

Sermon: The Greatness of Man

Psalm 8

Rev Dr Jos Strengholt

If you feel very low, Psalm 8 is great medicine. We can all think of many reasons why we might feel small, low, bad, frustrated, depressed. But Psalm 8 lifts us up, out of the pit, to rejoice in who we are. And who we are is something to be celebrated.

The song of David opens with praise to God. That is a proper starting point for looking at ourselves. First look at God.

This Psalm is a great example of what Christian hymns should be like. It celebrates the glory and the grace of God; it speaks of who he is and what he has done. It lifts us up to God – and it shows us how God's greatness actually gives greatness to humankind.

His glory is above the heavens; His great name fills the earth. That is the starting point for David. God is magnificent.

Think of the stars, the sun, the moon, and all the galaxies... God's glory is far beyond all that. And in all the earth, his name is majestic. From the glorious forests, enormous mountains, the mighty thunder, to the smallest particles of life, everything speaks of his greatness and beauty.

Look at the universe and we know that there is a greater God, a God higher and beyond the universe.

Gregory Nazianzen (329 –389), archbishop of Constantinople, said in one of his sermons:

Everyone who sees a beautifully made lute and considers the skill with which it has been fitted together, or who hears its melody, would think of none but the lute maker or the lute player... [On Theology. Theological Oration 2(28).6.]

I think this is a very valid argument. The grandeur of creation points to an even greater Creator.

And David does not just speak about this Creator – he addresses this Creator. Can you imagine: we can communicate with God!

Elephants cannot. Mountains cannot. Lions cannot. Trees cannot. Monkeys cannot. But humankind can think about God and communicate with Him. The fact that we can address God, points to something very great and special about mankind.

The fact that man can look at creation and ask questions about the origins of things, in itself shows something of the greatness of man.

David says: O Lord, our Lord. The grandiose Creator, Almighty God, is our Lord. We belong to Him and he belongs to us. He chose you and me to be His children. How blessed are we, human beings!

With amazement David praises God for the fact that He is mindful about us. The great Creator is our Lord who thinks of you and me. God thinking about us is amazing in itself; but it also has a compassionate ring. God thinking of his children means that he is caring for us.

And David sings to God in his prayer to God, that we have been made masters of creation. How great thou art, human beings!

And indeed, we can make or break this world. What a responsibility to manage this world well to the glory of God.

And what a mess we are able to make of it. That is where we show how small we humans can also be. God wants to lift us up, and we are able to go down into the pit and drag others with us.

The fact that God has given us this responsibility of managing his world, is our mandate for being involved in all aspects of life, including politics, and economy, and the care for creation.

This is part of our spiritual worship to God – to manage his world in accordance with his will. And if we do not involve ourselves in this, we neglect part of Gods work for us.

If people resist managing this world well, we have a duty to hold them accountable. We have a God-given duty to hold our rulers accountable.

We have a God-given mandate to also hold his enemies accountable.

Is it not strange? The God whose glory is higher than the heavens, the one whose great name fills the earth... he has enemies. How dumb to place yourself in opposition to God!

St Augustine, in his Expositions of the Psalms 8.6, saw the pagan Greek philosophers of his days as such enemies:

By enemies we ought in a general sense to understand all who forbid us to believe in things beyond our experience, while themselves promise certain knowledge.

This sounds like a description of modern day atheists actually.

But God also has foes who actually believe in his existence. We ourselves can be his foes, if we do not live in accordance with his will. If we ravage his world by bad governance, by making the lives of other people hard, or by creating a caricature of who God is.

God calls us to resist such enemies. How? What stops evil people in their attacks on God and on his people?

The praise of God in the mouth of little children. The praise of God from the lips of children silences the enemies of God and the enemies of his church.

The plans of God with this world are not developed by mighty rulers, by the strong powers, by large political movements, or by the military. The plans of God are accomplished by socially unimportant people. But: people with the praise of God in their mouth.

Those who stand up against God and his people are defeated by the prayers and the praise of Gods people.

So we must pray to God, and speak of Him. This does not mean we must not act politically, but we must trust in God, not in our own methods. And in our smallness, as unimportant people, God makes us great. We are his children and we are called to impact the course of this world.

God treats you as a very important person.

What is man? You made him ruler over the works of your hands... You put everything under his feet... We are only a little lower than the angels, crowned with glory and honor.

Ah... but this is about Jesus Christ, you may think... In the New Testament, in the letter to the Hebrews, this is applied to Jesus Christ our Lord himself. He was a little lower than the angels, for a while. He became a human being, but after he accomplished his work of reconciliation, He was elevated to the glory that he had before with God.

And indeed, Jesus is the True Man.

Interesting, for the question 'what is man', the Hebrew does not use the word Adam for man, but another word, Enosh. 'What is Enosh that you care for him.'

That word Enosh occurs first in the Bible in Genesis 4, after the Fall of Adam and Eve, after the murder of Abel, and after Lamech proudly promises vengeance for anyone who dares to harm him. How deep mankind sunk even at the very beginning.

Adam then got another child, Seth, and Seth in his turn got a son, and called him Enosh – man.

The question 'what is man that you are mindful of him', is packed with this concept: 'what is sinful man. What is fallen man... that you, God take care of him.'

God loves mankind as we are. Even as we are, He has made us wonderful. The image of God has not been wiped out because we are imperfect. As sinful, small, petty human beings, He lifts us up to be his representatives on earth.

And this is possible because God send his perfect representative to this world; thanks to this perfect man, Jesus Christ, we, imperfect human beings can be God's rulers on earth. That means, we have been called to develop this world, to take care of it, to arrange the affairs of the state in a good manner, to organize our workplace well, to ensure that all people have jobs; to bring love and joy in the hearts of people.

But we can only do this well, because of being tied to Jesus Christ, the perfect man. God uses us, children, through our prayers and our praise. And sure, also through our actions that are baptized in prayers and in praise.

Let us not despair but look at the Lord, our Lord, whose glory and magnificence and power is amazing. That is why we praise him. Praise lifts our eyes up to God.

But we also look at this world where God gave us such an important task. And as we also look at the reality in Egypt, let us pray much that the will of God be done.

And let us use our divine mandate to use our voice against the enemies of goodness and of God, to use our feet to show people the way, to use our voice to make clear to those in power that if they do not rule in a manner that is good for all people, we will not tolerate this and they can go.

And even if they don't, we continue to proclaim the praises of God, our majestic Lord, even in the face of our enemies.

Amen