**Psalm 100, Sermon at St Paul’s Banbury, 30.08.20**

*Our great God,*

*As we come to your Word preached, would you glorify it in all of us.*

*Bring light to our minds,*

*Awaken us our hearts,*

*Reclaim those who are wandering,*

*Comfort and establish those of us who feel weak,*

*And make us all a people ready for their Lord.*

*In Jesus name we pray. Amen.*

There are some songs that, when they come on, I can’t help but join in with – tapping my foot to the beat, bobbing my head up and down, or even singing along with the lyrics. For me, it’s songs like: “September,” by Earth, Wind, and Fire; “Big Yellow Taxi,” by Joni Mitchell; or “Here comes the Sun,” by the Beatles. Those songs make me move and sing.

Likewise, there are some songs that pull at my heartstrings. A number of Eric Clapton songs that do that for me. Perhaps the epic film scores of Hans Zimmer or Taylor Swift’s new album does that for you.

Anyhow, as Dan hinted at last week, in a more profound sense, it’s exactly the same with the Psalms. The Psalms are poetry; they’re songs.

As we see in the OT, the faith of God’s people moved back and forth between the polar extremes of anguish and misery, and celebration and profound joy. And the Psalms reflect that. Just like many of our songs today, the Psalms gave voice to the cries of those throughout the spectrum of human emotions. They arise out of real experiences of life - life as it comes – along with joys, hurts, betrayals, threats, loneliness, fears, anxieties, anger, and anguish.

And so, there are times when we need to enter into a specific Psalm – using the words of God’s people in the past to make them our own, expressing our emotions to God as those in Christ.

Psalm 100, for example, is an old, old favourite.

Originally, it was probably composed to accompany the Israelite thank-offerings (the *Todah*) – a sacrifice made on special occasions. It’s the only Psalm bearing this precise inscription – “for giving grateful praise.” However, it’s also been heavily used since then, often included in the official liturgies of the Church. It’s still known by some today as ‘The Old Hundredth.’

All that being said, the Psalter (the book of Psalms) is not just a songbook from which we pull-out our most-loved tracks – the ones that most match our emotions and circumstances. The Psalms as a whole function to shape and *form* our emotions and experience of faith in God.

Reading them is a liturgical act, one which works on us and helps us to embrace a reality not naturally our own.

In other words, as we enter into the Psalms as God’s people – whatever we’re feeling or experiencing (wherever we are on the spectrum from terrible grief to sheer joy) - they orient us, or re-orient us, to God.

What is more, each Psalm is arranged and composed in a particular way. And this form (arrangement) is part of the message. We can see that in Psalm 100, which is shaped by its seven exhortations (commands):

**A** **Shout for Joy** to the LORD… (v1)

 **B** **Worship** the LORD with gladness…

 **C** **Come** before him with joyful songs… (v2)

 **D** **Know** that the LORD is God. (v3)

 **C’** **Enter** his gates with thanksgiving…

 **B’** **Give thanks** to him…

**A’** **Praise** his name. (v4)

From this, the thrust of the Psalm is fairly obvious. As we verbalize it, the repetition of those exhortations drives us to praise. That’s the power and beauty of song, or poetry, or liturgy. It moves us.

However, it’s not by form alone that we’re led to praise the Lord. Because, notice, although they might be simple, the lyrics of this Psalm are full of depth, significance, and meaning. The message of the Psalm is *not*: ‘Don’t worry, be happy’; or ‘Always look on the bright side of life’; or ‘Clap along if you know what happiness is to you.’

Rather, real praise and worship and joy is *grounded* and *centred* on knowing God. Right in the middle of all these exhortations is Psalm 100:3:

***Know*** *that the LORD is God.*

*It is he who made us, and we are his;*

*We are his people, the sheep of his pasture.*

And right at the end of these exhortations (“shout… worship… come… know… enter… give thanks… praise…”) is Psalm 100:5:

*For the LORD is good…*

 *and his love Endures forever;*

*His faithfulness continues through*

*All generations.*

What this Psalm demonstrates is how experiencing God’s goodness kindles spiritual praise.

So, as this Psalm invites us, let’s enter in and briefly dwell on just three aspects of God’s goodness found in this Psalm – that we might be lifted to real joy and delight in him.

First,

1. **The LORD is the God of Creation**

In Psalm 100:1, it’s as if the Psalmist is summoning a great choir together, and he wants everyone to join in!

*Shout for joy to the LORD, all the earth.*

Whether Jew or Gentile, all the inhabitants of the land, of the world, are invited to play a part.

They’re invited to come and

*2Worship the Lord with gladness*  (not fear and dread) and*come before him with joyful songs.*

It’s a wonderful vision of unity and celebration - a universal festival of praise.

Yet it’s obviously a vision far removed from the *discord* in our world today. There is so much disunity around us, isn’t there? So many factions. There is social disunity; political disunity; cultural disunity; and now even physical disunity because of *Covid19.*

And lots of the contemporary discourse centres around mending those factions and ensuring equality, much of which is of course good. But, is it just me, or does every movement or programme seem to bring about further division, and more factions?

That’s because, ultimately, those divisions *cannot* be healed without reference to our most common feature as human-beings: that we are made by God. Psalm 100:3:

*Know that the LORD is God.*

*It is he who made us…*

*God* made us by creation. We did not bring ourselves into existence. We were all made by the will and power of another. For that reason, as John Calvin says at the beginning of his most famous work *The Institutes*, it’s impossible to speak about our humanity – or to understand what it really means to be human - in isolation from him. For he is the one in whom “we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28).

Instead, when we ‘know that the LORD is God,’and we recognise and remember that ‘it is *he* who made *us*,’ our bearings and allegiances change. We turn from self to God. We let go of our schemes to form people according to our perceived wisdom, and we embrace the LORD’s purpose for us. Rather than shouting at others, we more readily shout for joy to the Lord, which is what we’re made for.

Next week we begin our return to physically gathering together as a church. The lockdown has felt like a long period of exile. It’s certainly taken a toll on us as a people. Our return will initially be very small. And it will be far from perfect – not least because we can’t have everyone there, we might carry in some anxieties with us, and we won’t be able to sing as this Psalm encourages us to do.

But don’t be mistaken. It is no small thing. Our gathering together on the Lord’s Day is a way of embracing (and communicating to those around us) what it truly means to be human. There is no higher purpose to our lives than enjoying and worshiping the LORD together – the one who, out of sheer grace and for his glory, made us.

Our little gathering will also be a little glimpse of the ‘all-the-earth’ scope of God’s plans – as different people, from different parts, join together as one. *And* it’ll be a small taste of heaven, when there will be

*“a great multitude that no one [can] count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb.”*

Together they will cry out in a loud voice:

*‘Salvation belongs to our God,*

*Who sits on his throne,*

*And to the Lamb.’”* (Rev 7:9-10)

That touches on the second aspect of God’s goodness we see in this Psalm. That,

1. **The LORD is the God of the Covenant**

Psalm 100:3 again:

*3 Know that the Lord is God.*

*It is he who made us, and we are his;*

*we are his people, the sheep of his pasture.*

*4Enter his gates with thanksgiving
    and his courts with praise;*

*give thanks to him and praise his name.*

The LORD has made all people by creation. But he’s also made us his special people by adoption and regeneration.

Again, out of sheer grace and for his glory, it was God’s plan for all eternity to redeem His people. In Scripture, we see that plan unfold through God’s covenant promises. Those promises to bless and be a Shepherd to his people were first given to a few individuals (like Abraham) and small families. They extended to a nation, who met with God in the courts of his temple. But all of that culminates in the coming of Jesus Christ. He, as we recently saw in John’s gospel, is God the Son, the eternal Word made flesh, the light of the world, and the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep.

What that means is that we too – the church – are the recipients of God’s gracious covenant.

Whereas before entering the gates and courts of the temple were restricted to a few, God’s mercy now beckons us to *come* into his presence with praise and thanksgiving in our hearts. Whatever you and I are facing at the moment, there is absolutely *nothing* that changes the fact that, by the blood of Christ, we are his special possession. We are children of the promise.

Of course, the LORD, as creator, is present to all things at the same time – he’s not a bounded creature like we are. But, the LORD, by the Holy Spirit, is specially present to his covenant people, those in Christ. He is a shepherd and a father to us. He is the God of the Covenant.

As if that wasn’t enough, we come, finally, to Psalm 100:5. There we see

1. **The LORD is the God who is Good in himself**

Come and worship with joy and gladness in your hearts…

*5 For the Lord is good and his love endures forever;*

*his faithfulness continues through all generations.*

All of what we’ve seen so far of God’s good works of creation and redemption (in the gospel of Jesus Christ) arises out of who God is. God does good because He *is* good.

This is not like us. When we’re described as good, it’s always in relation to others. A ‘good’ friend is someone who pays attention to you and is loyal to you. But God, just by being God, is good. Or we might talk of people as having a ‘good’ character; they have traits of honesty or kindness or sympathy. But God does not *have* goodness. Goodness is not just a *part* of him or a quality in him. He is uncreated goodness itself. For God to be God is for him to be good.

What that means, dear friends, is that we cannot affect God’s goodness. We can’t change or improve him. Nothing can make him better than what he is. That would be terrifying – if we could cause God to change his nature somehow. Actually, it would make him less than God. Rather, he forever and always remains purely and perfectly good. He is the eternal source of goodness itself.

That might throw up some questions about our experience of the world. It’s entirely valid to ask those questions. However, it should also provide us with a huge source of comfort and thanksgiving. Because it means that God freely communicates his goodness in all he does. And so, when we pray things like, ‘give us today our daily bread,’ we’re not begging for something from a stingy, tight-fisted bully. We are in fact coming to the inexhaustible fountain of goodness itself, who delights to give without limitation or measure.

It’s no surprise that God’s goodness is a constant theme throughout the Psalter. Because the more we look upon God’s goodness, the more we shall see the reasons to move us to praise and thank him. It’s also no surprise that God’s goodness often comes together with calls to ‘shout for joy.’ For as Augustine writes, we “cannot find words” to express our praise. Yet, he goes on,

*“our sheer joy does not permit us to be silent; so let us neither speak nor hold our tongues.*

*But what are we to do, if we can neither speak nor keep silence?*

 *Let us shout for joy.*

*What does that mean: Shout for joy?*

*Give vent to the inarticulate expression of your joys, belch out all your happiness to him.”[[1]](#footnote-1)*

*The Doxology*

**Praise God from whom all blessings flow,
Praise him all creatures here below,
Praise him above ye heavenly hosts,
Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost,**

**Amen.**

1. Augustine, *Psalms* 5:87; Ps 102 (103):3-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)