

**Holy Trinity 17<sup>th</sup> May 2020**

**Sixth Sunday of Easter**

**Psalm 66**

**Prayer**

Let us pray to God,  
who alone makes us dwell in safety:

For all who are affected by coronavirus,  
through illness or isolation or anxiety,  
that they may find relief and recovery:  
Lord, hear us,  
**Lord, graciously hear us.**

For those who are guiding our nation at this time,  
and shaping national policies,  
that they may make wise decisions:  
Lord, hear us,  
**Lord, graciously hear us.**

For doctors, nurses and medical researchers and carers,  
that through their skill and insights  
many will be restored to health:  
Lord, hear us,  
**Lord, graciously hear us.**

For the vulnerable and the fearful,  
for the gravely ill and the dying,  
that they may know your comfort and peace:  
Lord, hear us,  
**Lord, graciously hear us.**

We commend ourselves, and all for whom we pray,  
to the mercy and protection of God.  
Merciful Father,  
**accept these prayers  
for the sake of your Son,  
our Saviour Jesus Christ.  
Amen.**

Although today's lectionary only has 66:7-end, it seems to me important to take it from the beginning.

READ Psalm 66 [Bible open would help]

The book of Psalms has been described as the Song Book of the Second Temple. It's perhaps not insignificant that it's right in the middle of our Bibles.

The word 'psalm' means 'a song'. As such they were a central part of Jewish worship. Just as song has always been a central aspect of Christian worship. Most Psalms tell a story. That is, they have a beginning, a middle and an end. This one is no exception.

It's divided into four sections - indicated by the word 'Selah'. The thing about the Psalms is that they often scratch where we're itching! They say things in a way that we can identify with. Psalm 66 is about worship in times of difficulty.

Verses 1-4 are a call to the whole of humanity to praise. Let's not forget that God calls the whole of humanity to worship Him. Verse 1: 'Shout with joy to God, all the earth!' Verse 4 gives a hint at the reason for that: 'All the earth bows down...' In fact, the Hebrew can be translated as a future, 'All the earth [will bow] down to you, they [will] sing praise to you, they [will] sing praise to your name.' This is a future certainty. Or it could be translated, 'All the earth [should bow] down to you, they [should] sing praise to you, they [should] sing praise to your name.' That is, it's an obligation. If so, the meaning is very much like Philippians 2:10-11, 'at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth...'

The reason these words in Psalm 66 are addressed to 'all the earth' – is that God is God of 'all the earth'. God is the Jew's God, the Muslim's God, even the 'atheist's God'. One day the staunchest unbeliever, will bow before Jesus. God is everyone's God. Whether people believe in Him or not. Believing the world is flat doesn't stop it being a sphere!

No wonder the Psalmist writes in verse 5, 'Come and see what God has done'. Many people get nervous about evangelism. Fear that we'll be perceived of as pushy or arrogant, or something. I think that's why sometimes the best evangelism is testimony. None of us is an expert, but we can all tell our story. Why God is important to us. Effectively, that's what the Psalmist does here.

Verses 5-6, 'Come and see what God has done, how awesome his works on man's behalf! He turned the sea into dry land, they passed through the waters on foot – come, let us rejoice in him.' He invites them to examine the Jewish story. The story of their faith – and here he highlights the Exodus and their liberation from the oppression of Egypt. So often, people are convinced when they look at the evidence themselves.

What about us? – sometimes we need simply to share our story. For the Jews that included the Passover, and the passing through the Red Sea on 'dry land'. For us – it will include the Cross and the Resurrection – but it will also include our personal encounter with Jesus – the living God. It's worth reflecting on how we tell that tale.

The next section of the story, verses 8-15, is divided into two sub-sections: It moves from addressing 'everyone' to addressing a 'particular' people and then 'the individual'. God is now referred to in verse 8 as 'our God', 'Praise our God, O peoples'. And he starts to reflect on the suffering of God's people. We are part of something big.

Because the truth is being one of God's people – we'd say the church – doesn't exempt you from suffering, persecution and all the ills of this world. Verse 16 is key, 'For you, O God, tested us; you refined us like silver.' The image of the 'refiner's fire' is taken up elsewhere in Scripture. In 1 Peter 1:6-7 Peter wrote, 'In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith – of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire - may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed.'

The image, of course, is of refining silver and gold – by melting the metals and burning off the impurities. Sometimes it is when life gets tough that that can best happen.

Notice how this section continues, verse 11, ‘You brought us into prison [as I prepared this I started to think about “lockdown”!] and laid burdens on our backs. You let men ride over our heads; and we went through fire and water, BUT [this is a key word here] you brought us to a place of abundance [in the Psalmist’s mind that is presumably ‘the Promised Land – the land flowing with milk and honey’].’

For the Christian we have a tremendous hope. An eternity with God in His ‘new creation’. This week I came across this wonderful quotation by AW Tozer, ‘Did you ever stop to think that God is going to be as pleased to have you with him in heaven as you are to be there?’ Eternity is going to be fun.

But in the here and now we need refining. If only so that our story can become more relatable to – and others might find the love of God too.

The second section here moves on to the individual. Sometimes the events of the so-called Reformation, have been criticised for producing a version of the Christian Faith that is too individualistic. People for example used to speak of ‘taking my communion’.

The Book of Common Prayer (a product of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century Reformation) actually changed the wording of the Nicene Creed to ‘I believe in one God...’; Common Worship rightly changed it back to the original Greek wording ‘We believe...’

However, it is nonetheless important to remember that we have a responsibility for our own salvation.

Verses 13-14: 'I will come to your temple with burnt offerings and fulfil my vows to you – vows my lips promised and my mouth spoke when I was in trouble.'

Again, my thoughts went to 'lockdown'. As, perhaps, we begin to see the light at the end of the tunnel, are we going simply return to life as it was? Many have spoken of the way 'lockdown' has made them aware of what we have had. To be more grateful for the air we breathe, for our freedoms, to see those we love, to hug, to go to a show, to eat out, to go on holiday, to worship and so on.

Have we made a vow – perhaps unspoken – not to take those things for granted anyone?

The final section of the Psalm returns to the theme of the beginning. Verse 5 said, 'Come and see what God has done...' Verse 16 here says, 'Come and listen, all you who fear God...' It's true that not everyone 'fear[s] God'. The Parable of the Sower remains eternally true. But when we do proclaim the Good News of God – some will respond.

Once again, the Psalmist speaks of his own experience, verse 19-20, 'God has surely listened and heard my voice in prayer. Praise be to God, who has not rejected my prayer or withheld his love from me!'

We are called to do the same.

### **Prayer**

God our redeemer,

you have delivered us from the power of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of your Son:

grant, that as by his death he has recalled us to life,

so by his continual presence in us he may raise us to eternal joy;

through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

**Amen.**

**Our Father in heaven,  
hallowed be your name,  
your kingdom come,  
your will be done,  
on earth as in heaven.  
Give us today our daily bread.  
Forgive us our sins  
as we forgive those who sin against us.  
Lead us not into temptation  
but deliver us from evil.  
For the kingdom, the power,  
and the glory are yours  
now and for ever.  
Amen.**