Where Love and Justice Meet
Psalm 146

On the flight back from holiday I sat next to a young guy, who I got into conversation with. And he was English, and so I asked him what he was doing flying from Johannesburg to Switzerland, and he told me he was in business management and interior design, had been to a conference and was in transit. And then he asked my what I did. And whenever anyone asks me that I have this moment's hesitation… 'how do I put this?' Because you know that they're going to be thinking, 'o man, 10 hours sat next to a religious nutter.' But I told him, 'I'm a pastor.'

Now, I won't tell you what we talked about for the next however many hours. But the conversation got going with him saying, 'Well, to be honest, I'm not really into religion. I put more trust in science.' Which I thought was interesting, given that it came from someone with a background in interior design. So, I said, 'oh, really…' And our conversation went from there.

But that objection is a common one, isn't it? 'I don't believe in Christianity because of science.' When the person who's saying it may not, in all honesty, really understand science or what they are being asked to believe. But another objection is like it: I'm not really interested in Christianity, I mean the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New are different gods and it's all made up. And still a third objection is that religion in general, and Christians in particular, have been a cause of so much harm in the world.

And I tell you all that, because the Psalm we are going to look at today addresses all three of those objections. And it does so by telling us that far from rejecting the God of the Bible, we should spend our lives in worship of him.

Read Psalm 146

So the psalm opens with this call to worship God: v1, 'Praise the Lord!' It's the word Halleluyah! It's an address to the crowd, to you and me: Come on, make God the centre of your life; orient your life around him. Make him the supreme focus of your affections and emotions, make him the one you take most pleasure in and most glory in. Praise him.

But just ask yourself, why does the Psalmist feel the need to stir the congregation, his friends, you and me, up like that? And why does he need to follow it by saying the same thing to himself? 'Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord, O my soul!' Why this need to turn the crank handle of our hearts, to prod us and provoke us and encourage us to worship God?

Because sometimes it can seem like there are a thousand and one reasons not to praise God, can't there? If you're not a Christian there are these reasons not to believe in the first place, so you think, why would I worship? Or there's the weirdness of it all, I mean, singing songs…? But even if you are a Christian aren't there times when all of us either don't want to or don't feel like worshipping God? You have all this other stuff going on in your life that presses in and pre-occupies your thinking. Stuff that weighs your heart down. There are the conflicting attractions of life – frankly you'd rather be somewhere else, or doing

something else. Or there are those nagging doubts that undermine your confidence in God.

And so, to turn the crank handle of our hearts, and to give us reason why we should worship God and make him the absolute focus of your hearts, the psalmist tells us two things about God.

The God of Power

Now, by and large, you guys are people who get things done aren't you? Many of you are here in Switzerland precisely because you are effective in your work place. You see a problem, or you're given a task and you deal with it. And that makes what the psalmist says here all the more challenging. Because he says that one reason you should worship God is because God is unlike you. That ultimately you are not God.

Listen to how he puts it: v3-4, 'Put not your trust in princes, in a son of man, in whom there is no salvation. When his breath departs, he returns to the earth; on that day his plans perish.' Now, when the psalmist talks about 'princes' he's talking about the influential and powerful people of his day. The people who can get things done for you, whose word carries authority, who can come up with a plan and action it. And if you needed something sorting for you, if you needed justice or help, you'd ask a prince, you'd go to the person with the can-do, someone with influence, someone with power, someone with the ability to do it.

But the psalmist is saying, don't put your trust, don't put your hope in people like that. And the reason not to is that, ultimately, they are mortal. So whatever help they can give you is only temporary. And to drive that message home he uses a clever play on words. He says, don't put your trust in princes, in a son of man – and that word *man* is the word *Adam*, because when his breath departs, when he dies, he returns to the earth and that word *earth* is the words *Adama*. So he's saying, don't put your trust in a man, in a son of dust, who's going to return to dust. Don't put your trust in a mere earthling, who's going to be food for the earth worms.

Now just think about that, because you and I are not inclined to turn to princes for help are we. And yet people still look to those of power and influence, don't they: politicians who will bring about the change they want to see. But that hope never lasts, does it? They thought that this president or this prime minister was going to be the one, but a few years in their opinion poll ratings are plummeting, because they have failed to live up to the hope and the hype. But the psalmist would respond: but why does their failure surprise you? They are only men, after all.

But maybe you're wise enough or maybe just cynical enough, not to put your hope in politicians. But we can still pin our hopes on an investor, or a financial backer, or a supervisor, or a medic, anyone who has power and influence in our lives. Or even, given some of your abilities, you might be tempted to put your trust and your hope in yourself. Because using the Psalmist's word, you're a prince – and you can do it, you can sort it.

And yet, the psalmist brings us crashing down to reality. Along with all princes, ancient and modern, you are not God. Neither we, nor anyone else, are the ultimate answer, because our power is both scope- and time-limited, and we are passing away.

But, in contrast, God is very different: v5-6: 'Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord his God, who made heaven and earth, the sea and all that is in them, who keeps faith forever.' Why should you worship God? Because whilst you are not God, He is. And so to worship, or hope in, or make anything else the centre of your life, is to miss the point of life. But unlike you, and anyone else you might be tempted to look to, his power is limitless and endless. And far from the natural order and the world of science being a reason not to worship him, it is this display of his power in creation, in the heavens and the earth and the sea and everything that fills them, that calls us to worship him. Because he is so unlike you.

But then the psalmist takes a surprising turn. You see rather than battering us into submission with God's awesomeness and power, he says that God uses that power principally on behalf of the weak and the vulnerable.

Power for the Powerless

Now just think about how you write your CV, or resume when you're applying for a job. You include your education and work history, and you list certain skills and maybe those characteristics that define you. And you're saying, 'This is me, and you want to give me the job.' Or think about LinkedIn, and how someone will endorse you for a certain skill. Well, in Psalm 146, the Psalmist writes God's CV, his resume, his LinkedIn profile. And in doing so he answers that second objection to faith, that in someway the God of the Old and the God of the New Testaments are different. That the God of the Old, He's a God of wrath, but the God of the new, He's a God of love. But the psalmist pulls the rug from right under the feet of that objection.

Listen to how he describes God: v7, 'who executes justice for the oppressed, who gives food to the hungry. The Lord sets the prisoner free; the Lord opens the eyes of the blind. The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down; the Lord loves the righteous. The Lord watches over the sojourners (that's the foreigners, the aliens, the refugees); he upholds the widow and the fatherless.'

Now, what's remarkable about that is that the commentators will tell you that that is a million miles away from how other nations of the time saw the power of their gods and their idols. Their gods and idols used their power to prop up the powerful. Their gods gave support to the elite, to the influential, to those in power, and woe-betide-you if you crossed them.

But the God of the Bible is very different isn't he? This is not power for the powerful but power for the powerless, for the oppressed, for the hungry, for the prisoner, for the sick, for the burdened, for the refugee, for the widow and fatherless, for the single-parent family. That's whose side this God is on. And he

uses his power to make sure the weak and the marginalised get justice. And woe-betide any ruler, any person of power and influence who robs them of justice.

And doesn't that strike a chord in our hearts? Because we want a God like that, don't we? A God of power, who uses that power to help the weakest. Wouldn't that be a God worthy of our worship? But it's interesting that it strikes a chord, because this is not survival of the fittest, is it? To care for the poor and the weak and the neediest is not exactly good evolutionary principle. And yet deep down we love that kind of characteristic, and we know that we want justice to prevail.

But of course justice is a two way thing, isn't it? On top of the dome of the Old Bailey, London's most famous criminal law court is this golden statue of the female figure of Justice. And in one hand Justice holds a set of scales, the scales of justice in which the evidence is weighed. But in her other hand she holds a sword, and the sword of justice is double edged. You see, if one side of justice ensures that the weak and powerless are protected, the other is to ensure that the wrong doer is punished.

And so the Psalmist finishes this list of how God deploys his power by saying, v9, 'but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.' So, is God, after all, a God of wrath and judgement? Sure he is. He exercises his power to bring justice to the powerless, but he also exercises his power to bring justice to the wicked. And doesn't that also strike a chord? We want the wicked to be punished. We want despots and tyrants and oppressors and fraudsters to get their due. We don't want people to be able to get away with murder – metaphorically, or literally.

And the Psalmist is saying, listen, it's as you understand that this is the character of God, that this is whom you are coming before to worship, this God of boundless compassion who uses his power to bring justice to the powerless, and to the wicked, it's as you realise that that your heart can begin to join the song of praise.

And yet, of course, it leaves us with a dilemma, doesn't it? Because we want this God who will act powerfully for the powerless, and bring to justice those who abuse them. But if we are honest, we know that when we point the finger at others and accuse them, we are not exactly standing on solid ground ourselves. If we are honest we know that while we love the concept of justice for the poor and needy, we have not always loved others as we should. We know that we can show the same kind of selfishness and self-centredness in our own hearts, that lies behind the oppression of the poor. And then we don't feel so sure about ourselves.

And when you begin to feel unsure about yourself in the presence of God, that you're not so sure that you make the grade when it comes to the two sides of justice, then most likely it's not confident worship and praise that you feel like, but uncertainty, and reluctance, and maybe even a tinge of fear.

So, the question is, how can you and I worship a God of power and justice, without shrinking away? And at the same time, how can we grow in these very

qualities of love and justice and compassion for the powerless, that we so admire but that we know we so lack?

Becoming Like What You Worship

In v5 the Psalmist describes God in an intriguing way. He says, 'Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob.' Now, why does he call God 'the God of Jacob'? Well, on one level it's easy isn't it? Jacob is just another name for the people of Israel. And so the Psalmist is saying, blessed, happy, content, with no need to fear or shrink away, is the man or woman who worships Israel's God. But I reckon there's something more here. You see, if you know Jacob's story you'll know that Jacob was not a nice piece of work. He was deceitful, he was a schemer, a liar, a fraudster. He was just the sort of person you and I would want to face God's justice.

But instead of God bringing him to ruin, in the sense we might want, He wrestles with him and changes him, and transforms him, and as a sign of the work he's done in his life gives him a new name, Israel. And from this nasty piece of work, Jacob, God brings a new man. A patriarch. And the Psalmist is saying, blessed is the person who worships this life-transforming God. The God who takes a man deserving of justice and makes him into a man who pleases him.

But how can you and I know that kind of transformation in our own lives? How can we stand before the justice of God and be those who work for justice? Well, elsewhere the psalms say something fascinating. In Psalms 115 and 138, the psalmist is talking about idols, false gods, and the writer says, 'those who make them [that's idols] become like them; so do all who trust in them.' (Ps 115:8; 135:18). In other words, what you worship matters, because you become like what you worship. And that's not just true of ancient idols, it's true of modern idols as well. Worship money and the self-protection, and self-security that goes with it and you become more closed and more insular and more cut off from the needy around you. Worship relationships and what others think of you and you become more self-centred and self-preoccupied.

But what if you worship this God of justice and compassion? Then you become more like him. And that's the answer to the third objection that religion just results in people who harm others: not if they understand the Gospel. Not if it is Christ they are worshipping. You see, when Jesus began his ministry, for his mission statement, he quoted from the prophet Isaiah, words that are almost identical to these words in Psalm 146: 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.' (Luke 4:18-19).

Now how does he do that? He does it at the cross, by taking all the justice of God for our sin upon himself. That at the cross, in the words of our psalmist, God brought Jesus to ruin. He hung there, between two thieves, in the place of the wicked, in your place and my place, in the place of justice, and took it all upon himself. And when you realise that that is the level of his love for you and his

grace for you then it does something in your heart. In fact it does two things. Firstly, it makes you want to love him and worship him in response. When you understand what Jesus has done for you, then you'll join the Psalmist as he says in v2, 'I will praise the Lord as long as I live; I will sing praises to my God while I have my being.' And so more than just an emotional moment in a church service, when the gospel gets you and you get the gospel you'll live a life of worship.

But secondly, when you realise the level of his love and compassion towards you, when you realise just how needy you were and how in Jesus God has met that need, then you'll become someone who works for justice and who exercises power for the powerless. As the apostle John wrote, 'By this we know love, that he laid his life down for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers' (1 John 3:16). When you know that Jesus gave himself for you, you'll give yourself, in whatever way God calls you to, for the oppressed and the hungry and the prisoner and the sick and the burdened and the refugee and the widow and the fatherless. In other words, you'll become increasingly like the One you worship.