**

Psalm 146
Mark 12.38-44**
**11th November 2018**

## The discipline of praise

*Lord God – our prayer is that the written word will point us to Christ, the Living Word – so in his name we pray and for his voice we listen. Amen*.

When the young Welshman, Ivor Novello, set Lena Gilbert Ford’s words to music in 1915 they produced one of the most popular songs of the First World War. The chorus went:

*Keep the home fires burning
whilst your hearts are yearning,
though your lads are far away*

*They dream of home.
There’s a silver lining
through the dark cloud shining,*

*Turn the dark cloud inside out,*

*Till the boys come home.*
That song has lived with me this week. It’s of its time, but no less valuable for that. It’s a song of hope. A deceptively simply song with a profound message that even in the brutality of war that vision of a family gathered together around the fire could inspire and maybe even sustain those serving on the Western front.

Our songs often define us just as, in church, our hymns regularly become our most influential theological teachers.

Well, in the Jewish Temple songbook we label as The Psalms, the final five are all hymns of praise. It’s as if the book of Psalms signs off in a crescendo of thanksgiving. And this morning our lectionary draws us to Psalm 146.

It’s opening verses set the tone:
*My soul, praise the Lord.
As long as I live I shall praise the Lord,
I shall sings psalms to my God all my life long.*

Maybe we think it was easier for these bible people to live grateful, praise filled lives. Are we tempted to view their culture as simpler than ours? Before we run away with the idea that their life was so very different from our own perhaps we ought to acknowledge that they lived, as a tiny nation surrounded by superpowers like Babylon and Syria, in virtual constant fear of war and invasion. They knew the terror of an uncertain future and yet they cherished the place of praise in the rhythm of their lives.

The slaves in the Deep South found a similar sense of purpose and identity to their worship Sunday by Sunday. For so much of their week they experienced the indignity of being treated like an object. Yet, as they gathered for worship, they sang the Spirituals that told their story. This was, in its way, an act of subversive praise. Whatever had come their way in the last week couldn’t rob them of this moment. And in this moment, in the discipline of praise, they shaped their identity and became a resilient people.

Some Holocaust survivors tell the same story. Of walking by the perimeter fence and giving thanks for the sunset. Subversive praise refuses to be moulded by man’s inhumanity to man, it refuses to define life in the negative; instead it uses praise and thanksgiving to grow a generous mind and grateful heart.

These Jewish Scripture psalmists sang their praise songs at their hardest moments to get them through the bleakest of times.

One of the things that happened during both World Wars were National Days of Prayer. In our church history book, it notes, interestingly, that AFC shared these days during the Great War more often with St Leonards than with St Michael’s next door. These were days to come together in the most difficult of times – to praise God and to pray to God. To find strength in prayer and praise.

Now, Psalm 146 has a rather crunchy gear change at verse 3. It comes down to earth with those words: So, put no trust in princes, or in any mortal…’

This is something of a recurring theme in scripture a certain distrust for the elite. It’s there in today’s New Testament reading as Jesus warns his audience to be aware of the scribes who love to walk down the street in their flowing robes and be greeted with automatic deferential respect.

Do you remember Maureen Lipman in that BT advert talking loudly on the telephone about her son who’d just passed his exams in lots of ‘ologies’. Well, the ideologies of leaders and cultures come and go. I don’t think the Bible is against leaders and leadership – after all kings like David and prophets like Elijah are highly praised in the Old Testament, whilst religious leaders such as Nicodemus or the ruler of the Synagogue are commended in the New. It’s not so much the office of leader that is being challenged here, be it in princes or priests, so much as the characters and ideologies that fill them.

 A few years ago a principal of one of our Baptist colleges wrote a book all about leadership. He concluded that it didn’t matter what you called leaders: bishop, moderator or regional minister – what really mattered was the qualities of the people who filled those positions. Do they have integrity? Can they communicate a vision? Can they both lead from the front yet work collaboratively behind the scenes. He even concluded, perhaps a little rashly, that maybe Baptists would tolerate having bishops if they were good bishops! Discuss – but not this morning!!

Psalm 146 exhorts us to live as praise filled people with grateful hearts and then it goes on to show us what Godly service looks like. The second part of this Temple Song speaks of a God who maintains his faithfulness towards us, deals out justice for the oppressed, feeds the hungry and sets the prisoner free. This is the God who raises up those bowed down and protects the stranger in the land, supporting the fatherless and the widows.

There is an overt social justice programme here in Psalm 146. If we want to know what faith could look like when it is grounded in down to earth living, then we only have to read the Magnificat in the New Testament or Psalm 146 in the Old. Both basically say to us: when we look for inspiration about how to run our communities, how to manage our families, how to live together in our churches, then ponder the character of God and seek to live with his faithfulness, compassion, justice and kindness.

When we encounter these God-like, Christ-like qualities in others we encounter a common humanity that crosses international borders and communicates regardless of regional languages.

One of the most precious memories I have of this year is from our visit to Hauke, our former Time for God volunteer, and his family in Lower Saxony during the late summer.

One of the many excursions planned for us was to the town of Hamlyn, famous for its Pied Piper. We followed a modern day, story-telling Piper around the city and at one point in the tour Hauke’s father pulled me back to show me some brass squares embedded in the cobbled streets outside the ancient houses. He told me, in a quiet, dignified and non-sentimental way, that these brass squares represented the Jewish families who once occupied the adjacent houses. Families which had been taken to a concentration camp and eventually murdered in World War Two. He said these brass squares of remembrance were now common throughout Germany, marking the homes of Jews who lost their lives in the Holocaust. When he finished speaking, when no more words were necessary between us, he took my arm and I patted him on the back. We both knew we had spoken of deep things.

Hauke’s grandparents and parents have now spent over sixty years between them seeking to build friendship and mutual respect between our two nations – a process that continued throughout 2017 – 18 with Hauke’s time with us here at AFC. Such friendships are precious beyond words and make our world a more Christ-like place. A place of praise filled gratitude and down to earth integrity – both themes that emanate from Psalm 146.

And maybe today is a most appropriate one for us to have been drawn back to this great song from the Jewish Psalter. That’s because some biblical linguists make the point that the opening verse of this psalm might more accurately be translated: I will praise God with my whole self. Everything about me, the way I choose to think and the way I decide to live, everything about me will be an act of service and thanksgiving. The psalmist is holding nothing back but giving everything.

One hundred years on from the end of the 1st World War I was encouraged by a member of the congregation to read up on a couple of the names listed on our own church’s war memorial in the entrance lobby. A U3A group in Amersham, along with the museum, have produced this wonderful book telling the stories behind the names on our town’s war memorial – and two soldiers from AFC are amongst them.

They gave their all.

Harry Bolton and William Lake probably knew each other as they attended church in our former building in Sycamore Road. They share a lot in common, these two young men.

They both lived in Amersham Common, they were both gardeners and both married their sweethearts in 1915. They were born a year apart, in 1889 and 1890 – they both died in 1917.

Harry Bolton served as a Lance Corporal having enlisted at Harrow in November 1914. He took part in the Battle of the Somme. He was killed in action on New Year’s Day 1917, aged 27. Rose, his bride from 1915, had lost her brother in the trenches just a month earlier. Harry’s parents didn’t only loose him but two of his other brothers as well.

William Lake, just a year older than Harry failed to get into the army the first time round because of his chest but signed up again and eventually became a solder in the Riffle Brigade. He’d come to live in Amersham from Deptford, next to Greenwich. He served at Ypres and Passchendaele. He died of his wounds after taking part in a recovery operation to get dead and wounded soldiers back from No Man’s Land. He was shot and next day, 3rd November 1917, died of his wounds. He never saw his daughter Kathleen who was born 7 months later.

The poppies that have stood on the corner of Woodside Road since the summer and the memorial bench that has this week been set up are in remembrance of men like Harry Bolton and William Lake – sometime members of Amersham Free Church, they belonged to this community and were mourned by this community when they gave their all in World War 1 for our freedom.

Today we honour their memory and sacrifice.

Indeed we recognise the place that sacrificial service continues to have in our lives and community today.

The cross, perhaps the pre-eminent symbol of our faith, speaks of self-giving.

Whenever we receive that sort of sacrificial love from another person our life is enhanced. And whenever we offer it our life is deepened.

Jesus watched that poor widow in today’s New Testament reading drop into the offering just two small coins and he had a glowing respect for her generosity. She, he said, had given all she had. She becomes one of the most famous and generous benefactors of all time – even though, ironically, the size of her gift was simply a penny.

She gave generously, willingly, sacrificially.

Psalm 146 exhorts us to live within the discipline of praise, to be grateful people, who give our all as we serve God and others.

A message that today is poignantly being remembered across our world.

May such an attitude of praise and service be part of our lives, in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen
 *Ian Green, Amersham, 8th November 2018*