

Worship, Sunday 17th January 2021.
Revelation 5, also John 1:29-end.

Prayer.

Story. Monk. Performance at Christmas. Key piece. Monk who couldn't sing very well.

New Monk joined. Angelic voice. He was asked to sing the key piece.

Which he did.

Everyone delighted. Abbot was happy.

That night. In his room, angel appeared. Abbot what happened to your performance this year?

I don't know what you mean?

Each year, we hear the performance and we enjoy the key piece sung so beautifully.

This year, we heard nothing...

Revelation 5. John, after being given the words to write to the 7 churches in what is now western Turkey, he is given a vision to share with these churches as well. He sees one seated on the throne, and the worship; he sees a scroll in the hand of the one on the throne, yet no one can open – bar one – the Lion of Judah, the Lamb who was slain. He sees and hears the worship. Then the seals are opened, and the scroll opens...

We are exploring our Focus to Worship.

Sovereign. The Scroll.

The scroll. It holds the events, the redemption, the judgement, which accompanies the end of this world, and the introduction of the new world to come. The scroll holds history. And the scroll is in the hand of the one on the throne. God is ultimately sovereign over history. It rests in his hand. No matter how chaotic things become, how far a pandemic extends, how strong evil becomes, how fierce satanic attacks are, history still rests in God's hands. He remains sovereign.

For Christians in those churches, where they faced persecution, were under pressure, in a minority, where even one of their number at least had been martyred, God remained sovereign. History rested in his hands. He remains in ultimate control. The word to them. The word to us. For this he can be praised – history is not in some random movement with no direction.

Kneeling. The Lamb took the scroll.

The four living creatures and 24 elders fell down before the Lamb. If you've read chapter 4, the living creatures and elders had been prostrate before the one on the throne. Now they offer the exact same worship to the Lamb. The approach to prayer in the first century – both by Greeks and Romans as well as by Jews – was to stand for prayer. So to prostrate – to fall before someone shows either extreme reverence or urgent supplication. That act already speaks volumes to us. There are times, simply, when our sung worship, doesn't create warm feelings, or impressive thoughts, there our times I believe, that our sung worship should simply bring us to our knees in reverence.

New Song.

The living creatures and elders sing a new song. A new song is a very common term in the psalms. There is always a song for the new mercies of God. A fresh song of celebration of God's mighty deeds of salvation for his people. Psalm 98 'Sing to the Lord a new song for he has done marvelous things, his right hand and his holy arm have worked salvation for him.' Psalm 40: "he set my feet on a rock and gave me a firm place to stand. He put a new song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to my God." The word points to 'a fresh song' not necessarily one that is quite different from those that have been sung before.

Fresh is provoking. There is a Hebrew word called kavanah. It means intention or direction. The word holds the idea of being *profoundly aware of the One* to whom you are speaking as you direct your heart to heaven. 'A prayer without kavanah is like a body without a soul' say the rabbis. Many Jewish prayers are repeated – so the rabbis emphasize the need for kavanah – each time the prayer is said, it is said as if the words are fresh, full of passion, with a sense of reverence for the awesome God

who is our focus. Jewish theologian and writer Abraham Herschel said kavanah is about 'attentiveness to God, an act of appreciation of being able to stand in the presence of God.' This applies to prayers, to our liturgy – one of my regular prayers for us all, that the liturgy we pray each Sunday – known, will be fresh, full of passion and faith. But it applies to songs and hymns of course. Each song, each hymn to be fresh. Even if we know it by heart. We sing to the Lord. We are aware of the One to whom we sing. In fact, we sing, we direct our heart to heaven. Songs and hymns without kavanah is like a body without a soul. Like our story at the beginning about the monks...
Let each time we sing, our words be as if fresh.

However, the word 'new song' can also designate a song composed for a great occasion. Isaiah 42: 'See the former things have taken place and new things I declare, before they spring into being I announce them to you. Sing to the LORD a new song, his praise from the ends of the earth. You who go down to the sea, all that is in it you islands and all who live in then, let the desert and its towns raise their voices...' Sing because a new order is about to begin... The new song is the consequence of the new creation. We sing due to the new creation God has brought about.

When you read through Revelation, it is a book of new things. There is the new name, the new Jerusalem, the new song – here and again in chapter 14, there are the new heavens and the new earth, there is finally the great promise, to make all things new.

The word used of new is important. There are two Greek words for new. *Neos*. That means new in point of time, but not necessarily new in terms of quality. *Neos* is a thing that has been recently produced, but it may only be a new specimen of something that has existed for a long time – a new hamburger, a new car. There is another word. *Kainos*. It means new in point of quality. *Kainos* describes a thing which has not only been recently produced it describes a thing the like of which has never existed before...

The Lion of Judah, the Lamb who was slain – celebrated. Through Jesus Christ, a quality comes into life that has never existed before. He brings into lives new joy. He brings new excitement and adventure. He brings new strength. He brings new peace. Something new begins to live in the world, and in each person who kneels before the Lamb and cries you are worthy.

Kainos is the word used for ‘new song’. A new song, which not only has been recently produced, but a quality of which has never existed before. Wow. Our Songs. Can we sing like we have never before. Can each one – hymn, song – we sing, be of greater quality, heart than before. Instead of NEOS – just another song to the Lord.

The first Song: Of the Living Creatures and of the Elders.

Lion of Judah. Lamb. Firstly the Messiah came in humility, he was slain and yet rose. Second time he comes in glory. John’s Gospel reminds us that the Messiah, is both King of Israel and the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. The Song cries out – it reminds us - of all the lamb has done for us.

The death of Jesus Christ was a **sacrificial** death. It was a death with a purpose. His death was not an accident or a tragic event in history. His sacrifice to restore the lost relationship between us and God, for that reason Jesus died. *Sacrificial.*

The death of Jesus Christ was an **emancipating** death. Jesus is the great liberator. The one who comes to bring freedom. With his blood he purchased men and women for God. He bought us. He ransomed us. *Emancipating.*

The death of Jesus Christ was **universal** in his benefits. It was – we hear – for people of every tribe, language, people, nation. In Jesus Christ we meet a God who loves the world. As someone said : The death of Christ was for all, and therefore it is the task of the Church to tell all about it. *Universal.*

The death of Jesus Christ was **transforming**. The lamb is praised not just for rescuing us. But he turns us from rebels with no hope, into useful servants for him. In fact more. We are turned from being slaves to sin, 'to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father...' as the letter began. 'From rubbish to royalty' as Tom Wright puts it. The lamb has set us free to stop being spectators and to start playing our part. I love what Matt Redman writes: the death of Christ shows he doesn't count anyone out, so you should count yourself into his plans and purposes.

Transforming.

When we think of what the death and life of Jesus has done for humankind, it is no wonder that the living creatures and the elders burst into praise of Him. In that way, daily, hourly, we can join the worship in heaven. As John Wimber wrote: "Worship is going on all the time in heaven. When we worship we are joining that which is already happening."

The Second Song: of the Angels.

Like in Daniel 7, suddenly there are thousands and millions of angels. Like on Christmas Day – there was one, then the entire host. The second song turns from what the Lamb has achieved. To what has and does deserve. He deserves all the glory and honour of which creation is capable. The wealth and strength and power of the nations belong to him. Everything that enriches human life, everything that helps people live wisely and to enjoy and celebrate the goodness of the Lord – all that is to be laid at his feet.

Unfortunately it is possible that for us as Christians, we can only think of Jesus for our comfort and hope – he rescued me, he is my friend – and fail to see *all* that he deserves, his majesty, his glory.

It is possible that we can be content to have Jesus beside us for spiritual purposes, but we give riches, glory, power, honour to earthly forces, idols and rulers.

Third Song. The Song of All creation.

William Barclay: 'Now the chorus of praise goes so far that it cannot go farther, for it reaches throughout the whole of the universe and the whole of creation. All through the world there is one vast song of praise to the Lamb.' Revelation, pg 228. Every creature in creation – which echoes our creed – the word from Phil 2 – "God has given him the name about all name, that at the name of Jesus, every knee should bow, in heaven and earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father." God the Father and the Lamb are praised, they both receive it, they both share it. Maybe you can say, there we get the highest possible understanding of Christology in the whole New Testament – of what we can say of God in worship, we can say of Jesus. God the Creator, God the Redeemer.

Sung worship shapes life.

These scenes of heavenly worship – this chapter and the one before – follow from the proclamation by the King of Kings to the churches in the 7 cities. These followers of Jesus faced their own challenges as well as opportunities. Some things were not as they hoped. They faced pressure. Persecution in some places. Yet in their struggles, what they hold before them is this cosmic vision of praise of God and for the Lamb. People may have said they were not fitting in, they were going against the flow of refusing to adore the emperor, Revelation refocuses.

All of creation – in Ephesus, in Smyrna, in Laodicea etc – is not caught up in worship and adoration of the Emperor, but in the worship of God the Creator and Redeemer, of the One who sits on the Throne and the Lamb. Revelation says – anyone not caught up in that worship, is actually in the minority. It is a cultural counter claim; it is a spiritual counter claim to reality. The call is for the readers, hearers of that letter and for us, to join in with that worship. That the choruses given the Emperor, their choruses are to the true King of Kings.

Louie Giglio says 'Passion is the degree of difficulty we are willing to endure to achieve the goal.' Passion is about a life, everything laid down, even when it costs us something or even everything.

We talk about passion for a sport – for a team who travel everywhere, will stand in the stands no matter how cold it is, they will sing no matter how bad the score is... The lamb who is slain – shows us passion – the degree of difficulty we are willing to endure to achieve the goal. He was passionately obedient to the Father, he was committed to the mission. Passion is about a life laid down to God.

We have talked about sung worship. Matt Redman reminds us :
“Passionate worship is never a matter of getting the words and tune right or raising a loud shout. The true test of our passion for God will always be our lives.” He goes on to say, that if we are looking for a way to tell God how much we love him, the best way hasn’t much to do with words put together in a song, it involves “a life laid down in service and adoration.” He ends by saying: “The concrete evidence of whether our [sung] worship has live or died in us, will always be our lives. We may sing our songs with good intentions but in the end our lives must become the evidence.” (Redman, pages 27-28).

Singing is easy. The proof – are we living it. Will the music in our hearts, disappear when the going gets tough? Pressure from outside or inside? Will we become distracted from living for God and the Lamb, when conditions aren’t as we desire. Will our fireworks of our excited hearts come to nothing – a brief moment like on New Years Eve fireworks – and then silence. Or will the fire of our passion – continue in the difficulties, inconveniences, pandemic. The worship of heaven, inspires. But worship is to shape and mould us, to recentre us.

To finish.
Focus for worship. He is sovereign.
Times of Intimacy also reverence.
Sing the Songs as if new, sing like we have never before.
Sung for all he has done.
Sung by all.
Our Songs to shape our reality, lives, the proof of the song words, in our lives.
Amen.

Shall we pray.

Lord, we see the vision in heaven. We remember Jesus you were asked to teach your disciples how to pray. Would you – Lion and Lamb – teach us how to worship you, in words, in song and hymn, and let those songs and hymns be lived out in each day.