

## Sermon, St Andrew, Corbridge, 2 before Advent 2018, Evening Prayer

*May the words of my lips and the meditations of our hearts be now and always acceptable in your sight, O Lord our strength and our redeemer. Amen.*

Theme: Whole-hearted worship      Text:      Psalm 95

In these Sunday before Advent, we reflect on the closeness of heaven. This is the season of saints and souls, of remembrance, and longing for the coming of God's kingdom when at last heaven and earth will become one for ever. And these realities are most present to me in the context of worship, when we unite with all the company of heaven, and so I was delighted to see Psalm 95 appointed for tonight's service. It is the Psalm we call the *Venite* from its opening exhortation 'O come' – 'come and sing to the Lord'. Archbishop Cranmer appointed it in the Prayer Book for the beginning of Morning Prayer, as an invitation to worship the Lord day by day. And when we worship, well, it's natural to sing as we are doing tonight – to sing to the Lord, to rejoice heartily, to sing joyfully, thankfully and gladly – see how the adverbs mount up in the opening two verses.

Why? Well, it's because of the nature of the One we worship – God is a great God, far above all others, who reveals his power, creativity and loving kindness through creation, through its majesty, diversity and immensity, its sheer height and depth.

But this high and exalted One, this exquisite Creator, is not remote and aloof, but rather a God who is draws near to us – 'He is *our* God', the Psalmist says, 'we are the people of his pasture and the sheep of his hand'. That's a tender, pastoral image of a God who comes close, who cares for us, who loves us, and calls human beings into relationship with him. Worship is one of the primary areas where we experience God's *care*, where God gives loving attention to us - after all, he speaks to us words of grace; he gives us forgiveness and peace, we feel his Presence.

So what is our proper response? Well, in verse 6, the Psalmist says, 'Come, let us worship and bow down and kneel before the Lord our Maker'. Three verbs come after *Venite*, Come. The first is the verb *histahawa*, the most common Hebrew word that we translate as worship. It means literally to bend down at the waist, to bow profoundly. And it came to be interpreted as to fall prostrate, to throw yourself down to the ground before the Presence of God. So the Psalm says, literally, 'Come let us *fall down*, let us *bow down*, let us *kneel*. Each verb is forcing us down, down, down, into a position of utter humility and awe-filled reverence before such a God

as ours. And the sheer physicality of these images suggests to me that worship is about our whole being, body, mind and spirit.

I've found, as I have journeyed with God, that this attitude of awe and reverence has become more and more important. We come to Church to worship. But we worship with utmost reverence. What that means for me is that worship is never flippant or some kind of entertainment. When I worked in a theological college, one of the students when saying grace, would say. 'Thanks, Dad. Amen', and expected us to be impressed with that as if it was funny. It troubled me. Yes, Jesus called God *Abba*, a term of intimacy that we might use of a loving parent, but he was never flippant or casual – for he knew the nature of One to whom he was praying. Our liturgy helps us here. Its language is reverential – 'Almighty and most merciful Father', 'Lord God, heavenly King, almighty God and Father', 'Lord Jesus Christ'. We let God be God and we remember that we are mortal.

And the second insight of Psalm 95 is that God speaks. 'O that today you would listen to his voice'. Note the sense of urgency – 'today'. When we come into the presence of God in the particularity of worship we should have an expectation that God will speak to our hearts, through the Scriptures, through the sermon, in moments of silence, in the words of the liturgy and the hymns, and as we engage in prayer. Do not be like Israel of old, the Psalmist said, who refused to listen and brought themselves under judgment. And even if we hear a difficult or hard word from God, we must attend, it is for our good, our conversion from self to godliness.

Of course, the Christian tradition adds one more fundamental element. Jesus is the true Worshipper, the true Israelite. He constantly worships within the love of the Trinity, a constant inter-flowing of love and worship within the Godhead, into which our worship is joined as we worship in union with him. And because worship is in union with him, we worship with all Christ's people in heaven and on earth. There are only a few of us here tonight, but in truth we worship with angels and archangels, with all the company of heaven, and united to millions upon millions of Christians in every part of the world. Worship is never solitary.

And that's why in these days, heaven is very close. I pray that you will feel that closeness tonight, and that you will know that you have worshipped with your whole being. You see, remember how *Venite* ends – it ends with the promise of entering into God's *rest*. Rest recalls the completion of creation, when all was very good, and God rested in harmony with his creation in peace and joy. In worship we find our rest, a rest that endures through the days of this coming week, and in which, amidst our daily activities, we are held.