

Psalm 146 – 29th August 2021 – John Davies

Good morning. Our study this morning of Psalm 146 brings to a close our summer series in the ancient song book of Israel – the very same song book that Jesus himself would have used to structure His praise and worship of the Father. I hope, like me, this series has provoked you to spend a little more time in the Psalms. Tom Wright, the theologian and former Bishop of Durham, encourages the Church and all Christians in his book 'The Case for the Psalms' to actively use the Psalms as part of our daily worship. I think there is much wisdom in this advice, and I personally want to commit to spending more time in the Psalms this term. Last week, Tim mentioned reading schemes to help guide us through our daily Bible readings, and I know he wishes to challenge all of us to spend more time in His word. Tom Wright makes a remarkably straightforward suggestion, which almost qualifies as a reading scheme: read five Psalms a day, and in one month you will have read the whole book. This is a challenge I intend to undertake throughout September. If you feel a little dry or want to rediscover your zest for worship, you might want to consider doing something similar.

Psalm 146 is one of the five final Psalms in the bible. They are commonly referred to as the 'Hallelujah' Psalms – you will notice that each Psalm begins and ends with the word 'Hallelujah'. In Hebrew, 'Hallel' means 'praise' and 'jah' is a shortened form of the name of God, 'Yahweh'. It makes sense to me, then, to spend some time this morning reflecting on what this Psalm, and its companions, might be able to teach us about being people of praise, or worshippers. It seems as relevant as ever for us to consider together who we choose to praise, how we choose to praise, and why we choose to praise. Hallelujah isn't just a throwaway word of celebration – it's a statement of intent.

Firstly, who we choose to praise. We all choose who we praise throughout our lives, and there are plenty of candidates vying for our attention. I think Psalms 146 has some guidance for us about where we place our praise, and why we should choose to direct our praise towards the God of Jacob. The word 'Hallelujah' is very specific – 'Yahweh' is the name given to Moses in Exodus; it is the holy name of the one true God, the God of Jacob. The word, 'Hallelujah', therefore, is both a statement of praise, and a precise definition of where that praise is being directed. This is no loose religious term – this is a specifically targeted statement of praise towards Yahweh, the God of Israel. Hallelujah is a choice. In fact, the poem sets up a deliberate structural contrast to emphasise the importance of choosing who we praise. There is a lovely positive/negative contrast in verses 2 and 3. The definitive statement of the psalmist in line 2, 'I will praise the Lord all my life', is held against the negative statement in line

three: 'Do not put your trust in princes'. This phrase is an imperative, or a word of command or instruction. I wonder who the audience of this statement is, particularly given that the psalm begins in the first person: 'Praise the Lord, my soul'. Perhaps the psalmist is reminding himself of the folly of choosing earthly princes for his praise, as well as the gathered assembly or worshippers. The parallelism in the poem is not accidental – the structure reminds both the singer and those listening that there is no choice when earthly princes are held up in opposition to the God of Jacob. The psalmist goes on to spell out the obvious point: princes are just human beings. They cannot save. They are also mortal; ultimately their great power and wealth comes to nothing compared to the glory and faithfulness of the Almighty who reigns 'for all generations' (v.10). The psalmist reminds us that the Lord is the 'Maker of heaven and earth, the sea, and everything in them' and, unlike the princes, the Lord 'remains faithful for ever'. The way this poem is structured underlines the massive contrast between even the greatest of human leaders, and Yahweh. There is no comparison. 'Why would you choose to praise anyone other than Yahweh?', seems to be the central rhetorical question of this psalm. It is not difficult, of course, to apply this question in our own lives. As Israel were often surrounded by princes and idols, we too are surrounded by princes in our modern world, even in our democracies. Every day we are faced with princes of economics, princes of politics, princes of television, princes of social media (or influencers), princes of sports, and, dare I say it, princes of religion – there are plenty of people around who might draw from us our praises, and some of them are very powerful and very charismatic. The psalmist in 146 makes the definitive statement in line two that we are all called to make: 'I will praise the Lord all my life' – there is no one else worthy of our praises. My friends, if you are here this morning and have not yet committed yourself to a life of praise of the God of heaven and earth, I invite you to consider whether today might be the day to begin.

Secondly, what does this wonderful psalm have to say to us about how we praise. You will notice that the psalm begins with the phrase, 'praise the Lord, my soul'. There is an immediate recognition that praising is a disciplined, spiritual act. It involves our souls or our spirits; it is no mere intellectual activity. It is not a disembodied affair either, by the way. You don't have to look far into the remaining Hallalujah psalms to find tambourines and dancing. Indeed, the book of Psalms ends with the statement: 'Let everything that has breath praise the Lord'. Nevertheless, praise is a deeply spiritual process, and yet many of us here will have experienced times when our souls feel heavy, burdened, not attuned to praise. We just don't feel 'up for it'. I believe all acts of praise or worship must begin with us asking our soul to praise. In fact, what a brilliant prayer to pray before any act of praise and worship: 'Praise the Lord, my soul.' Our praise should not be seasonal, either, or directed by circumstances. The psalm makes it emphatically clear in line two the nature

of the praise that is required: 'I will sing praise to my God as long as I live.' What a powerful statement, and certainly no less that the God of Jacob deserves. We are mortal, but by committing ourselves to a lifetime of personal praise (notice 'my God') is the greatest act of worship we can offer – there's a longevity of praise in this psalm, which is the only way that we can join with the song of creation in our lifetimes. Indeed, a brief reading of other psalms shows us that our praises often take place during times of distress and hardship. But our praises help to give our mortal lives eternal shape and meaning: this is how we join the picture of praise in Revelation – our lives are sacrifices of praise, foretastes of the praises in the Heavens, and in the Earth to come.

Finally, why we praise. We have already touched on a key idea from this psalm: 'because God is the only one worthy of our praises' – there is no contest, no other meaningful choice. The psalmist, though, does illustrate some of God's characteristics that should lead us to a place of praise, even though the fact that he is the 'Maker of heaven and earth' is clearly enough! The psalm celebrates and praises God for his wonderful qualities, all of which we dearly lack in our fallen world. In God's kingdom, all injustices are set straight – the oppressed are held up, the hungry are fed, the prisoners are free, the blind have sight. The Lord loves and lifts up the humble and righteous and frustrates the wicked. In his kingdom, the fatherless and the widow and the outcast are sustained and protected. This isn't a naïve vision of our world, it's a statement of the way that God does justice, and it stands in stark contrast to the world we inhabit. Praise, therefore, is an act of faith. It's an acknowledgement that our fallen world exists in stark contrast with the kingdom of God; our earthly princes oppress and blind and subjugate and deprive. We do not need to look far to see the reality of the way that this world works, with its many princes who seek to build their own militaristic kingdoms, or exploitative enterprises. As people of praise we say that God does things differently. The psalmist here sang of a vision of a more just kingdom in which the first are last, and the last first, a kingdom that would not manifest until God himself stepped into our world to establish it, in the person of Jesus, the Prince of Peace. The one who opened the eyes of the blind, set the oppressed free, loved the widow and the fatherless, exalted the humble and brought low the earthly princes of His day. And every time we praise the Lord, or sing Hallelujah, we are stating in faith that Jesus' just kingdom will break through both now, through us, and in its fullness in the time to come. True praise, therefore, is prophetic in nature – it joins with all creation to proclaim God's Kingdom, something that, like the psalmist, we see in part now, but look with eyes of faith to the time when it is fully manifest in this world, when every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord, and there will be no more tears, nor more pain or suffering.

My challenge this morning, friends, is to choose carefully who you praise, how you praise and why you praise. If we take seriously the words of this wonderful poem, and we know who God is, revealed in Jesus, there is no choice!

And so let us ask our souls to Praise the Lord, Hallelujah!, both now and for the rest of our days, for He alone is worthy of our praises.