

Psalm 66 – Abundant praise (25th May 2014)

What is church best known for? Maybe... presence in community. Commitment to social justice and working with disadvantaged (before state, mostly church). Less flattering media stereotypes. Maybe events like baptisms, wedding, funerals. One thing that has always characterised the church: they SING. Christians have always been known for singing. Recorded in NT, Gregorian chant, choral music, spirituals (blues/rock), or gospel music (R&B). Choirs key part, whether elite choristers in ruffs or male voice choirs in mining communities: Blackadder, 'bands of tough sinewy men roaming the countryside terrorising neighbourhoods with their close-harmony singing'. Christians SING.

Lots of secular choirs, but interesting how nation as a whole has lost art of corporate singing. E.g. of Olympic Stadium in 2012. Popularity of shows like 'The Choir' reflect resurgence of interest in a lost art. We watch it on TV because most of us don't do it anymore. Apart from football grounds, church is one of few places where still gather every week to sing.

Continuing series in Psalms: honest prayers and songs to God. (Intro for visitors: middle of bible, written over hundreds of years roughly 3,000 and 2,500. Heart of the Jews' worshipping life, sung in the temple every day, and still used e.g. at Sabbath, Passover etc.)

Looked at Psalms written in difficult circumstances, and how Psalmist can be honest before God. Today, different: one of psalms of praise. Takes us to heart of this question: why do the people of God sing? Why have they always sung? One fundamental reason: they want to praise God. Christians sing primarily not to develop their voice, or as an enjoyable pastime with a group of like-minded people, though music does lift the soul: they sing because they believe they have something to sing about. They are worshipping, they are praising God. And that makes them sing. Hence my working title for today: Abundant praise.

Why to praise, when to praise and value/importance of praise.

Why?

Start by saying it's something natural in all of us. Made to worship (God-shaped hole) – if not God, it'll be something else. Made to sing (releases endorphins).

In Christian life, it's a God-thing. Notice in psalm the order of priority: READ v1-3

Worship WHO GOD IS first before what he does. 'The glory of his name' (v2). We praise God just because he's God. His name is glorious, who he is is worth praising.

Dons v Os game – away fans (sing more) – most popular songs were names of players: Super Kevin Lisbie, There's only one David Mooney, Dean Cox (lyric not repeatable!) – so we do it here with people too. Not just Christians.

But how much more should Christians want to sing about God, and to worship his name. No problem with modern songs which use say name of Jesus a lot – his name matters. Psalmists were praising God's name 3,000 years ago.

Also what God does: 'great is your power' (v3) – example v6 – crossing Red Sea. Defining moment for Israelites – he was God, and he was THEIR God. Lots of refs in Psalms. But it's evidence isn't it? People want to praise because of what he's done. As Christians we want to praise Jesus because he came to this earth, died on a cross for us, and rose again. He's done stuff. He healed the sick, raised the dead, walked on water. And we praise him for it.

Two sporting legends retired on Monday: Jonny Wilkinson and Ryan Giggs. What makes them legends? Primarily what they've *done*: won World Cup, most decorated player in club history. But actually tributes more heartfelt for Jonny: who he *is*. Humility, work ethic. Changed the way rugby was played (preparation, hard-tackling backs – role model).

So we praise God firstly because of who he is, and next because of what he's done. Character doesn't change, and presence in history doesn't change: cross and resurrection there for all time (come back to that)

When to praise

Simple answer: in every situation. Not just happy times. One of great things about psalms – their realism. Acknowledges that life has tough times: READ v10-12. Also that cry out to God in those times: READ v13-14. All do it, don't we? Turn to God in trouble. But then when trouble passes...

Consistency about psalmist's behaviour – will fulfil his vows even now going is good. Not just a crisis Christian. Praises God in good times and bad.

Easy to say, hard to do! Natural to question God when things tough – lots of psalms about that too. How can we develop the capacity to praise God in all times, to say like Job: the Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away, may the Lord's name be praised'?

Back to reasons for praise: *who God is doesn't change. What he has done in history doesn't*. Our circumstances change, life gets hard: but God's character is the same. He still loves us, He still has power, He is good. What kills our capacity to praise is not tough times but doubting his character. Like Sam Harris book 'God is not great'. If believe that, then how can we praise him?

Tough times do test that belief: but psalmist can both acknowledge the reality that things can be tough and yet still say: God is good, your name is glorious and so are your deeds.

So praise is a natural thing to do, it rests on God's character and his works, and it's something we can do in every situation, good and bad.

Final point: importance of praise

Fact is that it IS important. It's what we were made to do. Westminster Catechism: chief purpose of human beings: 'To glorify God and enjoy him forever.' Do that with our lives, but also our lips. Praise goes to the heart of what it means to be a Christian. We want to worship, we want to praise. In fact we need to. It fires our faith, ignites our enthusiasm. Want our churches to be known as places of abundant praise.

If study role of worship in bible – threshold activity. Leads us into God’s presence, or leads us out into world. Praise is way and way out. Why central to our services. Church in London – always start with 20 mins of praise. Prepares us to meet with God, to get his perspective, to lay down our weeks. We need to praise. Should be an exuberance about it. Something stirs in our hearts.

Not all of us can sing, but God loves to hear us speaking out his praise. To tell him how great he is, what he’s done, how much he loves us. He’s God, after all. Only God can receive that and not be arrogant. He knows it’s good for us, it helps us see life through the right perspective, as his gift.

For 300 years Western society has operated with this fundamental myth: our lives are ours and ours alone. Most societies didn’t live like that before and don’t live like that now: belong to God, or family or society. Praise awakens in us deeper truth that our lives are not ours, not really. They’re God’s. (At baptism we have just committed Hector to God. To say I turn to Christ, you are declaring that your life is God’s not yours anymore.) Sounds scary, but only way to be. Only way to true life.

Praise lies at the heart of what it means to be human. The psalmists knew that 3,000 years ago. My prayer is that you will know that today. And that we as a church will commit ourselves to extravagant, abundant praise. Amen.