

Reflections for Sunday 16th August

## Psalm 67

**For the director of music. With stringed instruments. A psalm. A song.**

<sup>1</sup> May God be gracious to us and bless us  
and make his face shine on us—<sup>[b]</sup>

<sup>2</sup> so that your ways may be known on earth,  
your salvation among all nations.

<sup>3</sup> May the peoples praise you, God;  
may all the peoples praise you.

<sup>4</sup> May the nations be glad and sing for joy,  
for you rule the peoples with equity  
and guide the nations of the earth.

<sup>5</sup> May the peoples praise you, God;  
may all the peoples praise you.

<sup>6</sup> The land yields its harvest;  
God, our God, blesses us.

<sup>7</sup> May God bless us still,  
so that all the ends of the earth will fear him.

May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face shine upon us - what wonderful words to hear read this morning. What a wonderful psalm Psalm 67 is. In my bible there are instructions at the start of it stating that it is a psalm, a song, with stringed instruments. So this psalm was really a worship song and it is appropriate that on a Sunday when we are not allowed to sing we should instead concentrate on looking at the lyrics of an ancient song of praise.

This psalm was written as a song of corporate thanksgiving and praise and starts by asking God to bless us. Blessing is a word we hear and we use a lot. We ask God to bless us, or perhaps we have given money to someone who needed it badly, a homeless person perhaps, and they responded 'bless you', just what does that word 'Bless' mean? Well the dictionary meaning states it is God's favour and protection. So in the psalm we are asking God to be gracious to us with his favour and protection and make his face shine upon us.

That might remind you of the Aaronic blessing that we sing at baptisms - The Lord bless you and keep you, the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you, the Lord turn his countenance upon you and give you peace.'

So how is God's face connected to his blessing - Well the blessing **is** God's face and God's face is his presence with us. So when we pray for God to bless us, yes we are asking for his favour and protection but also for that to be given through Him being present with us in a real and personal way, for his face to shine upon us and give us peace.

The sunflowers you see here this morning are the same sunflowers that I planted as seeds at the start of lockdown back in March. I always prayed that we would be able to have them here in church when we were back worshipping together. They became, for me, a kind of symbol of hope for the future, and God be praised here we are, and even more amazingly knowing my gardening skills, here they are. But whilst watching the sunflowers grow, I realised why they are called that - obviously they look a bit like the suns that we drew as children - a big yellow sun with rays coming out. But the other point is that sunflowers follow the sun. They turn their heads towards the sun and follow it through the day.

So in a way they become another symbol this morning not only of hope, but of God's face shining upon us for We can only receive the light of God's face and His presence with us if we too turn our faces to him, if we don't look at him we live in a dark shadow. But when we do turn our faces to Him we discover that we change too. When we spend time with God our lives and even our physical demeanour can change. Have you ever been super stressed and you spent time in prayer and it relaxed you? The face of God is changing your face. Or have you ever been about to get angry about a situation, and you remember God's word, and in obedience you calm down? The face of God is changing you.

The psalm started 'May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face shine upon us, that your ways may be known on earth, your salvation among all nations', and it goes on to mention not just individuals but everyone, this is a psalm of corporate praise. 'May the peoples praise you, may all the peoples praise you, may the nations be glad and sing for joy for you rule the peoples justly and guide the nations of the earth. Then the land will yield its' harvest and God, our God, will bless us. God will bless us, and all the ends of the earth will fear him.' and the translation of fear really means awe, we will all be in awe of him.

We are the people of God today. The church is the people of God. When we turn our faces to God and receive His blessing, then we, his people, are changed. I used to be part of a women's bible study group at a church in the south of England. A non-Christian lady started coming along and was with us for many months. She came, at the invitation of her friend, wanting to find out more about God and Jesus. She asked lots of questions and queried lots of things we said and continued to come each week asking more and more questions. When we asked her what drew her to come each week her answer surprised us: She said: 'I don't know what it is, but there is something different about you

all. You have a glow about you which I can't explain, but it draws me back each week to find out more.'

'May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face shine upon us, that your ways may be known on earth, your salvation among all nations;'

When we turn our faces to Jesus he makes his face shine upon us. Then we become reflectors of God's light and love to others, whether or not we are aware of it, and that draws others to find out more. So we are all part of God's work. We turn to Him, He shines his face upon us and we reflect it out to others, and that shining face of God's gets reflected and reflected from person to person until God's salvation is known among all nations, like the psalm says, 'that your ways may be known on earth, your salvation among all nations.' and God will bless us all. So remember the sunflowers, be a sunflower and always keep your face turned towards the Son, God's Son, Jesus.

Amen

Reflective music:

Turn your eyes upon Jesus.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-dFfLt2Bd3o&feature=youtu.be>

## **Genesis 45:1-15**

### **Joseph Tells His Brothers Who He Is**

**45** Joseph was no longer able to control his feelings in front of his servants, so he ordered them all to leave the room. No one else was with him when Joseph told his brothers who he was. <sup>2</sup> He cried with such loud sobs that the Egyptians heard it, and the news was taken to the king's palace. <sup>3</sup> Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?" But when his brothers heard this, they were so terrified that they could not answer. <sup>4</sup> Then Joseph said to them, "Please come closer." They did, and he said, "I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. <sup>5</sup> Now do not be upset or blame yourselves because you sold me here. It was really God who sent me ahead of you to save people's lives. <sup>6</sup> This is only the second year of famine in the land; there will be five more years in which there will be neither plowing nor reaping. <sup>7</sup> God sent me ahead of you to rescue you in this amazing way and to make sure that you and your descendants survive. <sup>8</sup> So it was not really you who sent me here, but God. He has made me the king's highest official. I am in charge of his whole country; I am the ruler of all Egypt.

<sup>9</sup> "Now hurry back to my father and tell him that this is what his son Joseph says: 'God has made me ruler of all Egypt; come to me without delay. <sup>10</sup> You can live in the region of Goshen, where you can be near me—you, your children, your

grandchildren, your sheep, your goats, your cattle, and everything else that you have. <sup>11</sup> If you are in Goshen, I can take care of you. There will still be five years of famine; and I do not want you, your family, and your livestock to starve.”

<sup>12</sup> Joseph continued, “Now all of you, and you too, Benjamin, can see that I am really Joseph. <sup>13</sup> Tell my father how powerful I am here in Egypt and tell him about everything that you have seen. Then hurry and bring him here.”

<sup>14</sup> He threw his arms around his brother Benjamin and began to cry; Benjamin also cried as he hugged him. <sup>15</sup> Then, still weeping, he embraced each of his brothers and kissed them. After that, his brothers began to talk with him.

In 1972 a short 35 minutes musical was premiered at the Edinburgh Festival, expanded and re-written it was performed in the West End in 1973 and recorded in 1974. Known as Joseph and his amazing Technicolor Dream Coat, and based on the bible story in Genesis, it has continued to be performed by theatres and groups ever since, although perhaps its' most famous production occurred here in 2004 , when the congregation took part in a performance to much critical acclaim - or so they tell me.

The story of Joseph and his brothers is a great story of sibling rivalry, a hero who after battling against all the odds comes good in the end, and the family, once estranged, are all reunited. And it is also a great example of keeping your face turned to God.

I'm sure you all remember the story - about a boy who becomes his father's favourite child. Not content with that he also is a tell tale and enjoys boasting to his brothers about the dreams he has of his own glorious future at the expense of their own. As a result of his behaviour his brothers decide they have had enough of him and place him in a pit, planning to leave him for dead, but then selling him to a passing camel caravan. The traders sell him on as a slave in Egypt, where he rises in position to become overseer over his fellow slaves. He is then imprisoned on false charges of sexual assault when he refuses the advances of his owners' wife. Once in prison his skill in dream interpretation gets Pharaoh's attention, and he becomes his chief advisor and right hand man, and tells Pharaoh to store up 20% of the harvest in 7 years of abundance to feed the land in seven years of famine to come. Meanwhile, facing starvation in Canaan, Jacob, Joseph's father sends his remaining sons to Egypt to buy some of the grain stored there. Joseph recognises his brothers and now finds himself as the one holding all the power and it is surely at this point of the story when we should expect reconciliation? But rather than reconciliation, Joseph, in a move to discover if they have really repented of their treatment of him all those years ago, pretends not to know his brothers, accuses them of spying, and throws them into jail. The testing continues as Joseph sends the brothers back and forth to Canaan. He then demands that they leave his youngest brother

Benjamin, who would have been about the same age Joseph was when they got rid of him, with him as a slave. Judah who has promised his father to protect Benjamin offers himself as a slave in his place. At this point Joseph finally realises that the brothers are truly sorry for what had happened and he makes himself known to his brothers, in a joyous reunion. And that is the part of the story we heard read this morning, which really is the climax of the Joseph story. So as I say a great story, which thanks to the musical, every child growing up in the 80s knew well. But the one thing that was left out in the musical, and the one thing that puts Joseph's story on a different level from any ordinary story is - God. God is in the story from the beginning, at every turn, when you read the account, you find God interwoven through every episode, at every point in the story it says 'The Lord was with Joseph' and now when Joseph reveals himself to his brothers he finally tells them what his faith has guided him to realise all along, that despite everything he did, and everything they did, God was always in control. Whenever they thought to do evil, God turned it around and used it for good. Joseph like the sunflowers, kept his face turned to God constantly, despite not always behaving in the best way, and as a result God blessed him and let his face shine upon him.

This story and so many others in the Old Testament are not only a good story, but a great encouragement to us, Even though we, like Joseph, are far from perfect, God will use us if we are faithful to him. He will not abandon us but will be a presence with us and can do great things through us if we trust Him. Joseph had no idea, when he was thrown in the pit, or when he was falsely imprisoned, how his story would end, but he trusted God and God stayed with him. Finally in this passage he shares that knowledge with his brothers and forgives them: 'Now do not be upset or blame yourselves, God sent me ahead of you to save people's lives. God sent me ahead of you to rescue you in this amazing way and to make sure that you and your descendants survive.' God had taken the evil deed of the brothers who had tried to kill Joseph and turned it around to serve God's purpose.

We each have our own story, we each know we are far from perfect, but God isn't looking for perfect people - he's looking for faithful, trusting, believing people.

He's not looking for perfect people - He's looking for people who, whatever is thrown at them, will continue to trust God and ask for his blessing.

He's not looking for perfect people - He's looking for people that know their failings and will turn their faces to Jesus on the cross and ask for his forgiveness. And when we, those same people do that, we discover that like Joseph, God has an amazing plan for your life, an amazing plan for his people the church, and even though we can't always understand what is going to happen next, we can trust, like Joseph that God is in complete control.

In these times, when everything seems so uncertain, and we really don't know what is going to happen next, either to ourselves or to God's church, we need to remember this

more than ever. God's knows the plan, and if we trust Him, he can use us to bring it about.

So sit quietly now and think about your life. Are you willing to trust every bit of it to God, even though you don't quite know what he's going to do with it? Are you willing to let God use you to fulfil his glorious plan? Are you prepared to let God guide you as you step out, in faith, into the unknown, in the knowledge that things might not turn out as you wish? Perhaps in the quiet of the music, as you reflect on how God was working in Joseph's life, and is working already in yours, you might decide that now is the time for you to turn your face again to Jesus and say Yes.

Reflective music:

Is He worthy? <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SxnY7Wyxf38>

Blessing:

Here's a lovely benediction from Rev. Nora Vedress, Pastor at Calvary United Church in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, Canada.

So now we leave this space of worship  
And while so much of the road ahead is uncertain,  
the path constantly changing,  
we know some things that are as solid and sure  
as the ground beneath our feet,  
and the sky above our heads.

We know God is love.  
We know Christ's light endures.  
We know the Holy Spirit is there,  
found in the space between all things,  
closer to us than our next breath,

So May God be gracious to us and bless us  
and make his face shine upon us  
and give us peace. Amen

Closing music:

May the people praise you (based on Psalm 67)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7BrfkjHdKVI&feature=youtu.be>