

***Praise the Lord, O my soul***

<sup>1</sup> *Praise the Lord!*  
*Praise the Lord, O my soul!*  
<sup>2</sup> *I will praise the Lord as long as I live;*  
*I will sing praises to my God while I have my being.*

<sup>3</sup> *Put not your trust in princes,*  
*in a son of man, in whom there is no salvation.*  
<sup>4</sup> *When his breath departs, he returns to the earth;*  
*on that very day his plans perish.*  
<sup>5</sup> *Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob,*  
*whose hope is in the Lord his God,*  
<sup>6</sup> *who made heaven and earth,*  
*the sea, and all that is in them,*  
*who keeps faith forever;*  
<sup>7</sup> *who executes justice for the oppressed,*  
*who gives food to the hungry.*

*The Lord sets the prisoners free;*  
<sup>8</sup> *the Lord opens the eyes of the blind.*  
*The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down;*  
*the Lord loves the righteous.*  
<sup>9</sup> *The Lord watches over the sojourners;*  
*he upholds the widow and the fatherless,*  
*but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.*

<sup>10</sup> *The Lord will reign forever,*  
*your God, O Zion, to all generations.*  
*Praise the Lord! (Psalm 146 ESV)*

The call to praise God is not an unusual one. It isn't something that is unknown or foreign in religious circles. Praise is not confined only to God for we are well aware of praise in every day life – how people and situations (meaning the people who make those situations happen) are approved, acknowledged, thanked, promoted and so on – in fact sometimes people live their lives specifically to seek praise. They want words said about them that makes them shine.

That is part of the background to the word used for praise in Middle Eastern languages – to appear on the horizon, to shine or cause to shine. When we praise – when we shout, extol, sing a song of joy, rejoice; when there is jubilation, homage, respect, honour; when we make great, glorify, magnify – all these aspects can be found in praise – we take our words and use them to illuminate someone so that others can see them in this light. Praise is much more speaking about someone – the one we're praising – to others than speaking to the person we're praising. So when we praise, we're inviting, telling, encouraging those who hear us to see the object of our praise the way we do – perhaps in a new light.

So as I said, religious people are not unfamiliar with praise. Religious people want other people to see their God and others in their religion in the same way they do – hence they give praise to the world. It thus follows that if I praise someone it isn't just a matter of me saying 'So and so is good or wonderful' – which by itself is just opinion or propaganda – but rather I will also be saying why the person is praise worthy and I will put it such terms that my hearers will understand because my goal is not to give the one being praised a nice feeling but that others will join with me in seeing and praising the one to which I am pointing!

Hence, for me, any religious praise that is not based in Jesus is hollow and empty and wishful thinking. And I make such rather brusque comments because praise can be challenged and judged and examined and even tested. Simply put, in the pantheon of gods, the only one grounded in history and not myth or human invention, the one standing after death is the carpenter Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God, who leads people to the Father and together they send the Holy Spirit. This God and only this God is worthy of praise! Because this God and only this God has actually done anything that reaches out to people and rescues them – when all the other deities in the world’s supermarket of religion only offer programmes and tasks for people to do in the hope that they will succeed.

The last seven psalms are psalms of praise – they’re not the only ones and there are other references and calls to praise God – but Psalm 146 is both typical and rather unique. You can follow in today’s Worship Details – see how the psalmist lists the reasons why he is praising and wanting others to praise the Lord. God is eternal – he ‘lasts longer’ than others – even princes and kings whose death brings their life and work to an end – but God is creator and he is faithful to his creation – he brings about justice, food, freedom, insight, encouragement, righteousness, helps those in need, and gives the baddies their just desserts.

What makes this not just another religious rant? Well, for the psalmist it would be the Exodus where God rescued his people and established them as his people and remained faithful to the covenants. This praise is wide screen view of God’s action rather than a minicam on a person’s life. The psalmist isn’t saying that bad things don’t happen but what he is saying that God is present, God rescues, God helps – and that is why we should praise this God.

Today we have a fuller picture than the psalmist. I don’t think we can read this psalm and not be drawn to the person who spoke to John the Baptist pointing out his Messianic credentials: “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.” (Matt 11:4b-6) Jesus fulfils this psalm and thus qualifies for praise as he steps into the spotlight and appears to us as God. This is not something new – we are Easter people living in the light of the empty tomb – if that cross and resurrection are rubbish – then we of all people are to be pitied –for our faith is useless and our praise empty (like all the other religions).

It is simplistic however to place Jesus into this psalm and then say, ‘Therefore the followers of Jesus must be healthy, wealthy, and wise and prosperity and miracles shall follow you all the days of your life’. What the praise must always take into account is its foundations and for us, as followers of Jesus, they are always in the shape of a cross. If they are not then the praise is not solid and could be that religious rant and dream I mentioned earlier.

So the psalmist calls us to praise and today we see that in Jesus, God should be praised, and we are encouraged and strengthened and uplifted in our faith and those who hear us are challenged by Jesus’ credentials – by his words – and they are worked on by the Holy Spirit whose goal is that they, too, shall see Jesus shine, know him, as Lord, repent, and still rejoice in God’s grace.

I said that this psalm was also rather unique and you see it in the psalmist’s audience. Usually calls to praise are to a community, a group, where this psalm specifically speaks to us individually – Praise the Lord, O my soul! If you look at the last verse, the psalmist places all the individuals into the community of Zion again – but it is worth noting that he begins this psalm by calling on people, as individuals, to see that God cares for them personally – not just as a tribe, collective, mass, group – but individually. This perspective simply means that no matter what we might be going through, we can actually praise God!

Now, I know that this is where the ‘Christianity is delusional’ or ‘religion is an opiate’ can come to the fore if the individual is simply going through hell – and Christians are not immune from suffering and hard times – yet the psalmist directs us to a different landscape even momentarily and points out to

those who are suffering that God is not absent or sitting on his hands – for his actions in Jesus – those hands were pierced for us – have happened and not imaginary and thus God remains present even in the darkness of tough times – and that perspective can lead us to even praise him there – maybe momentarily and maybe a bit longer for that is what praise does – gives us or reminds us of a perspective that is worth knowing each and every day.

Praise the Lord, O my soul.