

## Blissful Worship

Psalm 24

Philippians 4:4-9

What a great joy and privilege it is to have received Graham, Peter and Fen into the membership of our church this morning! They bring with them wide-ranging experience, knowledge and insight. Their presence and their contributions, their gifts, their faith and doubts, their questions are already a great blessing to this community and will continue to be so - I am sure - in the days to come. The step they have taken signifies their desire to travel their journey of faith in the company of God's people here at AFC. And as it is all happening within the context of worship, it gives us the opportunity to explore the nature of our worship as well as the blessings we seek and receive by gathering together here week by week for the praise of God.

Psalm 24 is a poetic, dramatised example of how ancient Israel experienced their worship of God. From the content it seems the action takes place at the gates of the city or the Temple. It is in the form of questions and answers, "Who may stand in this holy place?", "Who is this King of Glory?" followed by the relevant answers, so it is likely that it was used as a kind of entrance liturgy complete with biddings and responses between priests and people. Rather like the opening responses we sometimes use in our liturgies. The Psalm describes in three broad strokes what all worship has at its heart: acknowledgement of human creatureliness by praising the creator God, then first the worshippers' entry into the holy City or the Temple then God's entry through the gates, so that the two could meet in the act of worship.

It is thought that the psalm may have been composed for the occasion described in the second book of Samuel, when King David had brought the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem. The Ark – you may remember - was a kind of portable shrine, which symbolised the presence of God for the people before the great central place of worship, the Temple was built in Jerusalem. But as the use of the Psalm was not limited to any one occasion I think we would do an injustice to the text if we tried to understand it too literally. It may be more helpful to adjust our modern, Western, literal minds to the broader, metaphorical approach of Hebrew thinking, where sometimes the underlying meaning is more important than the actual words used. So, regardless of place and time and the pictures used, the psalmist talks of worship as a two-way movement: humans entering the divine sphere and God entering the human sphere. This then raises questions which were as relevant to ancient Israel as they are to us 21<sup>st</sup> c worshippers: Why do we worship? Who can worship? What kind of God do we worship? And what makes for good worship?

By examining the Psalmist's answers to these questions we may reflect on our own understanding. The main reason for worship, according to the psalm, comes right at the very beginning putting everything that follows in the context of awe and wonder at the marvels of the Universe and the Mover of it all. We didn't do this, whoever is behind it, is worthy of our utmost praise. But are we the right creatures as we are to approach this holiness and might? After being bowled over by the beauty and complexity, the grandeur and intricacy of Creation the psalm registers a perceived divide between the object of praise and those coming to do the praising. Surely, there are some conditions the worshippers need to fulfil in order to be able to 'go up the mountain of the Lord!' They have to have 'clean hands and a pure heart, they must not set their minds on what is false or sworn deceitfully'. If we wanted to be literal about it, this would mean that only morally perfect people could enter the temple for worship. I wonder where would that leave us, 21<sup>st</sup> c worshippers. Can we say with hands on heart that we have behaved well all through last week; that we haven't told little white lies, or entertained unworthy thoughts about our neighbours, spoken harshly about someone and hurt them with our careless words, or disappointed others with our actions?

But, I think, this is not what's meant by the psalm. For one thing there is no record that anyone would have ever been excluded from Temple worship on moral grounds. For another, the Psalmist, himself boils down his conditions to the one important criterion, and it is 'to seek the presence of the Lord'. That is the only entry requirement. Jesus agrees with the ancient insight when he compares the worship of the Pharisee and the Tax collector in the Jerusalem Temple of his time. The story is recorded in Luke's Gospel (Luke 18: 9-14). It would be a reasonable guess that the Pharisee is probably a morally better person than the tax collector. Yet, he is not seeking anymore. He knows for sure what God is like: a bigger version of himself and that this God is on his side because of his moral uprightness. So, in his prayer he ends up merely talking to himself about himself. The tax collector on the other hand may have just drifted into the place of worship desperately seeking some kind of resolution to his messed-up life. He seems to be painfully aware of that great gap the Psalmist is talking about. Where he scores over the

Pharisee is that he doesn't take what he already knows about God, as the final word. He is after something more. He is searching for a God who would grant him a new beginning. According to Jesus' parable, this is, in fact, what he receives and he is able to leave with the blessing of forgiveness and a lighter heart to turn over a new leaf in his life.

We come to church for many different reasons. We are looking forward to singing some uplifting hymns. We come to be inspired by beautiful prayers. We come to catch up with our friends and look forward to the chat over a cup of coffee after the service. We may even come for some mental exercise, which an interesting sermon might provide. But the greatest blessing is to be received when we come with a genuine sense of seeking the presence of God. Perhaps not so much the God we already know, or we think we know, but the One who is still to be revealed.

There is a very telling moment in William Young's metaphorical novel *The Shack*, when Mac a deeply troubled, grief-stricken father, who is full of rage against an unjust, uncaring God, finds himself in the presence of that God. Now, I don't want to spoil the pleasure of reading this book for you, which I highly recommend, so I will only say that the actual God Mac meets is nothing like he expected. It is quite funny how on entering the meeting place his major worry is how to address God: Should he call him Father, the Almighty One, or Mr God? Should he stand or fall down in worship? But even before he can decide all his worries become irrelevant as he finds himself in the warm embrace of a most surprising kind of God, who is full of smiles and cannot hide the delight of coming face to face with Mac.

In a good worship then it is those who seek the presence of the Lord, who shall receive blessing from the Lord – according to Psalm 24. So, what is this blessing that may be the outcome of good worship? Someone told us the other day what an amazing week they had. It was full of marvellous coincidences; things have just fallen into place for different members of the family, one of them found the right job, a suitable accommodation cropped up, unexpected friends were forthcoming etc. And because they were religious they added: "Somebody has really looked after us from above. We felt truly blessed". I am sure we have all had similar experiences at one time or another. So, the first thing we can say about blessing is, that is *a gift and a surprise*, it is not something we earn, or particularly deserve. The second is, that we normally associate blessing with good things, things that are advantageous to us, things that are to our obvious benefit. And this is the sense in which the word blessing is used in our Psalm.

But if we turn to Jesus, his understanding in the Sermon of the Mount, as elsewhere, stretches our minds and presents us with a challenge. His sayings, we call the Beatitudes refer to the blessedness of those we wouldn't think of describing as blessed: the poor in spirit, the sorrowful, the gentle, those who hunger and thirst, those who suffer insults and are persecuted in the cause of right. And yet, Jesus calls them all blessed. This tells me that *blessing is to be had in all walks of life*, in the good as well as in the bad, in the easy and in the hard; it embraces our whole humanity. The God who blesses is right there in the midst of it all. Mac, the hero of *The Shack* meets God in the very place where tragedy hit his family and he experiences the third thing we can say about blessing: it may not change our situation, but *it changes us* and as a consequence, it changes the way we experience and deal with both our good fortune and our afflictions. It can unblock in us those things that stop the flow of love and goodness, the peace and understanding, which are there to help us to cope

And finally, something the whole Bible testifies to from Abraham to the Apostle Paul: blessing is not only something we receive, *it is to be passed on*, it is to be shared. The major part of our human dignity, as bearers of God's image is the ability to give or withhold blessings from each other. "Count your blessings, everyone..." – says the old hymn. Perhaps in the coming week we could instead count the people we could be a blessing to, and not only count them but actually bless them. May the Spirit of God help us as we do.