**

Psalm 146
Mark 7.24-end
9th September 2018**

## The Hallelujah Psalm

*Gracious God – we open the bible and long to receive your word – open, we pray, our minds and hearts to receive that word with all its comfort and in all its challenge. Amen*.

Hallelujah is one bible word that I guess most people know.

We use it often to express our joy when a difficulty is over-come or a problem finds a solution. ‘Hallelujah’, we say – probably not always remembering that in the original Hebrew it means ‘Praise the Lord’.

Leonard Cohen made the word famous with that haunting melody of his in 1984. Incredible that a song based on just one word went through over 80 different versions before it was released. And so popular has it become as a secular hymn that to date it’s been recorded by over 300 artists.

Well, our lectionary reading from the Jewish Scriptures this morning is the first of five so called ‘Hallelujah’ psalms which bring this book of the bible to its close.

Sometimes even the whole book of Psalms is referred to as the ‘Tehillim’, literally meaning the book of Praise Songs.

There is a story that went round Baptist churches in the mid 80’s that sort of explained why the new manual for ministers had the simple title: Praise God. Apparently the committee at Baptist House putting it together had spent a frustrating morning trying to come up with an acceptable title for the new book. They were getting nowhere when the tea trolley arrived and someone piped up: Praise God! That’s it, they all cried, and it became the service book that most of us used throughout the 80’s!

Today’s psalm is very much in praise of God.

Some have suggested its opening line is rather like a sticky note to self: Praise the Lord O my soul… A reminder that a healthy life, a wholesome mind makes room for praise, gratitude and thanksgiving.

It’s the reason why we try to begin every service with a hymn of praise. We might have had the best or worst of weeks yet here in church Sunday by Sunday we strive to bring a sense of perspective and balance to our lives and one way we do that is to begin by taking the focus off us and placing it on to God with a time of praise at the beginning of our worship together.

So in this temple song the Psalmist declares he will Praise the Lord all his life, for as long as he will live. His will be a life of praise.

There is, I believe, something healthy about this sort of mind-set as praise, gratitude and thankfulness can be contagious.

Peter Brooks was a one-time Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. Judged by contemporary standards and he would no doubt be viewed today as stuffy and old school, yet his staff loved him. I read that this cabinet minister was in the daily habit of praising those who worked in his office. He always made time to leave post-it notes on their desks expressing his gratitude. It made the world of difference to them and says so much about him.

This week we’ve been saddened by the untimely death of Radio 5 Live’s Rachel Bland. This forty-year old newscaster died on Wednesday from Breast Cancer. I was enormously impressed by the dignity shown by Steve her husband. Reflecting on the impact she had on the media as she talked about her illness he wrote to thank those who had sent good wishes saying: You’ll never know how much your messages meant to her’.

Surely this was the human spirit at its very best – the day after a loved one’s passing expressing gratitude for the support being offered to the grieving family.

For people of faith maybe that way of thinking and living with a grateful heart begins as we praise God. From praise flows thankfulness, and thankfulness is one of the essential ingredients for a grateful heart and healthy mind.

So, that’s our first reflection this morning all about the value of singing a song of praise which can lead to grateful heart. Our second is the idea of a life of principle.

In verse 3 the psalmist introduces a more controversial idea; that of not putting your trust in rulers and princes.

Suddenly our ears prick up and maybe we feel in an instant this ancient song is one that chimes with our contemporary world.

Only this week one of the Watergate reporters has published a book about the current American President, whilst the New York Times has carried an article all about officials exercising damage limitation in the Oval Office. In our own country hardly a day goes by without the media talking about who is positioning themselves to oust our sitting Prime Minister once Brexit is sorted.

The cry: Do not put your trust in princes and rulers has obviously been sounded down the ages, even thousands of years ago in the days of The Psalms.

So is this blanket despair railed against all rulers? Is Psalm 146 essentially calling for a theocracy instead of a democracy? Is it, in the words of Tolkein in Lord of the Rings predicting that this is the ‘end of the age of man’?

I don’t think so, and if that were the case why does the New Testament call upon us to pray for our rulers?

No, this temple hymn is not rejecting human leadership, but it is recognising its limitations.

Hagiography is that practice of over flattering our heroes. I think it’s something I tend to do all the time. I can wax lyrical for as long as you want about Elgar!

Perhaps even the Jewish tradition was guilty of this as it honoured Moses, Elijah and David. Although each of these leaders were great men of faith they all had feet of clay. Moses lost his temper and killed a man, Elijah had irrational episodes of uncontrollable depression and David was an adulterer. Yet all have entered into the Jewish folklore of fame because perhaps every tradition needs its heroes.

In this year when we remember the 100th anniversary of the giving of the vote to some women it’s interesting to reflect on the seminal role played in that by Emmeline Pankhurst. She is the towering figure in the story of women’s suffrage – a true hero in the Votes for Women campaign. Yet it’s also true that within that campaign there was a sharp disagreement between those who believed violence should be used as a means of protest and those who didn’t. Mrs Pankhurst advocated arson with the catch line ‘deeds not words’ and formed the Suffragettes, whilst those, often within The Church, who did not believe that violence should be a method associated with their cause became known as the Suffragists.

Our leaders and heroes are human and fallible – even Elgar!

Today’s psalm, I suggest, isn’t against human leadership it simply recognises its limitations. So, this is how verse 4 describes our heroes: When they breathe their last breath, they return to the dust, and on that day their plans come to nothing.

So what lives on? What is worth believing in? What endures?

Isn’t the answer…..ideas live on and principles endure.

Mrs Pankhurst may have had her faults and been one of the most autocratic leaders of all time, but her fundamental belief that women and men stand before the law as equals is still a driving force for change and an idea whose time has come – only this year, in June, were women allowed to sit behind the wheel for the first time in Saudi Arabia. Our heroes die but their ideas, convictions and principles live on.

Psalm 146 gives us a litany of ideas about God that have inspired and motivated those with faith down through the centuries. This God creates a beautiful world, deals out justice, looks after the hungry and oppressed and sets the captive free. This God restores sight to the blind and raises up the humble. He protects the stranger in the land, supports the widows and fatherless and in doing all of this thwarts the course of the wicked.

Maybe these verses from the temple hymn book remind us of Mary’s Song, The Magnificat?

In a way the psalmist in describing God this way is calling to mind the enduring inspiration of the nation’s best kings.

In the Ancient Near Eastern world of the psalmist a king was meant to show the best of humanity and that meant firstly ensuring justice and secondly, protecting the vulnerable. That was kingship infused with an idea.

One of the big issues of our day is the disproportionate influence that celebrities have upon us.

I had this notion as I prepared the sermon that maybe it would be a good exercise for us to rewrite verse 3 for 2018 so instead of reading: Put no trust in princes it might read: Trust not in single issue politicians or game show celebrities.

Ideas can inspire, and principles can motivate. Psalm 146 surely stands alongside some of the best manifestoes presented to us in the bible – like the Magnificat it is all about a faith that has a conviction for social justice at its very core.

Biblical languages were never my strong point at college. I remember getting up at four in the morning so I could memorise the Hebrew of the set psalms so if they came up in the exam at least I’d have a chance.

Well this week I read that the Hebrew verb ‘oseh’ isn’t only used to describe God creating but also the way he goes on striving for justice.

So, in verse 6 he’s the creator of heaven and earth and in verse 7 he deals out justice to the oppressed.

It’s the idea that God never stops. Creation doesn’t only bear his image, but every time Christian Aid speak up for the oppressed, every time the Child Contact Centre opens its doors so disadvantaged children can meet up with their non-resident parent, every time Radio Christmas is set up to raise funds for the work of Street Kids Direct – God is continuing to work making the creation better and fairer.

This morning we have dipped into a visionary psalm, surely one of the most inspirational to be found in the Psalter, the hymn book of The Temple. It has a vision for healing, restoration and wholeness.

It urges us on in our pilgrimage to be a people who have about us a song of praise and a life of principle.

May it be so, in the name of The Father, Son and Spirit. Amen.

 *Ian Green, Amersham, 7th September 2018*