

# King's College London Chapel



A sermon on the theme of God as Refuge<sup>1</sup>,  
by Dr Clare Dowding, Dean's Office Business Manager  
in the College Chapel on the Strand,  
on Wednesday 26 October 2022

*May the words of my lips, and the meditations of our hearts, be acceptable in your sight, O God our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.*

So far in this term's series of sermons on images of God, we've had Jenny talking about God as friend, Tim looking at God as father, and Alli thinking about God as mother. In what I have to say today, I'll be exploring a slightly different image of God as found in Scripture - one which may come across as less about a direct relationship than the previous images, but which nonetheless has something to say (I think) about how we can engage with God.

I would imagine that if you were asked to picture a refuge, most people would probably come up with a place of some kind - maybe a "women's refuge" for those escaping domestic abuse, or the "refuge point" in the corridor by the St Davids Room, which in an emergency evacuation is a designated location for those who need assistance in getting out of the building to aim for, so that they can contact Security and then be accompanied to safety. So if our usual association with a refuge is a place, how then do we view *God* as a refuge? After all, whatever our image of God may be, it's a fair bet that it's not usually as a place!

And yet, the image of God as a refuge, as a place of safety, is one which crops up quite a bit in the Old Testament. I could have chosen a passage for the first reading from at least fifteen of the psalms, or from some chapters of Proverbs, or from the books of either Isaiah or Jeremiah - it's really not an unusual image in certain sections of the Hebrew Scriptures. Quite often, refuge in God (whatever that means) is being sought by the psalmist, the prophet, or whoever, as a way of escaping enemies - although the exact identity of these enemies isn't always clear.

For instance, in the verses from Psalm 31 which we heard as our first reading, the psalmist turns to God asking not to be put to shame, and to be delivered from enemies and persecutors; although, like many of the psalms, there's no way of knowing if this originally

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<sup>1</sup> Readings: Psalm 31.1-5, 14-19, and John 17.10-15

represented a particular individual's experience, or if it was intended to be sung or prayed by someone (a priest, maybe, or the king) on behalf of the people as a whole. What is significant, though, is not just the identification of God as a refuge, a place where there is safety from danger, but the understanding by the psalmist that God both accepts and welcomes this approach; the psalmist is content to place his spirit (and it very probably will have been a him) in God's hands, because he knows that God has redeemed him - and he also notes that those who turn to God for refuge will be provided for by God with abundant goodness.

So the understanding of God in this psalm (and others) is of more than just an impersonal 'refuge point', somewhere to take shelter until the danger has passed. Rather, God is seen as offering refuge as part of the fullness of God's engagement with God's people - that when the people need somewhere to turn (and even when they may think they don't), God is there to offer rescue, to offer strength, to offer love, to offer all good things. And on those occasions when life is not as smooth-running as it could be, when we feel that just one more thing to deal with will be one thing too many, when - quite frankly - it's all just a bit shit (to use a technical term), then it's a natural human reaction to want to find somewhere to be safe until the shittiness passes. That could be hiding under a table (which works better for some people than for others ... ), but isn't it so much better to seek and to find refuge in and with the God who provides not just safety and protection, but love and redemption as well?

And it's because of his love for the disciples, and the act of redemption which he will soon achieve for them, that Jesus prays for God's protection for them, in the gospel reading. This passage comes from the chapters immediately before Jesus' arrest in the garden of Gethsemane, when after washing the disciples' feet he recaps for them why he has done and said what he has during his time with them, and tries to prepare them for the time when he is no longer with them. But Jesus knows that - being human - the disciples (and those who will come after them, including us) won't be able to cope in that changed circumstance without God's strength and protection; they will need the reassurance that they have a safe refuge, especially when they are struggling with the hatred of others, with a sense of not belonging, or with the very real attacks of evil (however that may be experienced).

In one of the references in Proverbs to God being a refuge, it's the name of God which is invoked as the place of strength and safety. So it may be with that image in mind that Jesus prays that the disciples may be protected by God in the name which has been given to him by God - and since Jesus and his Father are one, sharing the name which offers safety and protection, so Jesus indicates that even when he is no longer with those who follow him, he will be a place where they can find shelter from the pains and difficulties of the world.

Last week, Alli mentioned Julian of Norwich's use of the imagery of God as mother, as she reflected on the experience of God which she (Julian, not Alli!) had had while deathly ill. In another of the visions which make up Julian's 'Revelation of Divine Love', Julian describes seeing Jesus showing her the wound in his side, received at the Crucifixion, and how she understands this wound to be "a faire delectabil place, and large enow for al mankynd that

shal be save to resten in pece and in love.”<sup>2</sup> Taken by itself, the idea of finding refuge in the wound in Jesus’ side might seem odd to us (if not downright icky), but this imagery was very powerful in the late Middle Ages, because this particular one of the five wounds of Jesus was seen as giving access to his heart - and thus providing a way to seek refuge in Jesus’ love.<sup>3</sup> At a time when the ability to read was much less prevalent than it is now, the visual imagination was a very significant tool in the way people explored and experienced their faith.

So what ways might we find of understanding God as a place of refuge, and of seeking that refuge in God? Spending time with God’s word in the Bible is one, as is prayer - especially, although not just, at times when we really need to feel that we are somewhere safe, where we can be sheltered and protected from everything going on around us. I somehow doubt that the writer of Psalm 31 came up with beautifully and carefully constructed poetry when actually under severe physical or emotional strain! Crafting the words will have come later, but the faith that allowed him to say to God “you are the place where I feel safe” was there in whatever circumstance he found himself in.

And we also have something which the psalmist didn’t have - the reassurance that in the Eucharist we are invited, indeed encouraged, to find safety and protection (however we may understand that) in the body and blood of Christ, freely offered out of his love for us. For some people, this will be a special way of having access to Jesus’ heart, different from that envisaged by Julian, but just as sustaining. For others, there will be another understanding of being held safely in the protection of God, depending on their own situations. But however we understand the image of God as a refuge, and even if (or when) we don’t understand it, we can be sure that God always provides abundant goodness for all God’s people - because in all our images of and names for God, that’s what God does, and who God is.

*Amen.*

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<sup>2</sup> Julian of Norwich (ed Marion Glasscoe), *A Revelation of Love*, Exeter: Exeter University Press (revised edition 1993), p. 35. [‘a fair delightful place, and large enough for all humanity that shall be saved to rest in peace and in love’]

<sup>3</sup> Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England 1400-1580*, New Haven, CT & London: Yale University Press (1992, 2nd edition 2005), p. 244.