

“CREATION’S PRAISE”

Psalm 148

Can you remember back to those days when you used to do poetry at school? For some of us that might be further back than others. It might have been at O-level or A-level, or just in English classes when you looked at a poem, possibly learned it by heart – and then had to dissect it, line by line, word by word. What does this mean? Why did the author use that word? How does it all fit together? And after a lesson full of that kind of close scrutiny, you never wanted to see the poem ever again – even though when you first read it it sounded fun.

We run up against the same problems when we read the Psalms. They’re great poems, all of them. Depending on the translation, they sound great as well. The images are wonderful. The way the thoughts are put together is magnificent. The emotions expressed are powerful. And yet we want to take them apart, examine every word – and then put them back together again, by which time we’ve lost some of the force of the poetry. And I’m as much to blame as anyone else, because I stand here at the front and do it! That’s not to say that we shouldn’t try to learn some lessons from these Psalms – after all, they’re included in the Bible and that means, as Paul told his young friend Timothy, that it’s useful “*for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness*” (1 Timothy 3:16). Besides, if I just stood here this morning and read it to you a couple of times, there would be some who’d ask what on earth I was being paid for, I expect.

In his introduction to *Psalm 148* in *The Treasury of David*, Charles Spurgeon writes as follows:

“The song is one and indivisible. It seems almost impossible to expound it in detail, for a living poem is not to be dissected verse by verse. It is a song of nature and of grace. As a flash of lightning flames through space, and enwraps both heaven and earth in one vestment of glory, so doth the adoration of the Lord in this Psalm light up the universe and cause it to glow with the radiance of praise. The song begins in the heavens, sweeps downward to dragons and all deeps, and then ascends again, till the people near unto Jehovah take up the strain. For its exposition the chief requirement is a heart on fire with love to the Lord over all, who is to be blessed for ever.”

That’s pretty well poetry itself, isn’t it? And what Spurgeon says there is very true. We have here a wonderful picture of all creation from the most glorious heavenly beings to the humblest of worms bursting forth in praise to God, in a riot of colour, sound and diversity. The words on the page are just a doorway into a panorama of images which should inspire us in our own praise and worship. WE shouldn’t put all our energy into taking it apart word by word.

So, this morning, we’re not going to pull all this apart and consider the real meaning behind the Hebrew words translated for us on the page in front of us. I just want to make three general points about the Psalm, and then we’ll read it through once again. This Psalm provides a powerful counter to three different but wrong ways of looking at the world which were part of the worldview of many in the time when it was first written, and which continue to be espoused by many today.

Firstly, it is a way of responding to those who follow, for want of a better phrase, a New Age outlook on life. Now that’s being very vague in many ways, but what I mean is those who worship nature in and of itself; those who see everything as part of God, without there being any god separate from them. Included in that are those who believe that the stars and other created things have some kind of influence over their lives, and spend ages poring over charts and horoscopes, or go out armoured with crystals and tattooed pentagrams, and so on.

That view of the world is knocked firmly on the head by the Psalmist here as he says that these things are not to be worshipped in and of themselves – in fact, they should be worshipping God too. Why? “*Because he commanded and they were created. He set them in place for ever and ever; he gave a*

decree that will never pass away.” All these things exist only because God wills them to. He spoke them into existence. He is before them, over them and around them. Don’t worship creation. Join creation in worshipping the Creator. Enjoy it, by all means, but never forget where it all comes from.

Which brings us on to the second point. This Psalm is also a response to those who lean towards an ascetic view of life, those who withdraw into a kind of spirituality that actually seems to deny the worth of anything material. There are those who consider themselves so holy that they don’t have any fun. I’ve said many times that I have come across very, very few people whom I would describe as truly godly. But those few people have all had hearty laughs and been able to enjoy life to the full.

The ebullience of the language in this poem points us towards a God who has created a world to be enjoyed. A world of rich variety and colour, a world of joy and exuberance, a world that is worth living in and worth making the most of. Never forget that when God was calling into existence this amazing creation, he paused at the end of each day and pronounced what he saw as good. We live in a wonderful universe and God wants us to enjoy it, to make the most of it – without exploiting it or destroying it in our greed for profit. Some of the things the Psalmist describes we may consider a bit scary – lightning, hail, stormy winds, wild animals, great sea creatures – but they are still awesome and amazing. Don’t switch off from them and retreat into little world of your own making that you believe is somehow super-sanctified, cut off from the distractions of the world around. As this Psalm makes abundantly clear, the created world is not a distraction from God, but a pointer towards him.

And thirdly, this Psalm is a counter to any narrow, sectarian view of worship. We believe we have our own way of worship – and that says a lot about us. It’s very interesting that when people ‘phone me up to enquire about the church, one of the things they usually ask is what kind of worship we have. It’s almost as if there’s a right way of doing it and only the truly initiated can do it. But we’re all the same – usually dressing up personal preference in some kind of theological clothing. Only the chosen few can worship as God wants: anything else risks degenerating into something less than holy.

But just look who – what! – is praising God in these verses. OK, angels and heavenly armies: but also the sun and the moon, winds, trees and animals, birds and fish, and all kinds of people. Going back to *Spring Harvest* the year before last for the first time in fifteen years, there were all kinds of changes I noticed – some for the better, some for the worse. But one thing the leaders had recognised was that there is more than one way to worship God – and they’d provided different venues, different worship leaders, different styles of music to reflect that. But whether you wandered into the post-modern, youth oriented worship area, jiggled into the Celtic venue, or strode triumphantly into the Big Top, you’d come across hundreds of other people who were there to worship – using song, dance, mime, silence, reading, stories, prayer, signing, art, craft to offer praise and adoration to God the Creator and Redeemer and Sustainer of us all. All creation praises God.

But – and here’s the rub for us – as R E O White puts it in his closing comments on this Psalm, “*This is God’s world, all of it praising him; but they who know him best should praise him most.*” We know God as our Creator. We have acknowledged him as our Redeemer through the saving acts of his Son Jesus, which we are celebrating here in communion this morning. We experience him daily as our Sustainer and Energiser through the indwelling power of his Holy Spirit. As the redeemed of the Lord, we have that extra dimension to our relationship with him that the rest of creation – and many other human beings – do not have. We know him best, so we should be praising him the most.

And we praise God not just by singing and praying and coming along to church. We praise him by enjoying his world, by making the most of his gifts, by involving ourselves in the life of his creation, by living our lives day by day to his glory. Hold those thoughts in mind as we once again read this Psalm.