

Our true refuge

Sermon: **500th Commemoration of the Reformation (2pm)**; 29 October 2017

Bible reading: [Psalm 46](#)

Our Psalm for today, Psalm 46, draws on very vivid and dramatic imagery.

God's people Israel under military attack. Beset by enemies, they are fleeing, terrified, to their fortress for safety.

This is a well-known scene from the ancient world and, right up into the 19th century actually – taking refuge in the stronghold, behind high walls while the king and army fight the enemy. If you are a Lord of the Rings fan, it is like the battle of Helm's Deep. Tour anywhere in Europe and you will find fortresses and strongholds where people fled from advancing enemies.

Here in Psalm 46, the psalmist is referring specifically to Mt Zion, the fortified hilltop city of Jerusalem. But this is no ordinary stronghold. The refuge he is talking about is no fortress built by human hands. He is not talking about walls and ramparts, built around the city, but what is in its heart, as verse 5 describes: 'God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved'.

Here in the middle of Holy Zion, the city of Jerusalem is the temple, where, in the Holies of Holies, God's majestic presence dwells. Israel's fortress is not any city wall or tower, but God, the Lord himself. This is no human 'fortress mentality' which trusts in human strongholds, but faith and trust in the true God.

Here it is right in verse 1: 'God is our fortress and strength, an ever-present in trouble.' So even if the city is breached, and the enemies flood in, in fact if Mt Zion itself crumbles, God is Israel's refuge and strength – a fortress that can never fail.

Fortresses and strongholds were important in the Reformation story too of course. Part of the reason Luther seized on this image of the fortress in Psalm 46 for his famous hymn was his own experience of being hidden away in the Wartburg Fortress in 1521 after his trial in Worms, when his life was in grave danger and he was on the run.

In the late middle ages in Europe most cities were fortified; the Reformation city of Wittenberg too. In the opening decades of the Reformation they feared attack from the Holy Roman Emperor. This wasn't paranoia – there *was* a lot at stake: Luther and his fellow-reformers may indeed be arrested as outlaws. They feared that if their walls were breached, it would not just be a military disaster – the very treasure of the Gospel itself, and the freedom to preach and teach it, could be lost.

So the city walls were built up and strengthened. On the top of the high towers of the city church there was a watchman, living up there with his family, whose job was to scan the horizon for approaching armies. And in 1546, under threat of invasion, the tall steeples on the city church were taken off the two massive towers and canons placed there to repel the armies of Emperor Charles, who wanted to invade and crush the Reformation at its source. They built themselves a fortress.

What happened? Well a year later, in 1547 – the year after Luther's death – Charles indeed did invade Saxony. Did Wittenberg manage to defend their city against the enemy?

No. Those city walls failed. Those canons were never fired. There was no army to defend the city. Their fortress fell. Charles marched right into Wittenberg.

All was suddenly uncertain. What would become of the Reformation movement now?

From where we stand in history now, we can say 'Well of course. They made that classic human mistake – they had a classic human fortress mentality; they lost their focus and trusted in their own defences, their self-made protections, their own power, instead of trusting in the power of God, in the very Gospel they were fighting to preserve'.

It is perhaps harder for us today to see how we fall into just the same traps ourselves. We too build walls and defend. We can retreat inside the fortress of our own knowledge: 'We know God's Word and we will keep it, and blow the world out there who don't want it'. Or we can retreat inside our own history or traditions and surround ourselves with those. Or the opposite – we can run to the fortress of our culture and seek security and comfort there by throwing ourselves completely into being relevant and contemporary, thinking that will keep the church and us safe.

We can try to make our home our castle, make our family our fortress, relying on those constant and loving relationships to make us feel safe, or our possessions or our status.

But these fortresses will be breached. These walls will crumble. Not one stone will be left upon another. The world batters away at us. Our own spiritual weakness undermines our foundations, and the old enemy just loves our self-made fortress walls because they are so easily destroyed, just like the fortifications at Wittenberg in 1547.

But that military defeat was not the end of the story.

After the canons perched on the church towers had been taken down once more in 1547, something else was put up *inside* the church: the famous and beautiful altar piece by Lucas Cranach. This is what the Christians of Wittenberg erected above their altar in response to their military defeat. Strangely it was erected on the very day that Emperor Charles won his decisive victory over the Lutherans forces at Mühlberg.



Lucas Cranach the Elder, Wittenberg Altarpiece (1547)

You may know this beautiful and powerful work of art already, and if you do, you will know that what is depicted here is the *real* fortress of the Reformation, the *real* security, the *real* refuge of the people of God, in the Reformation era and in every era, including ours. This is the true fortress, not high stone walls and cannons all around the church, to keep it safe and protected – but the same fortress in the midst of the city that the psalmist describes in Psalm 46: God’s almighty and gracious presence.

We see depicted here in this altar piece the means of Grace.

The river that 'makes glad the city of God' – the waters of baptism.

The 'holy habitation of the most high' – Christ coming to and dwelling bodily with his people, through his real presence in his holy supper.

On the right is the declaration of God’s forgiveness made through the office of the keys – as people come to confession and receive absolution.

And in Cranach’s *Predella* – the painting across the bottom – the living word of God himself, Jesus Christ crucified, is preached. If you look closely you can see Luther has one hand resting on the Bible and with his other hand he points to the cross – to Christ, the unchanging and unchanging fortress of our whole faith. The one who is in the midst of us, just as God dwelled with Israel in the temple.

In many ways, Cranach has painted in colours here the same thing the psalmist paints in words. What we see in these pictures is the church running for refuge to Christ, seeking safety and security in him. This is no human ‘fortress mentality’, where Christians draw back and hide inside themselves, behind the high walls of their traditions, this is not fleeing *from reality*, but fleeing *to Christ*, trusting in him, seeking comfort, strength and help in him.

At the Luther Research Congress in Wittenberg back in August, I was privileged to join a seminar group who spent some time studying this altar piece in the city church quite closely. And somebody pointed out that as we look at these pictures, there is a strange effect: we, the church, find ourselves looking in at the church, at ourselves – not just at history, but at the present, and the future. Because these very scenes are played out Sunday by Sunday in *our churches* across Australia and the world: we baptise, we preach the Gospel, we celebrate the Lord’s Supper and we proclaim the forgiveness of sins – this is the Reformation’s ongoing life, right here, right now. More than that, it is the whole Christian church’s life, our life, our safe place, our refuge from life’s wars. This is the place we may be still and know that he is God – wonderful words to remind yourself of when you come into church and when you come to kneel for Holy Communion, because there you are in Christ, your fortress.

And, thank God, because on this 500th anniversary of the Reformation, we need a fortress!

The church, certainly in wealthy western countries like ours, and the Christian faith seem increasingly marginalised, disparaged; some would say attacked. Not only our values but their very source and heart – our biblical teaching – is increasingly out of favour, criticised and censured in our Australian community, and our freedom to speak our faith is gradually being curtailed.

Militant extremists hunt down Christians as part of their policy of terror throughout the world.

We are fewer in number. The cares of the world take people away. Many of our LCA congregations are struggling. We have financial issues. We have pastor issues – not enough of them. We have unity issues; we face the ongoing debate on the ordination of women and there are grave concerns over whether this will divide us.

But, you know, as you pray this psalm, Psalm 46, and as you look at this altar piece, and as you hear the stories of the church in other times and places, you realise something: we are no

different than the saints before us. Our struggles today in the church and in our own lives are not that different to theirs.

Think of Israel under attack from her enemies. Think of the Wittenbergers waiting to be invaded. Think of Luther and his very human worries and fears. Think of Christians in our world right now who live in fear and uncertainty.

Where have we all, where *do* we all run to? To the same place – the fortress, to Christ who is here with us, with his true body and blood, with his word of grace and promise.

Like the Lutherans of 1517, we don't know what is ahead of us, ahead for our church, for our congregation, for our family or for ourselves. We know from the Reformation, and from life in general, that history takes strange and unexpected twists and turns and we cannot see them coming.

There is no way to make ourselves secure here in this world. Where do we run to? To the fortress: Jesus Christ and the promise that we are his forever in our baptism. In this world we cannot even, it seems, trust ourselves: we fall into sin, we go back to our same old idols again and again. Where do we run to? To Christ, whose forgiving arms, stretched on the cross, welcome us back again and again.

He is our refuge and strength – always present to help in times of trouble.

Preacher: Dr Stephen Pietsch