

Psalm 96

It's the moment we stand on the side of the road waving our flags, holding our breath, bouquet in the hand ready to throw, pushing to get to the front of the crowd as it presses against the barricades waiting for the fancy car to come down the street.

The day of the royal parade. The coming of the King. That's the atmosphere of Christmas Eve...Yesterday we listened to Mary's song, composed for the occasion...and today we have the Psalmist. A song written for the day the Ark of God was returned from enemy lands to the Temple in Jerusalem but turned to a fresh use by our lectionary. Today it is a hymn announcing God's coming to dwell with his people.

It is a hymn of delight and excitement, it is sung with full lungs and full voice, it cannot be whispered in the darkness, it must be sung by his people from the mountaintops with flags waving.

The Kings Glory - vv1-6

This Psalm-song is naturally sung by those who belong to the Lord, who know his faithfulness and are waiting for his promises to be revealed, who sense they are about to become reality in front of their eyes.

A new song, it must be a new song and a song of what he has done! God's people call the rest of creation to join them, it must be shared with others, the nations of the earth, all the earth, sing the praise of the Lord!

This is no ceremonial 'all stand' as the Judge enters the room. There's no hint of soberness as formalities are read word for word by an MC. This is not a cold declaration of dutiful doctrine by the faithful. This is exuberance barely contained.

This is a trumpet blast, cymbal clash, sound and light show as the main act comes on stage to the adoring, screaming crowd. Put your hands together...

Sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord, all the earth.

Sing to the Lord, praise his name!

What reason is there to join the chorus ? The first 6 verses centre our attention on the glory of the Lord himself. He is worthy of praise; he is creator of all, he is mighty and dwells in splendour and majesty. The universal ruler who judges all the people of the earth with equity.

Revere him. Be impressed. He is no symbolic monarch, no carved idol on a mantelpiece. At his presence your knees go weak, his presence is overwhelming, he has no equals, and his reign is without limit. He is the real deal.

The Kings Due - vv7-9

The next verses suggest a fitting response to this King is to give him his due.

Firstly this involves recognising God is actually strong and magnificent, he is mighty and worthy of honour. The nations of the earth are called to bring homage to the Lord of creation. This is what happens when dignitaries visit a foreign country, even now.

So this helps us to understand that being 'feared above all gods' does not describe a grovelling fear, or a cowering fear, it is healthy awe - a correct perspective about the humility of humanity in comparison to the Almighty, an acknowledgement of God's authority and sovereignty. The Lord is to be approached with wonder and humility because of who he is.

Secondly the Lord should be approached with respect and worship. In human spheres a rightly humble subject seeks harmonious relationship with their King, brings the expected offerings as part of their dutiful service, or the sort of offering that gains one entry to court and demonstrates an understanding of one's place in the scheme of things.

God's status, though, is so far above humanity, there is nothing we can bring that he needs; nothing that can gain our access to his presence - there is too much that separates us; there is no sacrifice that smooths over our inadequacies or ineptitudes; no offering that comes close to representing what we owe to him; and there is nothing that he does not already own. Every animal of the forest is his and the cattle on a thousand hills are his as well (Psalm 50:10).

This king is due every duty and has the right to demand it, yet he invites relationship, he welcomes interaction, and so we do well to worship him not simply for what is due, but out of gratitude for his abundant and underserved blessing and generous kindness toward us.

The Kings Coming - vv10-13

As the Psalm concludes, another declaration is made. 'The Lord reigns!'

The sober message of the previous verses that insisted on appropriate awe and honour toward God have receded. The celebration from the opening of the psalm returns as the anticipation of his arrival rises.

Let the heavens rejoice, let the earth be glad!

Nations rise and fall, but the kingdom of the Lord is everlasting and unshakeable.

This is a comfort to us. When this God rules, his subjects are safe, for righteousness and truth are established.

No wonder the heavens, the earth, the sea, the fields and forest shout in delight and sing for joy. The psalm points forward to the fulfilment of God's intentions for creation.

While there are no direct connections to Jesus here, the NT resounds with the same song. This is the psalm the angels sang over the shepherds, the melody the stars shone down on the earth at the birth of the Christ child.

And the only fitting response to Jesus is this psalm, we witness it in the actions of the shepherds and the wise men who bring their gifts, and give their homage, who bow down and worship the King.

Christmas Eve

Christmas Eve is one of those moments when we gather like children for a glimpse of the sacred child in the manger, for something within us wants us to believe the message of Advent is true.

And the good news is it is true. God came to be with us. God is with us in the humility of the manger, God is with us in the glorious carols sung by the angel choir, God is with us as the daggy shepherds arrive with their sheep and the regal wise ones ride in on their camels. And God is with us still. It is the song of Jesus name - Immanuel - God is with us.

Some of us have experienced his presence in our lives and can sing our carol praises with exuberance. Some of us have experienced the whispers of his Spirit around us and tentatively join in the chorus.

If you have not sensed God's love in your lives, or your fellowship has grown cold, perhaps this is the night, in the beauty of God's sanctuary at Christmas or as you walk out under his stars, that you may meet him the first time or meet with him again.

The wonder and promise of this night is contagious. As the Spirit moves through God's people, the Lord invites you to sit with him, to hear his voice, to receive his love and sing a new song in your life.

The song he gives can touch all those broken places where healing is needed, his words of peace can calm the storm. Not just the storms of our personal lives but those of our world. This Psalm sings the heart of God for the healing of creation which sings his praise in expectation.

As we look at the child, we remember the music is already playing for his new song, and we are learning the tune. This is why we are gathered at the barricades, peering through the crowd, with the fire of hope lit in our hearts. We know everything has changed, a new day has dawned.

'O holy night, the stars are brightly shining. This is the night of our dear Saviour's birth,'

O sing a new song to the Lord!

Resources: Feasting on the Word Year B; Tyndale Commentaries