

Psalm 96:2: “Sing to the Lord, praise his name, proclaim his salvation day after day.”

Now, some wit wrote, “The trouble with a lot of songs that you hear nowadays is that somebody forgot to set them to music”, But, unfortunately it’s not a new problem, there are some old songs which have had their tunes lost and that is exactly what we have with the book of Psalms in the Bible. Nevertheless they, keep quite rightly, drawing us back to their purpose – singing to the Lord.

And today we are looking at our verse for this year; Psalm 96:2 “Sing to the LORD, praise his name; proclaim his salvation day after day.” And here I just want us to focus in on the first four words, “Sing to the Lord”.

Today it’s wonderful to have the Salvation Army band with us as we sing. It is great to have so many people here who have picked hymns which are special to them and a church full of people who want to sing. But why?

Well, there is something about music which connects with us at a very deep level; I recently heard a report that people suffering from acute Alzheimer’s, can often suddenly remember and sing every word from old songs they knew once the music begins.

And when we want to praise someone or something then a song just seems right; from a birthday party, or the football stadium, to the most beautiful love song played for the love of our life. And so it is an appropriate medium for us to use in order to praise God. In fact the story is told of a church where the choir had gone on strike, so the vicar decided to introduce the following Sunday’s service by announcing the first hymn; Isaac Watts’ composition “Come we that love the lord” - beginning with the second verse, “Let those refuse to sing, who never knew our God.” Suddenly all voices were raised in praise!

And this Psalm, psalm 96 is a great song of praise from those who knew and loved God, we know that because 1 Chronicles 16 tells us that David sang this Psalm when the ark containing the 10 Commandments was restored to the Tabernacle after it had been in the possession of the Philistines for some time. Here is a song of joy, of praise, of the commitment of God and commitment to God. It is an Old Testament example of what in more recent times Charles Spurgeon announced when he said; “When your heart is full of Christ, you want to sing.”

But is that our experience? Many of us will have attended weddings or funerals where the vicar was the only one singing and I can tell you that on at least one occasion I have got to the end of the hymn “lead us heavenly Father, lead us” and thought, “Well, ‘Lone and dreary, faint and weary’ pretty much sums up the singing if nothing else!”

But look at the singing the psalmist encourages, in verses 11-13; “Let the heavens rejoice, let the earth be glad; let the sea resound, and all that is in it; let the fields be jubilant, and everything in them. Then all the trees of the forest will sing for joy; they will sing before the LORD, for he comes, he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness and the peoples in his truth.”

Isn't it wonderful to know that God cares? God is coming to judge the world in righteousness and the peoples in truth? Now only a holy and righteous God can do that and we will explore that in the second talk in this mini-series. And surely we want everyone to be acquitted, to be found guiltless of sin when God comes as judge - and we will deal with that imperative in the third and final talk.

But for all of us who look at the world and go, “Well, that’s not right, someone should do something about that!” the truth that God can and God will should be a cause of celebration.

Paul tells us in his letter to the Romans that the whole of creation is groaning under the bondage of sin, longing to be the creation God always intended it to be, and here it is pictured by the psalmist as bursting into song in that anticipation, at the thought that God will return to judge the earth (as we heard last week) in order to usher in his new and perfect creation.

The point is this, singing is an intrinsic part of created life, some of us are better at it than others, some of us are worse! But the Psalms don’t begin by calling the professionals or the confident or the pitch-perfect to sing God’s praises – they call everyone, because God loves us all to love him and when we express our love through song it drives the reality of that love deeper into our hearts too, it connects with our emotions.

God is the great and glorious God who will judge the world in holiness and righteousness, but who has come to save us from condemnation in Jesus and to lead us to his new creation if we will place our faith in the death and resurrection of Christ – what more motivation to sing praise could we want? As the psalmist puts it in Psalm 81:9 “I will sing of the LORD's great love for ever; with my mouth I will make your faithfulness known through all generations.”

So, it is right and good and God honouring to sing songs of praise, Isaac Watts was right; “Let those refuse to sing, who never knew our God.”

“praise his name”

Someone once said that “the trouble with most of us is that we would rather be ruined by praise than saved by criticism”, but

when it comes to God, I suspect that it is all too easy for us to ruin our relationship with him through criticism rather than praise him for saving us in Christ. So when we come to this little phrase in Psalm 96 verse 2 we would do well not to skip over it - “praise his name”.

You see, I wonder if perhaps, too often, we lay the blame for all that goes wrong in this world at God’s door; when something goes wrong and we exclaim, “O my God!” Or if a disaster befalls us and we discover that the insurance company won’t pay out because they have designated it “an act of God”, or when we see some appalling situation on the world news or a tragedy strikes us personally and we ask that question, “God how could you do this?”

But have you ever noticed how if you constantly criticise someone it hardens your heart towards them even further? And if we constantly blame God for all the ills in the world then subconsciously we will start to believe that he actually is responsible for them – I have certainly met people like that!

So these three short words of the psalmist pull us back to the heart of our relationship with the LORD; the praise of God of which he is worthy. In fact the early church father Augustine of Hippo declared that “Man’s chief work was the praise of God” – it should come above and over everything else that we do.

Well, that sounds admirable, but is God really worthy of such devotion? Why does the psalmist say that our lives should be focused on praising God? Well, fortunately, this is not a glib one-liner, David tells us in the rest of this psalm.

First of all God is “worthy” because he is great. We give our praise to individuals who are worthy of it, to paintings which are worthy of it, to pieces of music, dance, medical science or whatever, which is worthy of it and the psalmist says, “For great

is the LORD and most worthy of praise; he is to be feared above all gods.” – God is great and God is worthy our respect - but why?

Well, the psalmist continues, “For all the gods of the nations are idols, but the LORD made the heavens. Splendour and majesty are before him; strength and glory are in his sanctuary.” So do you see the difference? God is not just a god, he is THE God, he is not an idol made by human hands, he is the sovereign creator God of the universe and of you and me – he alone made everything, he is worthy of our praise!

When we turn to God we see no wooden or metal deity, here is no statue or mere mortal. Such idols do not possess true and eternal splendour and majesty, strength and glory - but God does.

And that is why the psalmist then instructs us to “Ascribe to the LORD glory and strength...due to his name; bring an offering and come into his courts. Worship the LORD in the splendour of his holiness; tremble before him, all the earth.”

Is an idol worthy of all the earth trembling before it? Of course not! But God, our God is truly an awesome God who is worthy of our praise and our worship. When we think about how full of majesty and splendour, power, glory and holiness the sinless creator God of the universe must be it should drive us to our knees in praise and worship. How can we – how dare we ascribe all the wrongs of this world to the only truly holy God in the universe?

But listen, we do not worship out fear, but out of wonder and love. This God whom David in Psalm 96 calls us to praise is the God who had made Israel his chosen and beloved people and through Jesus he has made us his precious children too.

Do you think that we could hope to come into the presence of God in our natural sinful state? Of course not! Look again at those words the psalmist uses to describe God;

“glory...marvellous deeds...great...most worthy of praise...to be feared...

[he]made the heavens. Splendour...majesty...strength...holiness... reigns...judge...righteousness and truth.”

As sinners all, there is no way that we could ever be close to God in our own strength, but thanks be to God, through the death and resurrection of Jesus the writer of Hebrews in the New Testament reminds us that we can actually, “approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.” (Heb 4:16)

Far from God being responsible for the tragedies in the world, he is our helper, our comforter, our strong tower and our fortress.

It is as John Milton wrote,  
“Let us with a gladsome mind  
Praise the Lord for he is kind:  
For his mercies ay endure,  
Ever faithful, ever sure”.

So, as God’s people here we are called to remember his worthiness, his great goodness, his love, his mercy, his grace and that despite our rejection of him, he has rescued us and made it possible for us to come into his glorious presence through faith in Christ.

Surely then Augustine was right – our chief work, our *raison d’être*, our purpose in life is to praise the name of God. Three tiny words which will revolutionise the way we live if we put them into practice. Let’s pray for God’s help to do that.

“proclaim his salvation day after day”

A post-it-note was stuck on a hot air hand dryer in the toilets in an office block. It simply read, “Push here for a word from the boss.”

Well I wonder we talk about most of the time? Now that the World Cup has finished most men have got nothing to talk about to each other – we just stand around in corners looking confused! But I guess that just illustrates that most of the time we just talk a load of hot air, that most of what we say isn't of any great lasting significance. But I wonder what you would like to be remembered for saying.

I mean there are some great “famous last words” spoken over the centuries, Gaius Caligula, the Roman Emperor declared “I am still alive!” moments before his own guards stabbed him to death, Winston Churchill's last words were, perhaps, not his most stirring; “I'm bored with it all” but then again, not as wrong as Douglas Fairbanks Jr who confidently announced “I've never felt better!” and then died.

So maybe its best not put great store in being remembered for our final words. Perhaps it's better to be remembered for what we've said every day, for being people who had something worthwhile to say, who have lived a profoundly different type of life, a life which has impacted those around us for better as we declared with passion and conviction the faith that we believed in.

Well, that is what the psalmist instructs us to do in psalm 96 verse 2, “proclaim [the Lord's] salvation day after day”, in other words, “everyday let people know how the Lord saves”.

Now why is that important? Because God has entrusted to us the task of telling other people about him.

During the Reformation of the Church, John Calvin said, “The Gospel does not fall from the clouds like rain by accident, but is brought by the hands of men to whom God has sent it.” That’s you and me – read Matthew 28 if you are in any doubt!

The Gospel is the good news, the truth that The Lord saves us through Jesus’ death and resurrection. Paul says in Romans 5:10, “For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!” and in verse 9 of chapter 10 he makes it abundantly clear, “That if you confess with your mouth, Jesus is Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.”

That message, as Calvin pointed out, doesn’t just magically drop into people’s minds. God has entrusted us, each and every one of us (in the power of the Holy Spirit) to take it out into the world.

Now I think that we often assume that this is someone else’s job – evangelists like Billy Graham or J. John, or Rico Tice, but nowhere in the Bible does God make that distinction. Yes he says that some of us will have different gifts, that some of us will be more able to do evangelism on a grander scale, but all of us are to proclaim his salvation day after day.

Now, sometimes that is going to be difficult. If we are really passionate about the fact that we have been rescued from the penalty of our sins; death and separation from God and if we obey God and tell people about that, then sometimes other people will disagree, feel threatened, or for 101 other reasons, try to stop us.

When that happens then surely we should be like Peter and John in Acts 4 who are commanded by the religious authorities

to stop speaking and teaching in the name of Jesus. Their response?

Acts 4:19-20, “But Peter and John replied, Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God. For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.”

What's the point? Who are you most obedient to? The objectors, or God? Well, we all know what the answer should be, and also what it actually is most of the time!

But I suspect that often we don't even get to the point of needing to ask that question because it is actually our own fears which command us not to proclaim the Lord's salvation rather than public opposition. So we need to pray for courage, boldness and God's Holy Spirit to help us to be clear in those instances when we get the opportunity to say something about our faith, or to live out in our lives what we declare our faith to be.

You see, verse 3 of Psalm 96 tells us that we are to “Declare his glory among the nations, his marvellous deeds among all peoples.” And then in verse 10 as one translation puts it, “Take the news of his glory to the lost”.

So the question we need to ask is, “are we doing that? Are we proclaiming God's salvation plan day after day? Are we taking the news of God's glory to the lost, here, to our nation and around the world, or have we just chosen to ignore this biblical imperative? You see, if we are not doing those things, then we are not truly living out our calling as God's people.

One person has written that “when the power of reclaiming the lost dies out in a church, it ceases to be a church.” And the power of reclaiming the lost lies with God's Holy Spirit working

through God's redeemed people. If it dies out that means either God has lost interest and confidence in his plan – or God's people have. Who do you think it's likely to be?

So if the power, the desire, the hunger and the passion for reclaiming the lost has faltered in our churches then we need to look to ourselves and recommit ourselves to proclaiming the Lord's salvation amongst the nations.

And in order to do that we have to passionate about God ourselves. John Piper writes, "Worship is the fuel and goal in missions. It is the goal of missions because in mission we simply aim to bring the nations in to the white-hot enjoyment of God's glory...But worship is also the fuel of missions...[because] you can't commend what you don't cherish."

So, we need to cherish God, we need to love him, be thankful to him for saving us and to praise his name daily and constantly. If we do that then we will want to commend what we cherish. We will want to proclaim that God is real, glorious, majestic, just, holy, righteous, gracious, merciful and compassionate to a world who know nothing about him and who are tragically destined for a Christless eternity. That is what it means to take the news of God's glory to the lost.

Perhaps as a church – collectively and as individuals, we need to rediscover that passion, we need to sing of our love for God, we need to praise his greatness and holiness and then we need to look beyond ourselves and selflessly proclaim the salvation of the Lord, not once, not occasionally, but day after day. That's why this verse is so powerful. Let's ask God to help us.