stands behind him. So we should obey him.

III

This worries me.

You know that saying, *“Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.”*³ The idea is that if someone gains power, they will probably turn rotten. The more power they have, the more rotten they become.

That has wisdom to it. I wonder, though, if might be even more accurate to say this. We all have our corruptions. We are all rotten in some way or another.

What power does, is this. It gives an already-corrupted person more ability:

- a) to act out their corruptly, and
- b) to believe the lie that they are not corrupt. (For, who dares tell the king that he is naked?)

Remember David? He was chosen by God, and the greatest king of God’s People. Remember Bathsheba, the missus next door? I doubt David was the only fellow engaging in sexual misconduct that day. Being king did not make him any worse than the rest of us. What his power did, though, is give David more ability to transgress, coerce, cover-up, murder, and (almost) get away with it. And, power told him he had the right to.

² For the wisdom of regarding Psalm 2 as part of a coronation ritual, see Water Brueggemann and William H. Bellinger, Jr., Psalms, New Cambridge Bible Commentary (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 32.

³ This was said by John Dalberg-Acton. A Roman Catholic, he said it in the context of a debate about papal infallibility. I appreciate the irony of someone who went by a title of British nobility and privilege (“the Lord Acton”) offering wisdom on the dangers of power. It’s almost as presumptuous as someone who is given the honorific “the reverend” extolling the necessity of humility. For the entire quote and its background, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Dalberg-Acton,_1st_Baron_Acton.

IV

Remember, Psalm 2's message is that in this dangerous world, God has given a king. The danger I see is what that message does to the person who is crowned.

Whisper to me (or any of us) that God has especially chosen me, God has given me this power, my glory is for God's glory, my mission is God's mission, God is on my side, and top it off with bows or salutes when I walk into the room . . . I might start thinking I am very good. I can do no wrong. And I become very dangerous.

What happens when a whole nation believes that? No, I'm not singling out any particular country here, except perhaps our own. Do we believe our own press? . . . We're the best in the world. The world needs more of us. We possess a special virtue. We act with the best intentions. We are very nice about it . . . What does that do to us? Does it make it harder for us to admit when we are wrong? I don't mean formal apologies that. I mean really admit it. Can a people that prides its goodness, really confess and grieve its shame?

Those kings of Israel were, really, just like us, and all people, and all nations. A mixed meal of fine wine and rotted meat. Some were great. Some were terrible. All were called "messiah."

VI

So, what's the good news? What of God's answer to this dangerous world of raging nations? A world where power corrupts the already-corrupted? What is the good news in God's answer of a king?

It was the earliest days of the Jesus-movement. Two of its leaders, Peter and John, were taken into custody for crimes against the public order; they had healed a man and proclaimed Jesus. They received a conditional sentence and were discharged. They quickly returned to their friends, and a celebration of God broke out.

As they celebrated, they remembered Psalm 2:

*Why did the [nations] rage,
and the peoples [plot empty things]?
The kings of the earth took their stand,
and the rulers have gathered together
against the Lord and against his Messiah.*

They remembered how king, governor, people of God and peoples of the nations, had stood against God's King Jesus. And how they had God's Messiah crucified. And how God raised God's Messiah from the dead.

And that this all fit with God's good work in the world.⁴

What is God's answer to this dangerous world of raging nations, where kings and commoners share in corruption?

God's answer is to give us the one King who is not corrupt. The one King who does not share in our sin. The one King who does not abuse power, but gives power to serve. The one King who does not play the power games of the world's kingdoms, but brings to us his own kingdom, the kingdom which has its source not in the world, but from God.

Our hope is not this leader or that leader, this country or that country. Sure, treasure your country, and respect your leaders. But serve the King. Follow his way. Love with his heart. Live in his life.

Jesus, the hope for raging nations. Thanks be to God!

⁴ Acts 4:1-31