

Compassion for the Community (Psalm 146)

This week we look at another song of praise. It is a psalm that focuses on what God is like and what God does. However, we tend to put into practice what we praise and become like those we worship, so as we consider what God does we find ourselves wanting to act like him.

From Praise to Practice...

Over the last few weeks we've been asking the question:

"What kind of church is God calling us to be?" in a post-covid world?

We've seen that the church needs to be about:

- praying to him to seek his help,
- caring for one another in the church
- and sharing God's word with each other and the world around.

We are also looking at three areas where those with particular gifts can serve in helping us to reimagine and reignite the way we are doing things.

Last week we looked at praising creatively and we have a new team looking at how we can reimagine and reignite our music at St. Luke's to help us praise more creatively.

There is also a new team looking at our theme for today, how we show compassion for the community around us.

These might seem very different, but the two are linked:

- Praise leads to practice.
- We become what we worship!

Psalm 146 is a Psalm of praise. Like Psalm 147, 148, 149 and 150. It starts and ends with the same Hebrew word: *Hallelujah!* Which means, "Praise the LORD!" Indeed, the first two verses are all about committing to praise God!

However, the focus of this Psalm is not so much on how we praise God, but on why we praise the LORD.

God is Greater than any Hero (Psalm 146:3-6,10)

After beginning with praise, the Psalm moves on to a contrast.

It is a contrast between what other human beings can do for us, particularly leaders or heroes and what God can do for us.

It warns us not to put your trust in princes.

Why is that? Is it because humans are bad and God is good?

That's not the reason given here. The 'Princes' mentioned may be true heroes that do some amazingly good work.

Why should we trust in God and not them? The Psalm says because they are temporary, but God is eternal.

- There have been incredible acts of compassion by people shown for those in need both locally, nationally and internationally. We should celebrate that work and

encourage it, but we should never let such works of temporary salvation by humans with their fantastic short term effects, stop us looking to God for the eternal salvation that only he can offer.

It is only when people trust in God, not human acts of compassion that they find true and lasting happiness. He is the maker of heaven and earth, he remains faithful for ever. No human being, no matter how good they are or how much they achieve can ever replace God as the saviour we all need.

As we consider how we might better show compassion to our community, let's not forget that our works of love and kindness can never replace people's need for God's offer of salvation. That is where true happiness of blessing comes from.

God rescues the Oppressed (Psalm 146:7-9)

And yet, our God is a blessing not just because of his powerful and eternal nature as the creator of the universe,
but because he cares for those in need:

"He upholds the cause of the oppressed and gives food to the hungry!" (Psalm 146:7)

The next line is perhaps harder to understand - "He sets prisoners free." When we hear that phrase today, we might think of wicked criminals being broken out of a jail they rightly belong in. This sounds like a plan for the wicked, not God frustrating the ways of the wicked!

But, the Psalm was written by Israelites, where the idea of prisoners being set free was fundamental to the way God had saved his people through history.

Exodus

So, in the Exodus story, the Israelites were prisoners of Egypt. Held as slaves by an oppressive regime.

But God rescued Israel from their imprisonment and brought them out of Egypt to live in the Promised land.

God sets the prisoner free!

Exile

Then later on in Israel's history, the Jews were once again taken prisoner from the land, this time by the Babylonians, not the Egyptians. They were taken away from their home to live in Babylonia.

Yet, God once again set them free. When the Babylonians were defeated by the Persians, the Jews were allowed to return to and rebuild Jerusalem. Once more God had set the prisoners free.

So the Old Testament story is about God siding with the people of Israel, a weak and powerless people to rescue them from oppressive and powerful empires. God sets the prisoners free, he cares for those in need.

And this is also the New Testament story of God's actions:

Cross

When Jesus came he said that he was fulfilling what was said in Isaiah:

"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour." {Isaiah 61:1,2} (Luke 4:25-26).

And of course Jesus in his ministry did care for the needy and the poor, healing the sick, making the blind see, the deaf hear and releasing people from the powers of demons.

He also taught the truth, a truth which he says will set us free. The truth that we can be reconciled to God and be part of his kingdom.

And of course in his death and resurrection, Jesus set us free from the power of sin and death:

"Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death." (Romans 8:1-2)

The basic Christian message is that God comes to set us free from the oppression of sin and death!

This is the way God acts and behaves. This is what God is like.

It is a blessing to trust in God, because he cares enough to save us from what oppresses us and because he can do so eternally!

And that is why according to this Psalm we praise God!

God's people should act like God

But when we praise God for his rescue and care for the oppressed as in the Psalm. Then we naturally will become more like the God we praise.

If the God we praise is concerned for the poor and needy, then surely we too must act with compassion for the poor and needy around us.

And indeed, throughout the Bible the call to look out for those in need is rooted in the truths about what God is like and how he has acted. So take the teaching of Moses to the people of Israel after they had been rescued from being slaves from Egypt:

"He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the foreigner, giving him food and clothing. And you are to love those who are foreigners, for you yourselves were foreigners in Egypt." (Deuteronomy 10:18-19)

And when it comes to the New Testament we saw in Acts a couple of weeks ago that the early church were keen to care for widows and there are many other examples of the early church making sure that the poor were cared for.

As Christians we will want to show compassion for our community, because we praise a God who shows compassion to us in our need and cares himself for the needy.

Compassion for our Community:

So, as we seek to reimagine and reignite our life as a church in Ramsgate, how might we go about showing compassion for our community?

This will happen in many ways informally, as you as individuals spot the needs of people that you come across on your frontlines: neighbours, family, work colleagues and friends. Let's act in compassion to show the kindness of God to them, not in a condescending or arrogant way, but with a genuine desire to help those who might need our help.

But also, we may need to work with others in partnership or possibly be more organised ourselves so that we can set up schemes to support those in our community.

Gives food to the hungry...

We see in the Psalm that God gives food to the hungry. There are some great examples locally of where people are helping those struggling with food poverty.

We saw earlier in the service about the great work of the Food Club, not giving food away, but providing it at affordable prices and offering people support to enable healthy eating.

There is also of course the Food Bank run from the Salvation Army, that helps people in more immediate need of food.

On Tuesday nights before the Pandemic there was also a Tuesday night community meal run out of St. George's hall, offering a free meal and a chance for people to gather together in community. They are now talking about restarting this - possibly from the end of June.

These are all great projects and it is great that there are volunteers from St. Luke's involved in supporting each one.

Lifts up those bowed down...

The Psalm also says that God lifts up those who are bowed down.

When we think of those bowed down, who do we think of? The homeless, drug addicts, the lonely, the depressed?

There have been some fantastic initiatives in recent times to help the homeless in Thanet. The Thanet Winter Shelter in particular that we have been involved in has done great work not just in helping the homeless survive the harsh winter months, but also in enabling them to move off the streets permanently. I heard yesterday that 20 homeless people have been moved into permanent accommodation through the shelter this year. It's a shame that as Christians and St. Luke's we couldn't be more involved with that this year, but I know many from the church have supported them.

Then there is the work of Community Pastors, who when the pubs were open, were there to support those bowed down through the events of a night out! Again it is great that people from St. Luke's have been involved in helping out with them.

But perhaps there are other needs that we could address?

What about those that are lonely or depressed? How can we meaningfully engage with people in those situations in a Post-Covid world? That will take reimagination.

Watches over the foreigners...

The Psalm also says, that God is keeper of the refugees or foreigners. In most ancient societies the support network, both financially and practically was based around the immediate and extended family.

However, in Israel there was a recognition that some did not have this family support. This was true of widows and orphans, but it was also true of foreigners in the land, who would not have had their own land or an extended family network of support. The Psalm says that God watches over such people. Moses similarly says in Deuteronomy:

"He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the foreigner, giving him food and clothing. And you are to love those who are foreigners, for you yourselves were foreigners in Egypt." (Deuteronomy 10:18-19)

Fostering or adoption is one way that people help in this area. It is an important way of offering a supportive family environment to those who would not otherwise have it.

Today, perhaps we need to be particularly looking out for those in our area who do not have extended family networks of support in our area. This could be long term locals whose family have moved away or people moving into the area, who are looking for a network of friendships and support in a new area.

It may be that also we need to find ways to particularly support migrants to the UK living in our area. I had an email from an organisation that is trying to encourage churches to be ready to welcome a potential migration of 130,000 people from Hong Kong to the UK. Is this an issue we as a church should be ready for? Or are there other groups of migrants that are in particular need in our area? Is this an area of support that is needed and lacking?

Let's pray for our Compassion Reimagine and Reignite Team as they explore how we as a church can do better in this area of showing compassion to our local community and supporting those in need.

Blessed are those

At the same time, let's not forget that ultimate blessing and salvation can come only from God.

We want to help people out of their difficulties and needs, but everyone's greatest need is to be reconciled to God and rescued from sin and death through the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

As we seek to offer compassion, care and support to all, let's not forget also to share the good news of Jesus Christ and point them to the heavenly Father who really can save and bless them.