

Let everything that has breath praise the Lord

A sermon preached by Revd Dr Steven Croft, Bishop of Oxford Sunday 11 December 2016 at the dedication of St Peter's Jennings Organ. *Ref: Psalm 150*

"Be filled with the Spirit as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts"

It is a joy to be here tonight for the dedication of your new pipe organ. Congratulations to all who have worked so hard on this project over many years.

Already in this service we have heard each jubilant chord re-echo around. Loud organs his glory forth tell in deep tones as we shall sing in our final hymn. This wonderful new instrument will, I hope, support the worship of St Peter's for generations to come.

This evening we give thanks for all who by their skill and dedication began this project and have brought it to completion. Well done.

The Book of Psalms can be read from beginning to end as an argument: a debate, a conversation in tension, point and counterpoint. In the blue corner are the psalms of lament: full of sadness, complaint, honest wrestling, anger with God, cries of how long, how long O Lord, even curses from time to time. The original music for the psalms has not survived but they would be sung in a minor key.

In the red corner are the psalms of praise: full of joy, of thanksgiving, of hope. Longing and praying for God's reign and God's kingdom. Full of the promises of God's presence. Hymns of blessing and celebration and love. We have sung several this evening and will sing several more before our service is done. They are sung now as they have always been sung in a major key of triumphant celebration.

Lamentation and praise. If you read the Psalms through from beginning to end, you will find a tension, a struggle, as the psalms alternate between sadness and questioning and sorrow on the one hand and joy and hope and celebration on the other. This tension is there in our lives.

This day and every day we live with this tension. Today we celebrate this new instrument in a service of joy. If we spoke together for a while there would be many other causes of happiness. But we come bearing on our hearts the Church in Egypt following the attack on St Mark's Cathedral. We come in sorrow for the Christians in Nigeria where a church roof collapsed during an ordination service yesterday. We come bearing our private sorrows and we come in compassion for the needs of the world.

Joy and pain are not alternatives. Sorrow and gladness are woven fine into the texture of our lives and in tension through the Book of Psalms. For all of us, life is often difficult and painful. But if we can find it, the joy is there to find and to be celebrated.

And in the Psalms, there is a strange and beautiful pattern which goes further than this simple tension.

In the first half of the Book there is more lament than praise: more struggle than joy, more longing than hope. But in the second half of the Book those proportions are reversed. The major key emerges as dominant. Hymns of praise grow out of lamentation and prevail. The worship of the people of God and of all the earth rises above the everyday sorrows. It does not deny them. But

confidence in God overcomes despair. The Psalms give us a pattern for the Christian life. Through the whole length of our lives we learn to find deep joy even in the midst of this world's sorrow.

Psalms 150 is the final song in the book. It comes at the end of the great Hallelujah: seven songs of praise which are the finale to the whole psalter. Worship prevails over lamentation. The psalms end on this glorious note of joy which carries us towards God and to eternity.

The worship of the Church needs to be authentic to the realities of life. We need in our private prayers and public worship times of quietness and stillness; our intercessions should have a note of reality and lament. Jesus says of his church Blessed are those who mourn. We need to weep with those who weep. We need our minor keys.

But the worship of the Church should reflect overall the pattern of the Psalms. Our lips should be opened and our hearts lifted up to heaven and joy and wonder. We should be reminded of eternal realities, of truths which last for ever, of God's glories in creation, of the history of salvation, of the profound gift of Jesus Christ, of the wonder of the cross, the triumph of the resurrection, of God's invitation to offer our lives in service.

Worship is the heart of our calling as Christians. In worship we are invited to appreciate God and enjoy God for ever. That is our purpose and our joy. As we appreciate God and behold God's glory so our hearts are enlarged and set right and turned outwards. Worship is the antidote to selfishness and pride. We gain a new sense of proportion on the troubles we face. We learn to live in the perspective of eternity.

Worship is our eternal destiny and our everlasting home. I am as sure as I can be that there will not be bishops in heaven. That's not because we will all be in another place. But because we will all be in the presence of God. But I think there is a good chance that there will be musicians in heaven, helping the heavenly choirs appreciate and enjoy God for all eternity.

*Praise him in the sound of the trumpet; praise him upon the lute and harp;
Praise him in the cymbals and dances; praise him upon the strings and pipe;*

The organ is not an end in itself. Its purpose is more than beautiful music. It has not been placed here to become an idol or an object of adoration.

This organ is here to support and lift and surround and enable the worship of God's people: the worship we offer with our lips when we are in this place and the worship we offer in our lives in families and workplaces, in school and community and in God's world.

We offer this worship here on earth, even in the midst of life sorrows, as a pledge and a foretaste of heaven.

We offer this worship with our hearts and minds turned to God for this brief time at the beginning of the week so that we might carry the vision of God into all we do.

In a few moments time we will dedicate this new instrument to God's greater glory. But may God bless even more, his people who will gather here week by week, to lift up our hearts in worship and praise and joy.

Let everything that has breath praise the Lord!
Amen.