

It was just 100 years ago that the world was plunged into turmoil at the commencement of the first world war. On Aug 1 1914 a London evening paper declared, "Three hundred million people today lie under the spell of fear and fate".

As that summer progressed the war mongers pushed the continent of Europe ever closer to the brink of war until it tipped over into fighting that affected the whole world and left around 17.5 million people dead.

The war left a legacy of broken and wounded people but also broken and wounded nations breeding bitterness and mistrust, which would again overflow into war in 1939.

We thank God that since then there has not been another war on that scale involving most of the nations of the world. However that does not of course mean that here have been no wars. Today we see so many areas of conflict and so many people, be they in Gaza, Tripoli, Aleppo, Tikrit, Chibok or Donetsk, live in fear. The fear is because of political turmoil, turmoil similar to that which brought about the first world war.

However, it is not just political events that cause people fear. About 10 days ago Typhoon Rammasun blew through the Philippines killing about 40 people. In many parts of the world people live in fear of natural disasters be they hurricanes or earthquakes, floods or drought.

As we listen to the people of Gaza asking where can they go for safety, as we see people's homes in places like the Philippines which cannot hope to provide protection against the storm and as we hear the voices of those caught up in the fighting in Syria asking how can this be stopped, the rest of that newspaper article makes the point, "Is there no one to break the spell, no gleam of light on this cold dark scene?"

Fear was the word then as it is in so many situations today.

However, just as the first world war is history so the idea of fear is foreign to many of us.

About 10 days ago I was watching Glasgow Girls on TV. It is a musical drama telling the true story of a group of 15 year old students who campaigned against their friend's deportation. In one scene a girl who had fled from Iran asked one of her classmates who had been born and brought up in Glasgow, "when did you last feel afraid, I mean really afraid?" I felt for myself it was a pertinent question.

Today we remember the fear of war and also recognise, as best we can, some of the fears that those who fought must have felt fear of bullet, bomb, gas and death. In our own day we recognise that people have fear of the natural world and of the political world. In the light of this our own fears are insignificant yet for each of them they are very real, fears of the future often through aging, economic fears, social fears in a world that changes at such a rapid rate.

Fear is a factor in every generation and we see this as we turn to our passage for today, Psalm 46.

### **1. The fears of the people v2&3, 6&9**

#### **a. Fear of the natural world**

V2&3 use graphic images to speak of the fragility and volatility of the world in which they and we live. It speaks of i. earth “giving way” that is that which was deemed solid and secure suddenly not being secure. The Psalms speaks of ii. mountains falling into the sea. Mountains the signs of stability and security coming crashing down. It speaks of iii. waters roar and foam, the power and turmoil of the sea which humanity down the ages has wisely feared. It speaks of iv. mountains quaking at the surging of the sea. The whole is a picture of chaos and of creation falling a part.

We see security being washed away and turmoil and fear in its place.

We may understand more about our world today and yet still we are at the mercy of an unpredictable world. Just think back to the winter and the flooding that took place in this country.

We see the power of natural forces and things which had stood for ages being washed away.

So we too can experience the fear of the natural world.

#### **b. Political fear v6 &9**

Israel was a small state with often belligerent nations and tribes around it. Eventually the northern part of the kingdom would be taken over by Assyria and the southern part by Babylon. Throughout their history Egypt was also either friend or foe.

V6 speaks vividly of nations in turmoil and v9 of the weapons of battle. This was a constant reality for God’s people and so a constant fear.

The setting of the Psalm is fear.

Some we identify with and some we can see in a new and different way.

#### **c. current fears**

Often life seems secure and all is good but we have seen enough in our world to know a. that it isn’t like that for everyone and b. therefore that can be a false security for us.

I have sat and talked with people who have lost a wife, husband, father, mother and their world has been thrown into turmoil. We often imagine human life is secure but in reality we know it is fragile.

But that is not our only source of anxiety. In 2007-08 the impossible happened in that a British bank, Northern Rock collapsed. The surging economic tide brought that mountain down into the sea.

Along with this we recognize every time we want to board a plane the fear of terrorism.

In our world and possibly in our lives there is fear aplenty, we don’t have to go back to 1914 or even to 1000 BC to know about fear.

However the message of this Psalm is that “God is our refuge and strength....therefore we will not fear”.

In the face of natural disasters and political threats the Psalmist says we will not be afraid because God is our refuge.

## **2. The certainty of the Psalmist v1, v4-11**

The Psalmist's certainty was based on God

The overarching statement is v1 "God is our refuge and strength"

### **a. God is our refuge v1**

that is, the Psalmist was saying, he is our point of security. Other things may seem secure but as we have seen in v2-3 they are not secure. However, in God we are secure and, because of his strength, he will protect us.

One of the well known factors of the first world war was the trenches. Here men dug in to try and find protection and security against the bomb and bullet and later the gas of the enemy. Even as today in Gaza or Tel Aviv people seek safety in shelters.

God's strength is able to guard and keep his people. In him they and we are secure. Our God is able to bring us through the storms and troubles of life. He is able to keep us safe through the whole of our lives and bring us through death into his eternal life.

There are many things that may on the surface cause us to fear but in God we are secure. The world around us may crumble in the ways we have spoke about but God is constant and he will never let us down. The encouragement of the Psalm is to find security not in the things of this world but in God. Of course for us in New Testament terms that security is focused in Jesus, both in this life and especially for our eternal future.

At the last supper, just before he was taken away, Jesus sought to calm the fears of his disciples. We see this in John 14:27, ""Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid."" The pain and suffering of the cross was looming but he spoke of peace to his followers.

I just wonder if for those of us who follow Jesus centuries later that is our experience in the fears and anxieties of life?

### **b. God is within us, v4-7.**

The picture here is of Jerusalem under attack. Through the history of the Old Testament time and again Jerusalem came under attack and the assurance here is, v5 "God is within her she will not fall". God was within the city and therefore it was secure.

The Psalmist spoke, v4, of the holy place where God dwells. The presence of the ark in the holy place was a sign of God among his people. Here is the Psalmist's point of hope and security, that God is within his people. We see it again in the refrain in v7 & 11 "The Lord God almighty is with us." The God who, through his strength provides refuge, is amongst his people. He is there with them so they

need not fear. The point was that God was with his people. He was not separated from them and so they need not be afraid.

I'm not sure whether there is anyone in the crèche at the moment. Leaving a child in the crèche can be a bit difficult. The child may not settle and while Mum or Dad are not there may cry. But when Mum is there then the child is happy and calm. God's presence with his people brings them security. The Psalmist had a sense of security and peace in troubled times because God was with and amongst his people. He was present with them. Many letters written to people in England from the trenches spoke of soldiers who while facing huge fears found their confidence in a God who was there with them and for them. We have some replicas of John's gospel, which were distributed to soldiers during WWI. In them they have part of a letter from a soldier in it which says "I little realized that I should use it and find in it great consolation in the lonely hours. I have learned to realize the great personality of the saviour. When at night I have been on duty alone with Him by my side, and the Germans but thirty yards away, I realised that I needed more than my own courage to stand the strain." That soldier found God was with him in the trenches. As we know that has been the testimony of countless Christians down the ages, that, at points of fear and uncertainty, they have known God with them.

#### **c. God makes wars cease v8-9**

God's power is not just there in theory but in practice. The Psalmist invited people to see what God has done and can do. Vs 8-9 speak of God's power over the warmongers who have brought such turmoil to so many down the centuries. People are invited to come and see the awesome power of God who can destroy armies, end wars and bring tyrants to justice. Our God is able. The God who destroyed Pharaoh's army in the Red Sea and who turned back the Assyrian hordes at the gates of Jerusalem is powerful to bring down any king, dictator or tyrant. He can bring peace on earth. The nations are called to come and see God's works of power and v9 to recognize God's desire for peace across the world. He is the one who has power to bring war to an end and indeed ultimately he will when Christ returns to usher in his reign of peace.

#### **d. God speaks to the nations v10**

V10 is often misunderstood as nice comforting words. It is seen as individualistic, God wanting to speak to me in the quietness. However, here God is speaking to the nations who seek to create war. He shouts to them to be quiet and calls them to listen to the one who is God and who will be exalted. God says to that nations hush the clamour of your wars, your bombs and guns. One of the things we noticed earlier was the huge optimism at the beginning of WWI. There are pictures of German troops in Aug 1914 travelling on a train as they saw it to Paris. The clamour of

war, the sense of power, the desire for victory and all of it human. God's word is stop this noise, stop this clamour, stop this action and recognize that I am God and I am in control of the whole world. This is why the Psalmist says he is secure even, v6, when the nations are in uproar because it is God who is sovereign and whose power will ultimately be seen.

The Psalmist was only too well aware of the volatile nature of the world in which he lived. The waters roared and so did the nations. There was fear from the natural world and the political world in these he found God his refuge and strength. He knew that God was with his people but more he knew that God has power to protect his people and to destroy the evil ones. As such he called all people to stop their warlike cries as if they have power to determine history and instead to bow before the Almighty God.

Today there may be many reasons for us to be afraid. However, God is sovereign and powerful. God is with and for his people and so with the Psalmist we can say "God is our refuge and strength.... therefore we will not fear."