Trinity 13 at Sherrington

Psalm 136 Luke 22:14-20

607 Thy Kingdom come, O Lord 262
449 God of mercy, God of Grace 264
498 Let us with a gladsome mind= psalm 136 377
556 Praise the Lord! Ye heavens adore him 368

The Jewish faith is embedded in our Christian DNA, but we may struggle to identify with some of the OT scriptures, coming, as they do, from a very different period in history to our own, centuries before the birth of Jesus. He, like all Jewish boys, knew his scriptures by heart; the psalms were all familiar, and were generally sung, some of them in procession. It would be really interesting to know what they sounded like. Psalm 150 has a list of the musical instruments to accompany our praise: trumpet, harp, lyre, strings and pipe, and even cymbals. You would not necessarily expect today's psalm to have been sung , but my commentary tells me that it was chanted antiphonally between a solo voice or special choir and the entire assembly. Gregorian chant comes to mind. Monastic communities sing rhythmically without accompaniment, with the text in unison, so that the vocal line travels over a great distance.

There are six psalms of remembrance, some of which are much longer and more detailed (Psalm 78 has 73 verses, and tells of God's covenant and the disobedience of the children of Israel. Regulars at cathedral evensong on the 15th day of the month can appreciate the mood of what is happening, when the organist accompanies it dramatically, highlighting the words expressing the wrath of God).

This psalm tells the story of the Jewish people, starting from first principles: that the **Lord is gracious**, and is **God of gods and Lord of lords**. We are so used to the phrase **God of gods** that we may not realise its significance. In prehistory – the period of the first chapters of Genesis - there were many gods to be feared. Each tribe had its own god, and the greatest of all was Marduk, patron god of the city of Babylon, who was declared king of the gods after defeating the chaos monster Tiamat according to ancient folklore. I was fascinated when studying that period to discover how similar the stories about Marduk are to our scriptures. But scary too.

How important, therefore, that the God whom we worship is **God of gods and Lord of lords** and, as we declare in the Nicene creed, **the one true God, maker of heaven and earth**, **of all that is, seen and unseen. P**salm 136, after thanking God for his goodness, praises the God who **made the heavens and spread out the earth upon the water**s, **who made the sun to govern the day, and the moon and stars to govern the night**. It's interesting to note that the stars are included amongst the constellations that govern our planet. Ancient peoples were much more aware than we are of the movement of the stars. That was their map. As a variant on the Genesis text, in this psalm, God places the earth **above** the waters. In Genesis he separates the waters of the sky from the waters beneath, and gathers the waters beneath to create the seas.

The psalm continues with the history of the Jewish people: praising God for **bringing Israel out of Egypt**, **and leading his people through the wilderness**. And then we come to a piece of history which may not interest us much, except for its drama within the psalm, and which is recorded in the book of Numbers: **Sihon king of the Amorites and Og king of Bashan** were the first Canaanite kings to be defeated by Israel as they came to settle in the Promised Land. They are also mentioned in psalm 135, which is very similar to this psalm.

Psalm 136 is important for faithful Jews who see their history in relationship to God's presence among them. It is likely that it was chanted at the end of a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, following psalms 120-134 which are each headed 'A Song of Ascents', and it is called the 'Great Praise'. It would have been immensely popular amongst simple people, those who couldn't read, and those who wanted to praise God for his goodness; they could be a part of the rhythm of its poetry. In response to the cantor's invitation: "Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good," the reply is chanted: "His love endures for ever."

Think of football crowds or Promenaders at the Royal Albert Hall. They chant simple slogans in unison. Think of the Jesus prayer; “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me”. That is a prayer said calmly and repetitively, as we control our busy minds through gentle breathing concentrating on each phrase of the prayer. All our worship could be enhanced with the statement and refrain: “Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good,” and our reply: “His love endures for ever.”

The opening words are the same at the beginning of psalms 106, 107 and 118. The praise of God includes mention of his love. We tend to think of that the words ‘God is love’ are specifically Christian, lived out in the incarnation of Christ, but here we have it mentioned as part of the pattern of praise of the ancient Jews. I don’t knew enough Hebrew to know what the original words were, because in older translations used in the BCP, the first and last words of the psalm are **O give thanks unto the Lord, for he is gracious: and his mercy endureth for ever.** Mercy and love are not the same, but maybe this difference can open our eyes to what the love of God means. It is not love in human terms. It is expressed in God’s gifts to us of justice and mercy.

Do we find it helpful to say, or sing, the psalms? The psalms are the foundation of our liturgy, helping us to speak to God, to confess our sins and ask for his forgiveness; providing the words we use in worship, and the responses in BCP service are verses from the psalms. Some of our favourite hymns are metrical versions of the psalms, coming from the time of Luther when Latin was displaced as the language for worship. We may consider the wording to be as dated now as Latin was then, and you do need to tune in to the poetic speech. But if we allow the psalms to speak to us, they help us to speak to God. Alleluia!