

Lent Compline Talks 2020 on Prayer
Prof John Morris, Palm Sunday April 5th

6. *Prayer as Praise*; Psalms 134, 150; Chapter 3: Now the God of peace; Collects: 4,5,6

Tonight, we think about prayer as praise. On Palm Sunday we celebrate the Jesus's into Jerusalem on a donkey, surrounded by his hyped-up disciples, and greeted by a cheering crowd of Jerusalem residents waving palms. I guess many of us have been making palm crosses as per Meghann's instructions and it is interesting to see the different versions as they appear on the parish website! When Jesus rode in to Jerusalem, its people must have heard about him, particularly his miracles of healing and the cleansing of the temple, and it's not difficult to guess what they were hoping to happen next - this could be the Messiah!. The people were in subjugation to the Romans who were not noted for a gentle style of government and, at that time, there was a great expectation of a liberating leader to free them from that rule. Some of the religious leaders, who had made accommodations with the Romans which enabled them to maintain their own positions, were not so keen and the gospels tell us that, from Palm Sunday on, they discussed among themselves how they might counter the threat and do away with Jesus. But the crowds had fervent expectations and were heaping praise on the man they hoped would be their salvation, both in an earthly sense and, because they were a very religious people, also in an eternal sense.

Praise as a form of prayer has a long history in the old testament. In Exodus we read that, after the crossing of the Red sea and the destruction of the pursuing Egyptians, "the people feared the Lord, and put their faith in him, and in Moses his servant. Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song of praise to the Lord". It has phrases like "He is my God and I will glorify him". Such words have many echoes in the psalms, which fall into three distinct categories - those that plead for God's help, those that are entirely praise, and those that combine the two. We looked earlier at psalms asking for salvation, such as Ps 3 "Lord, how my enemies have multiplied .. Rise up Lord, Save me." A quick thumb through the psalms reveals that there are a similar number of psalms of praise, such as Ps 19 "The heavens declare the glory of God .."; Ps 33 "Shout for joy before the Lord, ye righteous; praise comes well from the upright ..". Indeed, the final group of psalms all start "O praise the Lord" including that great favourite Ps 150 "O praise God in his holiness, praise him in the firmament of his power" - we'll say that in a moment. Some psalms start with a cry for help but end with praise for the help has been forthcoming: Ps 35 starts "Strive O Lord with those who strive against me" but ends "so shall I talk of thy justice and praise all the day long"; and Ps 61 starts "Hear my cry" but ends "So will I ever sing psalms of praise".

If we turn to the NT, we find the same thing. Jesus speaks of giving praise as thanks after the healing of the ten lepers "has not one of the others who were healed returned to give praise to God except this foreigner?" again praise as sincere thanks for a blessing received. In other places the emphasis is slightly different. In Luke, the angels who came to the shepherds announcing Christ's birth were singing praises to God "Glory to God in the highest ..". The Lord's prayer starts "hallowed be your name" - a form of praise meaning 'to venerate as holy', and we usually end that prayer with "for thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory" - yet more praise. We've already thought about the hosannas of crowd on Palm Sunday. In Luke, we read that, after the resurrection and ascension the disciples returned to Jerusalem and spent all their time in the temple, praising God. In the same way, after the coming of the holy spirit at Pentecost "all whose faith had drawn them together held everything in common .. shared their meals with unaffected joy, as they praised God". Sadly, we shan't be able to share a communal meal this Maundy Thursday, but perhaps we, as people drawn together by our faith, should

make a point of remembering to praise God as we eat our evening meal next Thursday, if not every time we say grace at mealtimes.

One thing did strike me when thinking about praise. In moving to our current format of worship, we have lost some of the praise that was part of mattins: the Venite “O come let us sing unto the Lord” and the Te Deum “We praise thee O God ..”. Perhaps we need to do more praising?

The word praise comes from a mediaeval root meaning to prize, to count something as very valuable. This is certainly so of our praise of God. But does God *need* our praises? It seems inconceivable that, unlike some human rulers, God has an ego that needs to be stroked by people praising him. Rather, it is we who have a need to praise God. Mike Bennett puts it like this “God doesn’t ask us to praise him for his own benefit; he asks us to praise him for *our* benefit.”

What is that benefit? It is not just thanksgiving though that is clearly a part. I suggest that when we turn our minds to praising God, it gives us better perspective - it takes our mind away from our worldly troubles (a benefit particularly appropriate at the moment as we are bombarded with coronavirus news); the phrase “lift your eyes to the hills, from whence comes our help” comes to mind. Praising God also helps us to focus on the ultimate reality - what’s truly permanent in our transitory lives. The more I read what physics tells us about the nature of physical reality, that I’m made of quarks and dark matter or whatever, the more I feel that these nuts and bolts are not the essential “me”; that the essential of any living being of God’s creation is just a higher order function of our physical bodies given the gift of life. One other benefit is that, when we say or sing the praise of God, we have to think about what are the characteristics of the God that we praise. That thought should lead us to try to imitate those characteristics, to be more a “child of God”. Praise can only originate in a heart full of love toward God; hence the first commandment “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength”. Praise should therefore be an integral part of our prayers, and it may do us good to consider how much of the prayers we have said recently have been praise - preparing this talk made me realise I’ve fallen short on that. When we pray we should therefore pause before we ask God for what we think are our needs and remember all that that our bounteous God has given us and, as we consider all that we have received, we should we praise God for his holiness, mercy, justice, grace, goodness, and kindness.

I’ll end with Ps 103: “Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, praise his holy name. Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits.

I thought also tonight, to stay with the theme, we would say Psalm 134, which is in the Compline booklet, but also Psalm 150, that well-known psalm of praise, in the version we sing (see below)

Psalm 150

O praise God in his holiness; praise him in the firmament of his power.
Praise him in his noble acts; praise him according to his excellent greatness.
Praise him in the sound of the trumpet; praise him upon the lute and harp.
Praise him in the cymbals and dances; praise him upon the strings and pipe.
Praise him upon the well-tuned cymbals; praise him upon the loud cymbals.
Let everything that hath breath, Praise the Lord.