

Sunday 31st December 2023 – Rev Alison Bruton

Readings: Psalm 148; Galatians 4: 4-7; Luke 2: 15-21

I'll start with some explanation this morning as to why we have had an extra first reading. As you might already know the lectionary provides us with four readings for the main service each Sunday and on this occasion, I've taken a bit of a liberty and included the Psalm as well as our two other readings, not our usual practice I know.

When I was studying last year, we had a whole residential course at Easter on the Psalms, and I must admit to really having fallen in love with them. They seem to cover most every eventuality of life from individual and communal thanksgiving, to hymns used in festivals and processions, to those which celebrate the greatness of God as well as ones which are laments which complain to God and appeal for his help and intervention. This list doesn't cover all the variety of types of Psalm but as you can see the Book of Psalms covers a lot of ground in terms of our human experience and our relationship with God.

In my own daily devotions, it has often been the case that the Psalm that happens to be set for the day speaks right into my own situation or about something or someone I have been praying for. So, I wonder what we can make of Psalm 148 that was read for us this morning, how does it speak to us individually or as a church? It is clearly a Psalm of praise given the number of times that word is used; in fact it starts and ends with 'Praise the Lord!' The first part [SLIDE 1] commands a list of heavenly beings to praise God and even adds that heaven itself should join in the chorus. But why should they do this? Perhaps it is because they owe their very existence to God and that he has established the ways in which the laws of nature and the physical world work in harmony in order to give praise God through being what they are. The Psalm then goes on to look at the earthly part of creation [SLIDE 2] calling upon every element to join in the chorus of praise. But how does the created world around us obey this command? It does not need to do anything to praise God, it just is and that in itself is an act of praise to the creator. But what role can we play in this act of praise by the created world?

In our Advent reflection series, we have been looking at sections of the book 'Sleepers Wake' by Nicholas Holtam which has the theme of how we care for our environment running through it. It seems to me that there is a clear link between the Advent series and Psalm 148 and that is our part in helping or, more significantly, hindering the created world from doing as it is commanded to do and that is to praise God just by existing. How often do our actions hinder the created world from just being and functioning as it should naturally do? As we move into 2024 it is perhaps worth reflecting on how our actions both as individuals and as a society impinge negatively on God's creation and in doing so hinder it from obeying God's command to praise.

The added dimension to our role in this chorus of praise comes towards the end of the Psalm. In verses 11-12 we see various groups of people being called upon to praise God but then we see the reason for doing so [SLIDE 3]. The reference to raising up a 'horn for his people' in v14 refers to the strength that comes from God to his people through the covenant relationship that he had established with them. So how might this apply to us? Unlike creation, we have the ability to praise God by what we do and not just by being what we are. We too are in a covenant relationship with God which is a two-way relationship; we each have our part to play.

Looking at the reading from Galatians we see God's side of the covenant relationship clearly stated which links right back to the events of Christmas. God chooses the right moment and takes the decisive action of sending his Son, confirming this action by sending his Spirit. God acts totally independently in his power in order to enfold us in his loving arms; the Christmas story is about God's actions in our covenant relationship.

So, what is the outcome of God's actions and his keeping of his side of the covenant? In v5-7 [SLIDE 4] we read that we are to be freed from what might be rightly allocated to us under the law and we are to be adopted as children of God. Not only that, but the relationship we have with God is one of love and parenthood, so much so that we are given the privilege of addressing him as our Father. It is interesting that the pronoun used shifts from 'we' in verse 5 to 'you' in verses 6-7, it is almost as though, in his Epistle, Paul is turning his attention to his readers and calling on them to respond. We do not have the luxury of sitting on the sidelines and watching what God is doing in fulfilling his side of the covenant, but rather we are called individually to make a personal response and to commit to fulfilling our side of the covenant relationship as adopted children of our loving father.

What does this mean for us as we look ahead to the year ahead? In many churches there is a tradition of restating a version of the covenant we have with our God, our promise as to how, as his children, we will honour him as our Father in the coming year. Perhaps in doing this we will also play our part in enabling all creation to join in the chorus of praise to its creator.

As I close, I wanted to share with you a covenant originally written by John Wesley. This can be used to state both personal and corporate commitment to maintaining our covenant relationship with our loving Father during the days and months ahead. It might be a prayer you want to make your own. [SLIDES 5/6]

I am no longer my own, but yours.
Put me to what you will, rank me with whom you will.
Put me to doing, put me to suffering.
Let me be employed by you or laid aside for you,
exalted for you or brought low for you.
Let me be full, let me be empty.
Let me have all things, let me have nothing.
I freely and heartily yield all things
to your pleasure and disposal.
And now, O glorious and blessed God,
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
you are mine, and I am yours. So be it.
And the covenant which I have made on earth,
Let it be ratified in heaven.

Amen.

Praise the LORD!
Praise the LORD from the heavens;
praise him in the heights!
Praise him, all his angels;
praise him, all his host!
Praise him, sun and moon;
praise him, all you shining stars!
Praise him, you highest heavens,
and you waters above the heavens!
Let them praise the name of the LORD,
for he commanded and they were created.
He established them for ever and ever;
he fixed their bounds, which cannot be passed. [Ps 148 v 1-6]

1

Praise the LORD from the earth,
you sea monsters and all deeps,
fire and hail, snow and frost,
stormy wind fulfilling his command!
Mountains and all hills,
fruit trees and all cedars!
Wild animals and all cattle,
creeping things and flying birds!
[Ps 148 v 7-10]

2

Kings of the earth and all peoples,
princes and all rulers of the earth!
Young men and women alike,
old and young together!
Let them praise the name of the Lord,
for his name alone is exalted;
his glory is above earth and heaven.
He has raised up a horn for his people,
praise for all his faithful,
for the people of Israel who are close to him.
Praise the Lord!
[Ps 148 v 11-14]

3

...in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying 'Abba! Father!' So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.

[Galatians 4 v 5-7]

4

I am no longer my own, but yours.
Put me to what you will, rank me with whom you will.
Put me to doing, put me to suffering.
Let me be employed by you or laid aside for you,
exalted for you or brought low for you.
Let me be full, let me be empty.
Let me have all things, let me have nothing.

5

I freely and heartily yield all things
to your pleasure and disposal.
And now, O glorious and blessed God,
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
you are mine, and I am yours. So be it.
And the covenant which I have made on earth,
Let it be ratified in heaven.

Amen.

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