

Praise in All Circumstances

Sermon preached in St Stephen's Uniting Church, Macquarie Street, Sydney 12th July 2015.

Lectionary Readings: 2 Samuel 6:1-5, 12b-19; Psalm 24, Ephesians 1: 3-14; Mark 6:14-29

I heard a commentator on ABC talk-back radio this week saying that despite appearances to the contrary Australian are not as self-confident as they like to portray themselves. As evidence for that, he pointed to the large number of books and manuals in bookshops devoted to self-help and spirituality. We want to improve ourselves.

In writing to the Ephesians, however, the Pauline author points to a whole range of things that we have not done or been able to do for ourselves. The author also speaks of our salvation – our relationship to God, which is not something we can do for ourselves.

“Praise the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,” are the opening words of the *Contemporary English Version (CEV)* for the beginning of what is an extremely long, breathless sentence in the original Greek, going from verse 3 through to 14.

How are we blessed? God-in-Christ chose us “before the world was created ...to be God's own adopted children..Christ sacrificed his life's blood to set us free which means that our sins are now forgiven...by what Christ has done, God has shown us (God's) own mysterious ways.”

The focus is on what God has done, not what we have done. That's what we Christians gather for on Sunday, to praise God.

Then we live out that praise by the way we engage in our lives from Monday through Saturday. We do that, not in order to get somewhere with God, but in thankfulness for the fact that in Christ we have already arrived.

That's why we sing praise songs with joy, and enthusiastically sing songs that reflect our journey of the spirit. We are glad to be chosen, redeemed and forgiven and set free to become the adopted sons and daughters of God.

One of our hymns (134) celebrates this mood with the words “Ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven, who like me his praise should sing.”

When someone gives me a gift, I say “Thanks!” Our lives are our way of expressing thanks to God. Sometimes the only song to God that some people hear is our song, so we make it a song worth singing, with such a catchy melody that others may pick up the beat and start singing themselves.

How do we begin this journey of thankfulness? Bonhoeffer said “He who is thankful for the little things can be thankful for the big things.”

We might say that “self-improvement” begins with saying thanks for the smallest things, until we can give thanks for **all that is**. Our arena of challenge, opportunity and life is there for us.

A feeling of thankfulness may have inspired Dag Hammarskjöld to write: “I don't know who – or what – put the question. I don't know when it was put. I don't even remember answering. But at some moment I did answer Yes to Someone – or Something – and from that hour I was certain that existence is meaningful and that, therefore my life in self-surrender, had a goal. From that moment I have known what it means “not to look back” and “to take no thought for the morrow. ”

St. Augustine wrote In *“Confessions”*: “Still he desires to praise you, this man who is a small part of your creation. You have prompted him, that he should delight to praise you, for you have made us for yourself and restless is our heart until it comes to rest in you.”

Commenting on Augustine Robert C Roberts writes in *“Taking the Word to Heart”* “Praise here, means honouring God with one's attitudes and actions, serving God in word and deed, showing by all that one is and does that one regards God as wonderful, beautiful, great and glorious.”

“To be a self is to be more than just an object of God's admiration; it is to be at the same time a subject who actively admires God – or as we might say, an agent driven by God's ideals.”

We love because God first loved us. We sing praise because we have been blessed. Everything flows from that. Any good thing we do or say is our human way of saying to God, “Thanks.”

The wonderful, exuberant shout of praise that opens this letter to the people at Ephesus reminds us that not only in church worship but also in daily life we are living in a place of praise. Our lives are a sign, a signal a witness to the advent of a kingdom where the prisoners, the poor, and the wretched of the earth are the royalty and all things are made new.

This is counter-cultural in our world. We are heralding the advent of a kingdom where love rules rather than hate or discrimination or prejudice. We are in our lives making plain the presence of that kingdom. It's tangible, visible and it's alive!

We break free from the status quo when we venture out beyond the boundaries and restrictions of the common world-view. Our eyes are opened to all of our world and we invited to launch into the unknown. We acknowledge with keen anticipation the gifts of others.

Our communities can learn again how to be thankful for neighbours, our small groups and congregations. Rather than being over-laden with “busyness” we can have a party, a celebration.

We can express appreciation, say “thanks” more often. In our prayers and in the midst of a sermon or an exchange we may shout an “Amen” or startle our neighbour by bursting into song.

We may recall the words of Nietzsche “You must look more redeemed if I am to believe in your redeemer.”

One of my favourite hymns (141) sings “Praise to the Holiest in the height, and in the depth be praise.”

This is a way of saying that we give thanks in all circumstances of life. We praise God when we're high and when we are low. Our moods are significant and can be embraced. Once moods are embraced we can move on.

In our Gospel reading for today the disciples heard the dreadful news of the murder of John the Baptist. This is not something that would immediately inspire feelings of gratitude or thanks.

But it did lead the disciples to know that the coming of the kingdom was becoming patent to the powers that be. These leaders were not happy, preferring their ways of violence and subjugation. They tried to stop that new way of life, and the disciples realised what they were up-against.

The disciples saw that Jesus was also going to be up-against the powers that be, and that challenge was embraced by Jesus. God chose the disciples and God chose us to face the powers that be and continue to be, nevertheless, as Ephesians puts it “his holy and innocent and loving people.”

Ephesians goes on to celebrate “God was very kind to us because of the Son (God) dearly loves, and so we should praise God.”

We are a sign, signal and witness to the advent of a new heaven and a new earth. But this is not our doing but the gift of God to us, as Ephesians would put it, from being chosen “Before the world was created...to live with God and to be God's holy and innocent and loving people.”

Kazantzakis wrote in *“The Saviors of God”*: “We have seen the highest circle of spiralling powers. We have named this circle God...But we have named it God because only this name, for primordial reasons, can stir our heart profoundly. And this deeply felt emotion is indispensable if we are to touch, body with body, the dread essence beyond logic.”

This is why we rejoice and this why we are here and why we sing and why we dance! We join the Lord of the dance!