Psalm 136

*1. Give thanks to the Lord, for he is gracious,*

*for his mercy endures for ever.*

*2. Give thanks to the God of gods,*

*for his mercy endures for ever.*

*3. Give thanks to the Lord of lords,*

*for his mercy endures for ever.*

*4. Who alone does great wonders,*

*for his mercy endures for ever.*

*5. Who by wisdom made the heavens,*

*for his mercy endures for ever.*

*6. Who laid out the earth upon the waters,*

*for his mercy endures for ever.*

*7. Who made the great lights,*

*for his mercy endures for ever.*

*8. The sun to rule the day,*

*for his mercy endures for ever.*

*9. The moon and the stars to govern the night,*

*for his mercy endures for ever.*

*10. Who smote the firstborn of Egypt,*

*for his mercy endures for ever.*

*11. And brought out Israel from among them,*

*for his mercy endures for ever.*

*12. With a mighty hand and outstretched arm,*

*for his mercy endures for ever.*

*13. Who divided the Red Sea in two,*

*for his mercy endures for ever.*

*14. And made Israel pass through the midst of it,*

*for his mercy endures for ever.*

*15. But Pharaoh and his host he overthrew in the Red Sea,*

*for his mercy endures for ever.*

*16. Who led his people through the wilderness,*

*for his mercy endures for ever.*

*17. Who smote great kings,*

*for his mercy endures for ever.*

*18. And slew mighty kings,*

*for his mercy endures for ever.*

*19. Sihon, king of the Amorites,*

*for his mercy endures for ever.*

*20. And Og, the king of Bashan,*

*for his mercy endures for ever.*

*21. And gave away their land for a heritage,*

*for his mercy endures for ever.*

*22. A heritage for Israel his servant,*

*for his mercy endures for ever.*

*23. Who remembered us when we were in trouble,*

*for his mercy endures for ever.*

*24. And delivered us from our enemies,*

*for his mercy endures for ever.*

*25. Who gives food to all creatures,*

*for his mercy endures for ever.*

*26. Give thanks to the God of heaven,*

*for his mercy endures for ever.*

Refrain

Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good,

for his mercy endures for ever.

Psalm 136 is a hymn in praise of the steadfast love of God, which is seen in his control over nature (vv.5-9), and also in the deliverance from slavery in Egypt and in giving Israel her homeland. (vv.10-22) The response after each line, for his mercy endures for ever, was part of the temple liturgy. This can be seen in 2 Chronicles:

‘It was the duty of the trumpeters and singers to make themselves heard in unison in praise and thanksgiving to the Lord, and when the song was raised, with trumpets and cymbals and other musical instruments, in praise to the Lord, “For he is good, for his steadfast love endures for ever.”’

In many churches today, including St. Michael’s, we use a responsorial version of the psalms, especially at the Eucharist.

This sees the nation as being created by God by mighty acts, which revealed his steadfast love. This is why he came to their rescue when they were in slavery in Egypt.

The first part, vv.1-3, is a call to thanksgiving, as used in temple worship. The response can be found also in Psalms 106, 107 and 118.

In the second part, vv.4-9, God is seen as being the creator of the universe and in control of it, a revelation of his steadfast love. This occurs also in the creation story in Genesis, chapter 1. Psalms 19, 1-6 and 104 also praise the majesty of God the creator, for example, Psalm 19, ‘The heavens are telling the glory of God and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.’ (v.1).

The next section (vv. 10-22) tells of God’s mighty acts in founding the nation, which includes the defeat of Pharaoh and the saving of his people at the Red Sea, as recounted in the book of Exodus. The psalmist proclaims, ‘And brought out Israel from among them. With a mighty hand and outstretched arm. Who divided the Red Sea in two. And made Israel pass through the midst of it. But Pharaoh and his host he overthrew in the Red Sea’, all these being followed by the refrain, ‘For his mercy endures for ever.’

The psalmist shows how God looked after the Israelites in the wilderness after the Exodus. (v.16, ‘Who led his people through the wilderness, for his mercy endures for ever.’)

Then God destroyed the kings, who opposed them, Sihon, king of the Amorites and Og, the king of Bashan, and gave them a heritage in what was to be their own land. (vv.17-21, ‘Who smote great kings, and slew mighty kings, Sihon, king of the Amorites and Og, the king of Bashan, and gave away their land for a heritage.’)

However, Psalm 136 does not mention Israel’s rebellion in the wilderness, as we saw in Psalm 78.

In the last section, vv.23-26, the acts of God, which were recited at the covenant renewal festival (perhaps the equivalent of our Patronal Festival), the worshippers see all this, not as a tradition from the past, but as events taking place in the present and involving the whole community for ever. So, in this last part, ‘our forebears’ are replaced by ‘us’. (vv.23,24, ‘Who remembered us when we were in trouble, and delivered us from our enemies, for his mercy endures for ever.’)

The psalm ends as it began with a call to thanksgiving. (v.26, ‘Give thanks to the God of heaven, for his mercy endures for ever.’)

The refrain, for his mercy endures for ever, reminds us that God is always present with us in all the ups and downs of life. The psalm goes from seeing God as creator to his involvement with the people of Israel and then his love for all. What we have to do is to try to see God’s presence in our world today, to give thanks for all that we have, our environment and our relationships with other people, and to understand that he will always be there with us, for his mercy endures for ever.

Prayer

Almighty God,

you have created the heavens and the earth

and made us in your own image:

teach us to discern your hand in all your works

and your likeness in all your children;

through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,

who with you and the Holy Spirit

reigns supreme over all things,

now and for ever.

Amen.

(Collect, 2nd. Sunday before Lent)