

Psalm 100:1-5
All The Earth Praises God

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Last week in the gospel reading we heard Jesus tell us to make disciples of all nations. Sometimes we get the impression that this was something special in the new covenant. That the old covenant was designed to exclude other nations, and now only in Jesus is everyone included. A careful reading of the Old Testament shows this is not true, and that God's chosen people were to be a light for all nations.

What is true is that under the old covenant, God hid his glory and presence in the Ark of the Covenant inside the Holy of Holies in the temple in Jerusalem. And access to God was mediated through the system of priests and sacrifices. But this was for all nations. You just had to travel to Jerusalem if you wanted to participate in the worship life of God's people. This is why on the day of Pentecost you have this long list of nations that people in the crowd were from. Pentecost was the harvest festival under the old covenant, and so it was a special time of pilgrimage for people from all over to come and worship in the temple.

The new covenant changed all of this. With the incarnation, God is fully present in Christ Jesus. And with his ascension and then the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, Jesus, by the power of the Holy Spirit, is fully present everywhere, and especially when the people of God gather in the name of God. "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them", Jesus said.

So, when we have a psalm like Psalm 100, that, under the old covenant was used as a call to worship in the temple, what place does it have for us under the covenant? It certainly has been used to call together a community for praise. In this short psalm, the entire earth is called to worship the Lord with joy. It emphasises gratitude and loyalty to the Lord God who cares for his people. Thanksgiving, praise, and blessing are appropriate responses to God's goodness, God's steadfast love, and God's everlasting faithfulness. The pure joy of this short psalm has made it very popular in Christian worship. Probably the most famous example is the hymn "All people that on earth do dwell", used for the coronation service of Queen Elizabeth II at Westminster Abbey in 1953, and loved and revered in the UK ever since.

This brief psalm has five commands to the worshipping community, five actions for them to do: shout (v. 1), worship (v. 2), enter (vv. 2 & 4), praise (v. 4), and bless (v. 4). Taken together, we can see how the old covenant worshipping community is called to participate in a grand procession into God's holy temple. When a choir processes singing "All people that on earth do dwell," one gets a sense of the type of temple ritual that Psalm 100 depicts. A cathedral full of voices along with organ, brass, and percussion that can almost be felt even if watched on a TV screen, somewhat mirrors what happened in the temple in Jerusalem.

So, the first aspect of this psalm, the great call to praise, is much the same under both old and new covenants. The location might be different, but that's about it. Then we are called to know that the Lord is God. At first glance, this command 'to know' seems out of place. We typically understand 'knowing' to be an internal mental process rather than an outward action that we can be called to do. But the Hebrew word 'to know' actually suggests something more. This is not about mere intellectual assent, but a deep and intimate awareness of God's identity as revealed to his people. And God is made known to us in Jesus. The eternal and immortal God took on human flesh so that we could know him, so that God becomes approachable by us mere humans.

Then the psalm reflects more on this relationship. He made us, and we are his, we are the sheep of God's pasture. Again, there is very little difference in reading this under the new covenant compared to the old. We now belong to God because of his claim on us in our baptism. We are part of his people, united with Christ Jesus and all those who have gone before us in the faith. Then the pastoral imagery gives way to a city with gates and courts, very much a reference to entering Jerusalem and the temple.

This is where we find our biggest difference. Wherever we gather as God's people, we know that God is present. God no longer constrains himself to a temple built by human hands. We do still gather in buildings, not because God promises to be in that particular place, but so that we have a place separate from the happenings of everyday life. And I do look forward to the day when we can do that again.

The psalm then ends with a simple justification for this repeated call to praise: God is good. The word 'good' has a pretty broad range of uses, both in modern English and in the scriptures. But we do get some extra statements to clarify its meaning here. The Lord's goodness is seen through his steadfast love and his faithfulness. These two descriptions are repeatedly paired together in the psalms to describe God's enduring commitment to his people. What makes the Lord good is that he has been reliable and trustworthy throughout the history of his relationship with his people, both under the old covenant and now also under the new. And so, we know that we can continue to rely on the Lord God into the future.

Whatever challenges come before us as a community of God's people, this psalm calls us to praise and thanksgiving. There is always reason to give thanks, always reason to shout for joy, and to worship the Lord with gladness. And whenever we sing this psalm, we join a vast community of praise throughout the course of history. As we bear witness to God's goodness, we step into a grand procession that stretches across time and place, across generation after generation. And we celebrate God's enduring commitment to the redemption of the world and our place in his kingdom. So thanks be to God that he is faithful, that we do belong to him, and that we too can join in this ancient song of praise to a God who is good, whose love endures forever, and who is faithful to us and to all generations. Amen.

May God's peace, which passes all human understanding, keep your hearts and minds safe in the risen Lord Jesus. Amen.