

Sunday 9 September, 2018

A sermon preached by The Very Revd Dr Andreas Loewe, at an Evensong attended by alumni of the St Paul's Cathedral Choir.

Reading: Psalm 146

It's a great delight to welcome back to Choral Evensong at St Paul's alumni of the Cathedral Choir. Thank you for your contribution to our worshipping life on weekdays and Sundays during your time as trebles and choirmen. Among us is a continuous line of praise through music that dates back to the days of Dr Alfred Floyd, director of music here from 1915-1947, continues with choristers who sang under the direction of Mr Lance Hardy, who took over the baton in 1951 following the relatively short tenure of Mr Colin Campbell Ross, before passing on the directorship of the choir to Dr June Nixon in 1973. It's a joy that June, and her husband Neville, and choristers from more than four generations of music-making at St Paul's are with us tonight, as living reminders of that chain of praise that connects us with the people of God throughout the ages, and that may be ours as long as we keep singing.

When St Paul's Cathedral Choir was established under the directorship of Ernest Wood in 1888, it was purposefully modelled on the choral tradition of English Cathedrals, taking on a pattern of worship and praise that stretches back to the medieval monasteries that gave birth to the modern Cathedral choirs of the nineteenth century. We are privileged to have been able to resource this tradition and enable it to flourish here at the heart of the city and diocese of Melbourne ever since. If the founders of our choral tradition looked back to a pattern of praise at the heart of the church since the times when monastic plainchant echoed in the chancels of the great Abbeys and Cathedrals of Europe, by our own singing today we share in a continuous line of praise that spans not only 70 or so years represented in this Cathedral tonight, but rather one that spans a millennium and a half: taking us back to the days of Gregory the Great, who categorised the pattern of psalm-singing that we call plainchant, or indeed Gregorian Chant.

Gregory himself spoke of his task in characteristically humble terms; he merely formalised a pattern of praise he had himself inherited: the singing of the cycle of the 150 psalms across a week at Lauds, Matins, Vespers and Compline, introduced to the Western church by the great hymnodist Ambrose of Milan in the late third century, practised in the great monastic foundations of St Benedict of Nursia in the sixth century and spread across Europe since. If the *musical practise* of chanting psalms that we maintain today extends back to the great Fathers of the Church, the *words* of the psalms that we sing, date back even further. Though we no longer have the tunes to which the psalter was sung in the days of Jewish temple worship, the directions given to musicians by King David a millennium before the birth of Jesus survive to date. 'To the leader, with stringed instruments, a Psalm of David', reads the musical setting of Psalm 4, just as the names of tunes such as 'The Deer of the Dawn' for

Psalm 22 survive. Likewise do we find instructions as to how to perform or to maintain this precious tradition: 'To the leader: Do not destroy' instruct Psalms 57 and 58: it's hard to say today whether that was encouragement to preserve the text, or an instruction not to murder the performance.

Today then, you and I share in the privilege of stepping into a line of praise that takes us back to the songbook of the Temple, and joins us with temple musicians such as King David and Solomon, and temple singers such as Asaph and Heman the prophets, and the Sons of Korah. Certainly since the time of Synagogue worship tonight's Psalm has been recited daily at morning prayer by observant Jews. It speaks of the sense of connectedness with those who have sung God's praises through the ages, and the intent to praise God throughout life: 'while I live I will praise the Lord; yea, as long as I have any being I will sing praises unto my God', the nameless writer sings. And people of faith have been sharing in this tradition of praise ever since, making the psalms their own songs of faith: songs of the shared experience of living as believers – with all the joys and challenges that faith-filled living bring with them. Because, if they are to sustain a chain of praise that spans the millennia, the songs of faith that we sing in praise of God need to be both songs of joy, as they are songs of justice and action, songs of mourning and anguish, and songs of hope and praise. For a songbook and tradition to endure that long to be filled with meaning, the songs themselves – the psalms – need to reflect life in all its fullness, and be full of life themselves.

'Hallelujah', our psalm frames this life of worshipping God in good times and in times of challenge: 'praise the Lord, O my soul'. And out of that praise flow the actions that determine the life of one who worships God. The psalmist reflects on the frailty of human influencers: the power brokers of today, the 'princes' and rulers of the present, are not worthy of trust or reliance: power alliances may change at a moment's notice, party leaderships may spill any day. The psalmist speaks into his own age and ours. 'There is no help in princes, or any child of man', therefore lasting value needs to be sought elsewhere. And not only lasting value eludes humankind. Life itself is similarly vulnerable, is lived under the mark of death. 'When the breath of man goeth forth, he shall turn again to his earth, and then all his thoughts perish'. Not only are our lifetimes relatively brief, but each generation will be confronted with change and challenge. Trust in these changeables, the psalmist tells us, is futile: 'there is no help in them'.

Where, then, may humans go for lasting value? For our psalmist it is clear, that it is only when we reach beyond ourselves and place our trust in the One whose praise has been sung for as long as the world has been, that we may find lasting value. 'Blessed is he that hath the God of Jacob for his help, and whose hope is in the Lord his God', the psalm singer exclaims. Because God has been from everlasting, has 'made heaven and earth and all that is in it', God will also keep his word, 'he keepeth his promise for ever'. God cannot be contained even by our human perception of the universe, the psalm singer writes: in contrast to human power, God's power is unlimited, unfathomable. Yet unlike human

rulers, who are unreliable and, the psalm writer suggests ultimately untrustworthy, God is constant. His intentions are good, and his values immutable: 'He helpeth them to right that suffer wrong'. God does not change, the psalmist tells: he will always defend those that seek his help. Because God himself is righteous, he 'careth for the righteous' and 'helpeth them that are fallen'.

This help may be found in the life of a community of worship, the psalmist tells. God acts through those who live by his values, who give shape to those values through their service. Each of the voices that join the psalmist's intent, 'while I live I will praise the Lord', share in expressing the values of God in their own generation: standing up for justice by helping 'them that suffer wrong'; righting economic wrongs by helping to feed the hungry; advocating for those who are detained in spite of the demands of international agreements or the demands of our justice system by 'loosing men out of prison'; providing adequate access to healthcare by 'giving sight to the blind' – those who literally have lost their eyesight – as well as opening the eyes of those who have shut them for fear of the hopelessness of their situation, or the state of our world in general, to a reality that lasts beyond the challenges of today. We sing God's song to remind ourselves of the *reason* for our hope, and the *obligation* to show forth that hope in a life of service.

For when we sing, 'while I live I will praise the Lord, yea, as long as I have any being, I will sing praises to unto my God', we not only join the chain of praise that spans the ages, but also join the people who have made that song their pattern of life. Because the *way* in which the 'way of the ungodly are turned upside down' is when those who share the song of the lasting values of hope, and the confidence of God's presence, live by those values of service of God and neighbour, and out of these values undertake the very works that make God the foundation of our trust and hope. When we sing God's songs, we give voice to the action that will, ultimately, right the wrongs of our world, and make God the centre of our existence: our 'king forevermore and throughout all generations'.

Thank you, choristers past and present, for joining God's song, and giving voice to a hope that has been of old and that invites a new generation to take up the song that pledges to right the wrongs in our own time. Thank you for your lives of praise, and your service of singing. It is my hope and prayer for you that you will continue to share the song of praise that lies at the heart of our faith: 'Praise the Lord, o my soul. While I live, I will praise the Lord; yea, as long as I have any being, I will sing praises unto my God'. Amen.