

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

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PSALM 103

2nd July 2017

Psalm 103
Revelation 5:11-14

When you come to church, I wonder what you think you are coming to. Do you think just "Church, I come to church"? In which case I do so hope you mean the people gathered and not the building, coming to be together with God's people is a very valid reason for being here. Maybe you think that you are coming to the service – but have you ever considered what a peculiar expression that is? The service.

"The service in this restaurant is great, while in the one across the road it is terrible?" Is it that kind of service, in which case you could be thinking of the level of staff performance – and I do so hope not.

"My car is going in for its annual service?" Well, we would like to see you more than once a year, but we do all need our souls, and our walk with God tuned up regularly.

"I am at your service?" I am, but that's not really what we mean by it. When we say we are holding a service, what we are doing is shortening the phrase "a service of worship." The service given is by all of us, in worship of God who made and loves and saves us. The primary point of what we do here on a Sunday morning, and on Messy Church afternoons, and, indeed at funeral or wedding services, is to serve God in giving him worship. And in fact, one way we do it is simply by turning up. We take time out from everything else to give that time to God.

All of the Bible gives us reason to praise and worship God, but there are two parts which are best of all at it. The first is the book of Psalms, which are songs written for use in worship of God. The other is what you might call doxologies, exclamations of praise to God with we find studded through the letters of Paul and the other New Testament writers, and also periodically in the book of Revelation. In July we are going to take a trip through a sequence of praise-full Psalms beginning from Psalm 103, and not only learn what the ancient people of Israel who sang them praised God for, but allow them to inspire our own praises as well.

Read Psalm 103

"Bless the Lord, O my soul!" Begins this Psalm. The call to bless is a call to acknowledge all that God has done to enrich life. Enrich in the widest sense, as we see if we think about the beatitudes in Matthew's Gospel where Jesus claims that God enriches the very people who seem poorest – the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek and so on. "Bless the Lord, o my soul." And who is the soul? The next part of the verse tells us – it is "all that is within me". Our souls are our inner selves, the site of our deepest thoughts and feelings and the deepest truths about ourselves. Jesus, quoting scripture, said that we should love the Lord our God with all our hearts and souls and minds and strength, and it is that kind of wholehearted-

ness that is being called on here in acknowledgement of God's goodness. Bless the Lord and do not forget his benefits – and the Psalmist lists his personal benefits, which he knows are also personal benefits for every member of the congregation for whom he is writing – even as they still are for each of us here today.

God forgives and heals, and the two go together, not because wrongdoing causes our illness, but because doing wrong rends the fabric of our souls, our inner beings. When a human person does wrong he or she causes hurt, not only to others, though often, but also and primarily to themselves. You can do wrong that you think doesn't matter because no one knows and no one is hurt by it. You can tell the white lie. You can keep the wrong change you are given. You can decide to forget that someone you know could use some help – you never promised to help: they won't know that you had even considered it. And in all of these little things, as in the things which do affect and hurt others, your own inner self is distorted from the purity that God made in you. But God forgives and he heals. He forgives and he mends the tears with new weaving, he corrects the distortions as though they had never been. And he redeems our lives from the pit – which means from everything that is to do with death and darkness. Bless the Lord!

And having forgiven and straightened us out, he does more, he crowns us with his steadfast love and mercy. The idea of crowning is not so much that of a royal coronation as the crowning of a bridegroom in that far off culture. On a man's day of days he was crowned, garlanded with leaves or flowers. But day to day God garlands us with love that will always be there – that is what steadfast means – and with mercy, which withholds any punishment our lives might merit. And he satisfies us with good. It was James, Jesus' brother, who said that *“every good and perfect gift comes down from above, from the Father of lights.”* (James 1:17) All the good that comes to you in your life, from the day of your birth to the day that you die, all the good that is shown you by others, all the good gifts of life and beauty and love, all the good gifts of food and drink and shelter and work and leisure, all the good gifts that you can think of and those you forget are given you by God. All of them. God is behind every goodness in the world, and brings his good to his children, whether or not they know it comes from him. Bless the Lord!

It is the good which comes to us which renews our strength. The idea of the eagle is always a picture of strength in Scripture. You know yourself how you can be going along, finding your day or your days a little drab and same-y when suddenly someone does something which changes your whole outlook. Someone comes to visit, or sends a letter or a card or an email; someone asks for your help or gives you a compliment, or lets you know that you are needed, and suddenly you feel, not just brighter, but stronger, as though life is more worth the effort, as though you had more effort you could make. No matter what your chronological age, your youth is renewed – which means your strength and your hope – like the eagle. Bless the Lord!

Sing Hymn 719 The one who longs to make us whole

Having thought about the personal reasons we all have to praise, bless and worship God, the Psalm then turns to thinking about how God has revealed his nature in the story of his people. He is a God who puts right what is wrong. He saw what was wrong for his people, how they were oppressed and made his way of setting things right known to and through Moses so that all the people could see it. There is one point in the story of the exodus, just after the dreadful debacle of the golden calf, when Moses asks God *“Show me your ways, so that I may know you and find favour*

in your sight." (Exodus 33:13) And God does, proclaiming his own description as he does so: "*The Lord, The Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.*" (Exodus 34:6) These words, God's own self-portrait, are virtually repeated in verse 8 of our Psalm. Bless the Lord!

The Psalmist then moves into a meditation on this description of God. He will not always accuse, nor will he keep on and on about things – that is the Hebrew sense of verse 9 where there is no word for anger – something the translators thought they should put in. God may have to bring charges against his people at times – parental love does – but he won't nag, and go on and on about things. And though he knows our sin, he doesn't make that the basis of his dealing with us. He deals with us on the basis of his steadfast love. The love which is higher than anything on earth; the love which removes our wrong far, far from us. Are you feeling like praising him yet?

God loves and forgives, he doesn't go on and on at us, and why? Because he knows who we are and what we are like. He remembers that we are pretty frail creatures, all in all, especially when compared to himself. It is good for us to remember our own mortality, which keeps things in perspective for us, and when we do so it is good to remember the steadfast love of God which holds even we transient creatures. He keeps us in mind from everlasting to everlasting – in other words he has known and loved us from before the beginning of time and will never fail us. Never, giving that word its strict and literal meaning – not ever. From before all time and space God has known and loved and can trace our family connections from generation to generation. "Who do you think you are?" asks the TV series. God really knows!

Read Revelation 5:11-14

The Psalm ends with a hymn of praise to God, and no wonder, given what we have already thought about. And this hymn of praise brings our Psalm into the compass of the heavenly courts. His angels are enjoined to praise God, angels who are the mighty power which do God's bidding. And so we are caught up into the picture we find in Revelation, of the whole of heaven worshipping God and Christ, and even the prayers and praises of God's human children having their part, even yours and mine. The Psalmist ends by bringing us back to earth in our praises, and enjoining all of creation to praise God. Rocks, mountains, trees, flowers, vegetables, insects, pets, wild beasts, oceans rivers and tiny burns, all of God's works by being themselves show God's greatness and give him praise. May we also praise him, in word and deed, in allowing him to forgive and remake us, in remembering our frailty and his steadfast love. May we go forth from this time of worship into the world with praise at the core of our being. Bless the Lord, O my soul! Amen.