5 August 2018: Choral Matins
The Tenth Sunday after Trinity
Psalm 18:1-6, 16-20, Genesis 2:4-end, Romans 5:12-19
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From the first verse of this morning’s psalm: ‘I will love thee, O Lord, my strength… my stony rock, and my defence, my Saviour, my God, and my might, in whom I will trust, my buckler, the horn also of my salvation, and my refuge’.

In nomine…

We talk of God’s Word – Word in the singular – for God has spoken to us through the single instance of human perfection we know as Christ our Lord. But the Word of God, both in Christ and in the scriptures that testify to him, comes to us by an abundance of ways and means. You might be forgiven for having lost the thread a little in this morning’s second lesson, but the key message of this passage from the letter to the Romans is that whereas sin, and the condemnation it brings, narrow us down, the free gift of righteousness does precisely the opposite, it opens us up. For us as individuals here and now – and for us as a human race over the ages – sin funnels us into a cul de sac, otherwise tellingly known as a dead end; God’s grace, on the other hand, ‘leads to justification and life for all’.

‘I will love thee, O Lord, my strength’, says the Psalmist, ‘my stony rock, and my defence, my Saviour, my God, and my might, in whom I will trust, my buckler, the horn also of my salvation, and my refuge’.

This was the first full verse of scripture that we encountered in this morning’s worship and what a gift it is. No fewer than nine titles are accorded to the Lord, all of them grammatically in apposition. Apposition, as I don’t really need to remind a Christ Church Matins’ congregation, is the grammatical construction in which nouns are placed side by side, each identifying the other in a different way: ‘Emma, my wife’, ‘Oxford, home of lost causes’. Each of these nine titles merits a sermon in itself, but the real gift is that the psalmist has no qualms about offering all nine of them in his address to God. The Christian scriptures, built as they are on the Hebrew Bible, are marvellously plural
through and through. Four gospels; two accounts of creation, the second of which we heard this morning: key events from the giving of the ten commandments to the anointing at Bethany to the conversion of Saint Paul, each recounted several times with different emphases. The Word of God is shared with wonderful diversity.

The very opening of the verse is telling too: ‘I will love thee, O Lord’, says the Coverdale version we used this morning. Other translations opt for the present tense in English, but the future allows a wider range of meaning. ‘I will love thee’: this is an expression of hope, desire, intent, not a claim to an achieved state: ‘I will love thee’, I desire to love thee, I resolve to love thee; but I cannot do so apart from the gift of thy strength, nor without thee as my stony rock, my defence, my Saviour, my God and my might, my buckler, the horn of my salvation and my refuge.

And we can rejoice in the sheer physical tangibility of these images of God: rock, buckler, horn, refuge. Tradition holds that the Reverend Augustus Toplady was inspired to write his great hymn, ‘Rock of Ages’, by just such a tangible encounter with the mercy and strength of God. Caught in a storm whilst travelling through the gorge of Burrington Combe in the Mendip hills, he found shelter in a fissure in the cliff: a literal apposition of fragile human body with stony rock, defence and refuge. We’ve all been there, haven’t we? Not in Burrington Combe, but in other rocks of ages, scattered across time and space. We can each call to mind the sheer relief that comes from finding unexpected shelter in the midst of adversity. Most recently for me it was the lifting of anxiety that came from turning a bend in a sodden moorland track after a long day’s walking in the Lake District to see a curl of homely smoke ascending from the bothy of Mosedale Cottage, a good five miles from the nearest sign of civilisation. A real Rivendell – no need to spend a night shivering in a damp sleeping bag after all! And the shelter is not just physical: we can think with equal gratitude of people or places that have lifted us from the depths of fear and isolation when we least expected it: the unanticipated apposition of ourselves and God in the form of his servants, animate and inanimate alike.

Psalm 18 goes on to describe the context of suffering from which its praise of God emerges: ‘the sorrows of death’ compassing the psalmist, ‘the overflows of ungodliness’, ‘the pains of hell’ and ‘the snares of death’. Death is the human condition of physical mortality, but it is also a metonym for what might be called the forces of negativity, Luther’s unholy trinity of sin, death and the devil. These are the forces that stifle the original intention of God in creation. As we heard in our first reading from Genesis, God’s intention at creation was to give life in every sense:
the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils
the breath of life; and the man became a living being.

A living being, flourishing within the garden of God’s planting with its living creatures,
and then, as the consummation of this abounding life, Woman, ‘bone of his bones and
flesh of his flesh’.

Our reading from Genesis stopped short of the account of the arrival of sin in the
following chapter, but our second reading from Romans took up the story. Death – that
power of negativity – writes Paul, held sway from Adam to Moses. With Moses the law
brought relief from death’s dominion; but, Paul is clear, it did not overcome it. Death is
overcome only in the incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection of Christ that Paul goes
on to describe. This is what he calls ‘the free gift’: the Father’s free gift of his Son for the
life of the world.

‘Rock of Ages’ was first published in the Gospel Magazine of March 1776. Augustus
Toplady introduced it with a remarkable article:

Noting that the National Debt was so large that it would never be paid off, he argued
that human beings would incur the same kind of unpayable debt because they break
God’s laws ‘every second of [their] sublunary duration’. The result was what he called
‘Our dreadful account’, second by second:

At ten years old each of us is chargeable with 315 millions and 35 thousand sins. At
twenty, with 630 millions, and 720 thousand. At thirty, with 946 millions and 80
thousand.

[And so he goes on until he reaches our average age this morning!]

At the end of this calculation, Toplady then writes that, though the debt grow every day,
Christ’s saving work ‘will not only counter-balance, but infinitely over-balance, ALL the
sins of the WHOLE believing world’. There then follows the first full version of the text
of ‘Rock of Ages’:

Rock of Ages, cleft for me,
Let me hide myself in Thee;
Let the water and the blood,
From Thy riven side which flowed,
Be of sin the double cure,
Cleanse me from its guilt and power.

[J.R. Watson, An Annotated Anthology of Hymns (Oxford, 2002)]

We may demur at the dourly Calvinist precision of Toplady’s mathematics, but we can appreciate its rhetorical goal: to help us to a proper sense of awe at the abundance of the free gift offered to us in Christ. ‘Justification and life for all’, says saint Paul: life for all, strong to undo the deathly embrace with which original sin has locked the entirety of the human race.

‘I will love thee, O Lord…’. That opening verse of this morning’s psalm rightly summarises the Christian stance to both God and creation. ‘I will love thee, O Lord’, and all things in thee, all people, all creation. This is the love of God and neighbour which we desire; which we see fulfilled in Christ; and glimpses of which we catch in ourselves and in the life of the Church and the world.

‘I will love thee…’: not that I do already, but that I desire to; and that, abiding in Christ and by the abundance of God’s grace, mercy and strength, one day shall do so.

In nomine…