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Wednesday, 18 February 2026

Sermon by the Right Reverend Dr Richard Murray, Moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland when he opened the Special General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland this morning, in Assembly Buildings, Belfast.

Psalm 46 – A psalm for times of trouble.

No one's very sure when Psalm 46 was written, but it was written at a time of huge change in the history of the people of God.

The people of God had a sense about them of earthquakes happening:

- Verse 2 “The earth gives way...the mountains moved into the heart of the sea.”
- Verse 3 talks about waters roaring and foaming, mountains trembling
- Verse 6 talks about the raging of the nations, kingdoms tottering
- Verse 8 talks about desolations (maybe natural disasters)
- talks of wars and weapons of war, bows, spears, chariots...

Clearly the psalmist was living through times of cataclysmic change and it's good to remind ourselves that such times have always been faced by God's people, to a greater or lesser extent.

We in PCI are living through such a time when there's been an ecclesiastical earthquake and when safeguarding has (quite rightly) been moved centre stage,

- When yes we affirm those who have faithfully and dutifully carried out their safeguarding duties but others have failed us and in their wake
- we are acutely aware of people who have suffered and been left desolate
- And then there are forces without and forces within that oppose us and sometimes we wonder what's coming next?
- What does the future hold for PCI? And where is the Lord in the middle of it all?

I want to take Psalm 46 and I want to ask three questions as we address ourselves to this moment:

- How have we reacted before God to our failures?
- How have we lived before God in this kairos moment
- How have we shaped ourselves because if the Lord isn't finished with us yet, He has shaken us for a reason, and this 46th Psalm helps us navigate such a time.

THE REFUGE; (verse 1)

Notice first of all the psalmist talks about "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble."

We in PCI are in trouble, make no mistake about it, especially, again, and most necessarily we think of those hurt, harmed, traumatised by our failings and as David Bruce said away at the beginning "even one case is one too many..."

And when trouble envelops us the natural human reaction is fear and certainly the psalmist felt fear in his trouble for he names it in verse 2 "Therefore we will not fear though the earth give way."

It is like he is having to speak to:

- his fear
- to address it
- to refuse it a place in his life and to keep it under control

But please do not make the mistake of regarding this as some sort of positive thinking technique - for the reason he does not fear is because of what he says in verse 1 "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble."

In Bible times there were six, what were called, "cities of refuge" established by the law of God. And if someone committed manslaughter (say), and a family member of the deceased was after them for revenge, the culprit could flee to one of these cities and be given sanctuary and a fair trial after establishing the facts; six cities of refuge.

The Psalmist sees God as a 'city of refuge', somewhere to flee to when his heart is full of fear, and in the Lord he's finding his strength and help in his very present time of trouble and upheaval and uncertainty.

- Someone has said “All things shake but God does not shake”
- And God’s city does not shake.

You remember Luther’s great hymn on this Psalm with its closing words:

“And though they take our life; Goods, honour, children, wife,
Thus is their profit small; these things shall vanish all,
The city of God remaineth”.

I encourage you in this time of trouble for PCI not to fear but to flee to the Lord Jesus Christ as the Lord of the church,

- He is our city of refuge
- Our strength
- Our very present help in trouble...

But then secondly in the present there is something to remember and there it is in (verse 4)

THE RIVER

“There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High.”

Some of you will have been to Jerusalem and perhaps noted the absence of a river flowing through the city. There is of course the Gihon Spring to the pool of Siloam, but it can hardly be called a river – so what is the river the psalmist is talking about?

Well, notice he’s talking (verse 4) about the “river whose streams make glad the city of God.” So he’s not talking about an earthly city, rather a heavenly city. This is the first time in the Book of Psalms the expression ‘city of God’ occurs and the city of God is different to any earthly city.

This is the city where God lives (verse 4) “The holy habitation of the Most High.” This is the city, when earthly cities are being shaken, the city of God, (verse 5) “God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved; God will help her when morning dawns.”

Yes, it’s a dark time but there is encouragement that morning will eventually dawn – just as Abraham went out in the dark not knowing where he was going but he was looking forward to the city that has foundations whose architect and builder is God.

So what is the river of God?

Well, fast forward to John chapter 7 and Jesus in the city, its the city of Jerusalem at the Feast of Tabernacles. It's said on the last and greatest day of the feast a golden flagon filled with water from the pool of Siloam was paraded through the city and poured out in the Temple by the High Priest - signifying yes God's provision of water in the desert, but maybe too Isaiah 12:3; "With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation."

And on that last and greatest day of the feast in John 7, Jesus stood up and cried out, maybe just as the High Priest was pouring out the water - "If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me, as the scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water...'" The gospel writer adds – "This he spoke concerning the Spirit whom those believing in him would receive."

In other words, the river of God is the river of the Spirit of God flowing through the history of the human race and as we sang at the last Special General Assembly about the Church of Jesus Christ. She is his new creation, by water and the word, the true church is not an institution but an initiation into the things of God by the Spirit of God. The true church is the people of God. (1 Peter 2:5) "you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ".

Please do not make the mistake of thinking this building is the church, even though we frequently call it "Church House", nor is any building the church. The true church is the body of Christ – the people who have repented towards God and believed on the Lord Jesus Christ as the Spirit of God gives them grace.

And this is why in Ezekiel chapter 47, the prophet has a vision of a river of living water flowing from the temple in Jerusalem.

- It starts off a trickle
- Then its ankle-deep
- Then knee-deep
- Then waist-deep
- Soon the river was deep enough to swim in.

And when it reaches the Dead Sea it makes the sea live. Fish begin to swim in the sea and trees once again grow on the banks of the sea.

Ezekiel 47:12 “Their fruit will be for food, and their leaves for healing.” Isn’t that a picture of the flow of God’s Spirit like a river through human history? Bringing life and fruit and healing even to the most unlikely people and to the most unlikely of places! And as they drink of the living water provided by the Lord Jesus Christ they find themselves saved and caught up in the unfolding grand plan of redemption.

Brother and sisters, I again call upon you in your ministries wherever God has placed you, to keep the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ front and centre in your ministry.

- That Christ died for our sins, according to the scriptures
- That He rose again from the dead on the third day, according to the scriptures
- And when we preach those scriptures and Christ in all His fulness, “He utters his voice” says Psalm 46:6, “the earth melts”, and faith comes through hearing and hearing through the word of God.

How the world needs to hear the good news about the pearl of great price, so in all the doom and gloom lets not lose the wonder of our great Saviour the rose of Sharon and Lily of the Valley.

We’ve talked about the refuge, the river. Thirdly and finally;

THE REST

Because God’s people are called to practice rest in troubling times. Listen to verse 10:

“Be still and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!”
The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.”

I wonder do you know the painting called ‘Peace in the Midst of the Storm?’

It’s a painting of a waterfall cascading over a rockface, but on the rockface, on a ledge, is a bird sitting on her nest. Due to it’s fast overflow the water is missing the nest, but the bird is oblivious to the water and the roar. She’s resting quietly, hence ‘peace in the midst of the storm.’

And there is a very real sense in this time we are called to rest in the middle of flowing events, to rest when there are roaring noises. And to practice stillness in our souls, believing the Lord of hosts is with us and the God of Jacob is our fortress.

One of my very good friends is the Congregational Church minister Rev Tom Shaw, and in a magazine article on the presence of God he wrote this a number of years ago now:

“The presence of God is extremely difficult to define. In fact it is possibly impossible to define. How could a human being define that indescribable experience we call the presence of God? (He goes on) When we do experience the presence of God we can do no more than say with Jacob at Bethel, surely the Lord was in this place.”

And you remember Jacob at Bethel? (We began this morning by singing about him). He’s mentioned here in verse 7 of Psalm 46 – Jacob was a very imperfect man but it was to him God gave that vision of a ladder set up on the earth with the top reaching to heaven and the angels of God ascending and descending on it.

You remember where Jacob lay his head that night? On a rock. And he lay down in that place to sleep – well can’t we lay our heads down on Christ our Rock? We are a very imperfect church and on this side of eternity we will always be a very imperfect church because we are made up of very imperfect people – sinners saved by grace.

But if God wasn’t ashamed to be called the God of Jacob, I don’t believe He’ll be ashamed to be called our God too. So look to the rock from which you have been hewn, “The Rock of Ages, cleft for me, let me hid myself in Thee” And trust Him to lead us through this morass. We need not fret but instead free ourselves from stress and know that the Lord Jesus will be in the process.

This isn’t our church. This is His church and He has promised; “I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”

Brothers and sisters, the Refuge is the Lord, the River of God is still flowing. Let’s Rest in God and do justly, love mercy and walk humbly with our God if we’re going to survive this crisis and emerge refined, humbler, holier.

I’d like to lead you in prayer as we respond to God’s word...let us pray

Ends.