

Sermon Psalm 48, 6 Feb 2025

‘We ponder your steadfast love, O God, in the midst of your temple.’

You may well have heard of the great English composer Ralph Vaughan Williams. One of his most famous pieces is the Lark Ascending which is a great favourite of many people and frequently tops Classic FMs Hall of Fame. But as well as being a great composer Vaughan Williams was also a great collector of folk songs and he was part of something of a English Folk Song Revival. He collected his first song called *Bushes and Briars*, from a Mr Charles Pottipher, a 70 year old labourer from Essex in 1903 and went on to collect more than 800 other songs as well as singing games and dance tunes.

Our psalm this morning, Psalm 48, may well have been one that was also collected, albeit several thousand years ago. The Korahites who are mentioned in the title of this psalm were a group of temple singers who as well as singing psalms probably collected them, and passed them on to others. The psalms, of course would have been sung and today’s psalm is a song of praise – one that was used as a thanksgiving after the ending of a siege by Israel’s enemies or as part of worship in the temple at a New Year’s festival.

It begins “Great is the Lord and greatly to be praised in the city of our God! His holy mountain, beautiful in elevation is the joy of all the earth, Mount Zion in the far north, the city of the great King.” Mount Zion is a hill in Jerusalem and is mentioned in the Hebrew Bible, or the Old Testament as the place where God dwells. It is there that the Temple was built and the ark of the covenant was finally brought by Solomon, to be a home for God and where God could be worshipped. The psalmist describes Jerusalem as the city of the great King, not the great King David but God the King who rules over all the earth. Of course Jerusalem remains the spiritual centre for the Jewish faith, giving it such religious and political importance for Jewish people.

But Jerusalem or Mount Zion as it is called in our psalm acts as a metaphor for something much greater to come – Jerusalem becomes a metaphor for God’s presence with his people. And all that Jerusalem stood for came to fruition in the person of Jesus Christ, Immanuel, God dwelling with us in actual human form. God with us not just in a temple.

God is present and God’s presence according to the psalmist frightens away the enemy, the assembled Kings were astounded, they were in panic and took flight. God has established the city and it is invincible.

In the psalm the worshippers recall how God has delivered them from the hands of the enemy and God's steadfast love towards them. This leads to further worship and even a procession about the city... imagine what that would look like with all the musicians, the priests from the temple along with the people going around the city with its towers worshipping and praising God with all their might.

The psalm is a reminder to us to praise God for all that God has done for us in our lives and to ponder the steadfast love of God. "As your name, O God, so your praise reaches to the ends of the earth. Your right hand is filled with righteousness. Let Mount Zion be glad! Let the daughters of Judah rejoice because of your judgments!"

It is a reminder not just to praise God, but to be glad; to be joyful in our praise.

We might not be feeling very joyful this morning, we might be carrying all sorts of pains and burdens with us this morning and the news once again is full of terrible things that are happening around the world

But we do have much to be thankful for – the freedom to worship unlike so many people in the world, a beautiful place to worship, homes, family friends. And God is present. God is

always present with us and with us particularly this morning in word and sacrament

As we consider all those things for which we are grateful, especially God's steadfast love and God's presence with us in our lives and worship, then how can we be anything other than joyful in our praise of God?

The Eucharist (from the Greek word *eucharistia*) means thanksgiving. The Eucharistic prayer which we will pray together shortly is the great thanksgiving – in it we express our heartfelt thanks for all that God has done for us through his son Jesus Christ. We thank God and we praise God in songs of everlasting praise...

But our praise shouldn't stop when the service is ended or even when we leave this building, tempting as that might be.

Our praise for God needs to permeate our lives and all that we do. We are an Easter people, we are a joyful people – or at least we are supposed to be...

So, I wonder how do we praise God's steadfast love in our lives?