

PRAYER – THANKSGIVING AND PRAISE

(Psalm 100.1-5 and Luke 1.46-55)

Thanks and praise in prayer is the theme of our service this morning.

I was said of Rudyard Kipling that every word he wrote was worth 25 shillings so a group of students sent him a letter which said, *We understand that every word you wrote is worth 25 shillings. Enclosed is 25 shillings: please send us your best word.* A couple of days later (the post was fast and reliable in those days) they got a telegram from the great man. It consisted of just one word; *Thanks!*

Kipling thought that saying *thank you* was the best thing to do. It is certainly one of the best things we can say to God.

Well, I have bad news and I have good news. We had hoped to get John Pritchard to give these talks about prayer. He is the former Bishop of Jarrow and of Oxford and led a day's course on Prayer here a few years ago. He is a brilliant speaker. Alas, he is already tied up with lots of invitations and we were too late with ours so you will have to put up with me on this particular topic. That's the bad news.

Now for the good news! Our God is a great God who loves us to bits.

I wonder what was in the mind of the guy (I assume it was a guy because that's how things were then) – the guy who wrote Psalm 100 - to make him say *Shout to the Lord, all the earth?* Not whisper, not speak, not announce; SHOUT. Not the people nearby, not the local village, not the nearest town, not even the country; THE EARTH!

Was that guy remembering God's promise to Abraham about his descendants inheriting the earth? Was he recalling the exodus when God led his people out of slavery in Egypt and through the desert into the Promised Land? Was it God's promise of a messiah foretold by the prophets?

Whatever it was, our psalmist just could not hold it in. Remember those words? – gladness; joyful songs; thanksgiving; praise. And why? Because (what is it he says?) *The Lord is good and his love endures for ever; his faithfulness continues through all generations.*

Our God is a great God who loves us to bits.

Now I want to give you a secret preview of something a bit special coming up in Advent this year. Instead of sermons we will be showing, by weekly instalments, the BBC film called *The Nativity*.

We all know the story of how Mary was visited by the angel Gabriel and told she would bear God's Son. In the film we will see how Joseph, her finance, takes her obvious pregnancy very badly, bitterly accusing her of betraying him with another man. For her part, she can't find the words to explain to him and convince him about what had happened to her. Indeed she is not sure about this herself. This particular episode in their relationship is one of the most moving parts of the film and will bring you close to tears.

Mary has a cousin called Elizabeth who is knocking on in years, has no children and is regarded as barren. But Mary remembers that Gabriel has told her that Elizabeth is pregnant. Utterly miserable, Mary decides to go and visit Elizabeth to see if this is true. When she arrives, it is very clear that it is indeed true and Luke tells us that Elizabeth's baby *leaped in her womb*. Mary is then convinced, for the

first time, that she **is** to be the mother of God's Son and, like the psalmist of old, she cannot contain her joy and gratitude: *My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour.*

It's worth looking at what she says about God that makes her so joyful and grateful. There are at least 6 characteristics of God that she lists:

1. He has honoured and blest her – just an ordinary girl
2. He is utterly holy
3. He is full of mercy and grace for those who turn to him
4. He does great things
5. He treats everyone the same - whether they be rich or poor, living in big houses or living in the gutter
6. He never, ever changes

The unknown psalmist and Mary – just two examples of prayers of praise and gratitude from the Bible.

We have noticed how each of them, the psalmist and Mary, lists the things they want to thank and praise God for. Aren't kids wonderful and simple in their approach to things? As there is at each Godzone, there was a *THANK YOU* area at the harvest Godzone a couple of weeks ago. Here are some of the things they wrote:

Thank you for the food for us

Thank you that I go to football and that I get sweets and Pepsi and getting food for us.

Thank you for everything on the earth and for all the fruit and veg.

Thank you for giving us all of the gifts

Thank you for Jesus saving us

So what might be our approach?

I don't know about you, but I am so keen to ask God to help me and other people or situations that I have to remind myself to do two things before I get to the asking bit (intercessions in posh language). One is to say sorry and the other is to say thank you. Maybe you find that either in your personal prayers or in a group situation. How can we avoid that?

One way is to jot down 'thank you' and 'praisey' things as they occur to you or as they actually happen. Then you have your list (just like Mary) when you get to your special prayer time.

Or, in a quiet time, after saying sorry, think back over the last day or so. What has happened that fills your heart with praise and gratitude?

- ✓ Someone you know who has recovered from illness or had a successful operation
- ✓ The beauties of God's provision in nature as you walked through the woods or just looked out at the garden
- ✓ A special friendship
- ✓ A bit of the Bible that suddenly struck you
- ✓ The person you invited to church who accepted that invitation
- ✓ Your family

There are so many things just in our ordinary lives.

Sometimes it's an 'arrow prayer' – you know, something good happens and you simply say, there and then, *Thank you, God*. After I had prepared this sermon and written those words I was cutting the lawn in the front garden. When a fairly close neighbour, I'll call her Rachel, walked past. Rachel's husband had died very suddenly and dramatically at home not long ago and I had been wanting to call to see her but whenever I went past her house there were cars in the drive and obviously lots of people there; so it was not the right moment. So I just prayed each time for God to comfort

and sustain her. Then, there she was as I looked up for the mowing machine and we had a good talk. As I went back to my lawn cutting I found myself looking up and saying *Thank you, God* – my arrow prayer.

Don't let's be afraid to sing our prayers of praise – out loud or under our breath. Timothy Dudley-Smith turned Mary's words from our New Testament reading into the song we will sing at the end of the service *Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord*. I suspect some of us might be singing that as we go home.

Another way of using songs or hymns as prayers is simply to read them either silently or out loud and soak ourselves in the meaningful poetry.

The psalmist had a list: Mary had a list - of things about God which inspired their thanks and praise. I came across one the other day which I found helpful. Perhaps you will too:

God's goal is a relationship with ME
God will never leave me
God will never forsake me
God will never mislead me
God will never forget me
God will never overlook me
God will never cancel my appointment in his diary

When I fall, He lifts me up
When I fail, He forgives
When I am weak, He is strong
When I am lost, He is the way
When I am afraid, He is my courage
When I stumble, He steadies me

When I am hurt, He heals me
When I am broken, He mends me
When I am blind, He leads me
When I face trials He is with me
When I face trials He comforts me
When I face death He carries me home

We've talked a lot about lists and looked at some, but there is one overwhelming reason for praying our thanks and our praise. St. Peter, the one who denied Jesus, had this to say in his first letter – this is the version from the Message Bible. You might like it to have it to hand at your prayer time so I'm going to leave a few copies at the back for you to pick up if you wish before you go home. This is what Peter says:

What a God we have! And how fortunate we are to have him, this Father of our Master Jesus! Because Jesus was raised from the dead, we've been given a brand-new life and have everything to live for, including a future in heaven – and the future starts now! God is keeping careful watch over us and the future. The day is coming when you'll have it all – life healed and whole.

Remember: our God is a great God who loves us to bits!