

Dear God, this is your church

I love all those house programs on tv, my favourite is still Kirstie and Phil on 'Location Location Location' though Escape to the Country is definitely a close second. My mum and dad used to watch house programs loads when I was growing up and even now, when they come down to Leeds to visit us, we'll have been out for the day and say, 'Before the boys come home from school, shall we have a cuppa and watch Homes under the Hammer?' and they'll watch potential buyers discussing the work that needs to be done on a house- the houses that need re-wiring, the walls that need knocking down or the flats that need their avocado coloured bathroom changing.

This morning we're continuing the teaching series on 'This is your church' and I wanted us to think about God's house this morning- that's us, the church. How are we actually doing as God's church? How does God think we are doing? Do **we** need some re-wiring? How do our neighbours think we are doing? You might be like some of the people on those house programs, just having a look round, seeing what you think of the church- asking questions like 'do I like it? Does it smell? Could I come back here? Could I make this my home? So, what do you think...how are we doing? Do we need to knock down some walls to create more space in our lives? Maybe thinking about outside our house, do we need to just lean over our garden fence a bit more and invite people in for a cuppa? Or maybe we just need a fresh coat of paint? How are we doing as God's church?

I thought it would be good to see what God wants us, his church, to be like so we're going to take a look at the Psalms this morning, a book that's right in the middle of the bible. We're looking at Psalm 95 and we're literally going to stick with this Psalm for the whole talk, examining it and figuring out what it says.

The Psalms were written by King David (you might remember him as the guy who killed Goliath) and were frequently sung and shared by God's people. Let's read the first 7 verses of Psalm 95.

¹ *Come, let us sing for joy to the Lord;
let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation.*

² *Let us come before him with thanksgiving
and extol him with music and song.*

³ *For the Lord is the great God,
the great King above all gods.*

⁴ *In his hand are the depths of the earth,*

and the mountain peaks belong to him.
⁵*The sea is his, for he made it,
and his hands formed the dry land.*
⁶*Come, let us bow down in worship,
let us kneel before the Lord our Maker;*
⁷*for he is our God
and we are the people of his pasture,
the flock under his care.*

So let's press on and dissect this Psalm a bit. Let's start from verse 3:

1. FOR THE LORD IS THE GREAT GOD...

³*For the Lord is the great God,
the great King above all gods.*
⁴*In his hand are the depths of the earth,
and the mountain peaks belong to him.*
⁵*The sea is his, for he made it,
and his hands formed the dry land.*

The Lord is known here as the creator, the King, the Maker and the Shepherd. He is the one to whom obedience is owed. He is the friend of the poor, He is the enemy of oppression, He possesses an everlasting name, He is remembered forever and ever and He is the object of our unending thanks and worship. He is the great God, the great king above all gods. Now in the culture of the time, pagan worship was very much directed to other gods- the **depths** referred to in verse 4, for example, were ruled by Molech, the **mountain peaks** by Baal and the **sea**, referred to in verse 5, was ruled by the pagan god Tiamat but the Psalmist says in verse 3 that that is all false, our God is the great God, the great king above all gods and **all** is in his hands.

And as I read this, I don't know what you see, but I see a God to whom nothing compares. He wants us to give **him** priority in our worship. The Psalm talks about bowing down and kneeling. This says to me that the Lord stands alone as the only one out there to worship. Now there's a lot of good things out there in our culture that ask for priority- often they are good things too - our work, seeing extended family, looking after our children well - these are all good things, but does our God just go alongside all the other values in our lives? Is it work, children, God, family.... Because I think the Psalm strongly suggests that we are to put him first then everything else goes beneath that.

How many of us look at all the list of priorities in our lives and then divide up the time we have and so every one has a little piece, everything gets satisfied enough so that it stops pestering us for our time? I wonder how many of us forget that **God's opinion** matters most- do we ask other people for their perspective on a tricky situation rather than going straight to God? I wonder what would happen if, as a church, we collectively agreed that the first thing we would say if someone came to us for our opinion would be 'What does God say?' Because by doing that we are **choosing** to give **him** the priority, what **he** thinks counts the most because He is the great God, the great King above all gods.

Let's look at some more of this Psalm.

2. COME, LET US...

How many of these 'us' can we see in this Psalm? How many can you count?

We read in verse 1: Come let **us** sing for joy...

We read on verse 2: Come let **us** shout aloud

Verse 3: Come let **us** come before him with thanksgiving

Verse 6: come let **us** bow down in worship

Verse 7: let **us** kneel before our maker

The word 'us' is used 5 times in 7 verses. That means that it's a pretty important word and important message that we need to hear. It tells me that the response to the Great God that we have talked about should be not only an individual one but a collective one. This thing we call the church is not just about buildings, teams, rotas etc, it's about doing life together with people who love Jesus. And it seems to me that the culture that we live in is crying out for people to do life together. From outward appearances it would seem that we are supremely connected. You can pretty much get to any person anywhere in the world at virtually any time of day via text, email, phone- we have the capacity and ability to connect to one another and yet we are increasingly lonely in how we relate with each other. Social media theoretically helps but it really doesn't because Facebook, for example, only seems to show people at their best. We see people getting married, we get to see who's had babies and it's painful if you see people always smiling, having a great time and you're not there! You have to close down your computer and get on with your life.

We see lots of interaction but I don't think that is what this Psalm is referring to when it uses the 'us' language. I don't think it refers to people **living off snippets** of other people's lives.

If we look at Genesis 1 and 2, the very first few pages of the bible, it goes on and on about God saying everything was good, do you remember- 'God made the light... the light was good' 'God made the earth... the earth was good', 'God made the plants and trees, they were also...good'. But then we get to Genesis chapter 2:18 and it's like a massive noise in a silent room. It's like a fire alarm going off in a library because it suddenly says da da daaaaa, something is not good!! The Lord God said it is not good for man to be alone. So it goes...It's good it's good it's good, suddenly it's not good. This is before any sin has entered the world, everything is exactly the way God designed it to be and something isn't good. So what's not good? It's not good to be alone. God brings the animals to Adam to name them and that creates some level of connection but it's just not suitable (verse 20). So then God makes Eve and there's an intimate connection.

This is significant because yes, we were created to have intimate relationship with God (you might have heard of Nicky Gumball, who heads up Alpha, quoting Pascal when he talks about there being a hole in our lives that only God can fill). But there is also a second thing that you might not have considered- there is a people shaped hole that even God himself will not fill - not **cannot** fill but **will not** fill because he designed us to have a close life with others.

So how are we doing with this? How many people know your weak spots, how many people are praying for you and walking alongside you? I'm saying this because this is an opportunity that is not worth missing out on- we have loads of totally free groups you can join where you would be welcomed whatever your background, circumstances or upbringing. None of us are perfect but we are called, as the Psalm says, to be an '**us**'. Maybe there are some of us here who are just thinking that being a Christian/following Jesus is only about our relationship with God, but maybe God wants to make you new **through** relationship with others.

Learning to follow Jesus alongside others helps us so much in what follows the '**us**' phrases in this Psalm. What follows the lines saying 'let us...' in the Psalm? - it's the kneeling, bowing down, shouting out loud, singing. It's what we would call worship.

We can come **together** to worship, let us worship, let us bow down, we can collectively come **together** and extol him with music and song. **But** we can also help each other with our **discipleship** in worship. It's true isn't it that most of our worship involves

singing with our mouths and listening to God with our ears. So we can ask each other how well we are going with 'guarding our gates'. Have you heard that phrase before? Guarding your gates? Your eyes and your ears are your gates and it's our responsibility to 'guard our gates'- that's what we watch and what we hear. You get to choose what comes in. **You get to choose what you see and what you hear.** We have to get good at that because that totally affects our worship - our hearts and minds get mucked up by things that get in there and that messes up our relationship with God - it makes it harder to worship, it makes it harder to receive love from God and it makes it harder to give love back to God.

So **'let us'** help each other with our discipleship of worship. Be accountable to each other. What clogs up those paths of relationship to God? If, like the Psalm says, we're going to worship the Lord our God, extolling him in worship and singing for joy we have to make sure that we are guarding our gates. What do you see, what do you think, what do you hear? Does it help you or hinder you with your worship?

Let's look at the last section of the Psalm:

3. FOR WE ARE THE PEOPLE OF HIS PASTURE, THE FLOCK UNDER HIS CARE

So what does King David, mean here when he says that we are the people of God's pasture, the flock under his care? I think he knows and understands that God is stable and that God is more stable than him. It's the same for us. He is bigger than you and me, he is someone you can build your life on. We can't bank on ourselves, we can't rely on ourselves but we can rely on our Heavenly Father.

Now none of this means that followers of Jesus don't get hurt or stressed or face some hard stuff- we do live in the same world as everyone else. We eat the same food, we drive on the same streets, we go to the same schools. We experience almost all of the same threats from the economy and our health and war as everyone else does.

But to be the people of his pasture and the flock under his care means that God will bear the brunt of whatever comes our way. We don't have to take it all on ourselves. We don't have to experience things head on. To have God looking after us as 'people under his care' means that whatever does come our way can never separate us from God and his love for us. Nothing can ever ever get in the way of God loving us.

This is what Paul means when he said in Romans 8

"Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

God is our shepherd, we shall lack nothing, he makes us lie down in green pastures, he restores our soul. (Psalm 23) We can be secure in God's commitment to us. It's not because we have chosen him but rather that he has committed himself to us.

Being the 'flock under his care' implies that God gives us outer protection doesn't it... But I think King David is talking also here about God giving us inward strength. My son broke his arm last year and when you break a bone, most of you will know that you have to have a cast put on it. You can decide whether you choose a bright pink cast or, did you know, they now do camouflage casts! The cast is designed to give the bone outward strength and it stops you from injuring it further. But the weirdest thing is when Joseph went to have the cast taken off his arm...when they use those massively strong scissors to cut it off...we realised two things about his arm- firstly how completely, disgustingly smelly it was because it had been wrapped up for so long. But secondly, it was so so skinny and weak. We discovered that he needed to build back the strength in the arm itself, in the inward strength.

I think this part of the Psalm is saying that God is not just our outward strength but our inward strength, he works inside us to enable us to keep going when we are overwhelmed, when we are threatened, when something is simply too big for us. God promises to covers us externally but also care for us inwardly through our dark days, through whatever is going on with us, he promises to strengthen us. Paul says:

'But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed but not in despair'.

2 Corinthians 4:7-8

As 'his flock', we **opt in** to spending time with God and step up to dealing with the things he is challenging us on. And God changes us for the best. Those of you that have been married a long time will relate to this- we've been married about 19 years and, on occasion, it has been known that even though we have got dressed completely independently, we have ended up looking virtually exactly the same. The longer we spend with Jesus, the more we walk, stumble, run, grieve, play in the 'fields of his

pasture', the more he transforms us and the more we become like him. If we are still making the same errors, having the same addictions, getting angry at the same things in 10 years time, that's not a good result.

So let's opt in to become more like Jesus. Let's invite the Holy Spirit to come and show us what changes he wants to make in his house, the church. And the thing that I felt God remind me of when preparing this was this: when you look at a house and you see things that need changing, you often think that you have to wait and save up so you can afford all the changes. It's expensive to change things in a house and likewise, it costs to change things in our hearts, in our minds and in our lives. But the Lord wants to remind you that he has already paid for all those things when Jesus died on the cross, it's free. You just need to ask him. Whether you have known Jesus for years and years or whether you are just sitting here this morning hearing about Jesus for the first time, the amazing change that Jesus brings **is free**.

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