

## **Year C**

### **Psalm 150**

Sir Thomas Beecham, the English orchestral conductor, once saw a distinguished-looking woman in a hotel foyer. Believing he knew her, but unable to remember her name, he paused to talk with her. As the two chatted, he vaguely recollected that she had a brother. Hoping for a clue, he asked how her brother was and whether he was still working at the same job. "Oh, he's very well," she said, "And still king."

The wife of a retiring bishop was impressed when she and her husband left the home of their host, the Episcopal bishop of Panama, and found a crowd waiting near the front of the house. Having seen these people during a morning church service, she greeted each one present and thanked them for such a warm good-bye. Her enthusiasm waned, however, when a city bus appeared and the puzzled crowd climbed aboard.

I'm sure none of us like to be embarrassed. The sudden awareness that you've said or done something silly before an amused gathering can cause the blood to rush to

your cheeks and that just makes it worse, doesn't it?

I was watching a children's choir in church recently on television. They stepped up onto the chancel and lined up ready to begin to lead worship. The pianist began to play and they all, on cue, sang through the first verse beautifully and all went well until they got to the chorus. You see, there were actions with the chorus and it was clear that some of the children knew the actions better than the others and the others were aware of that. The uncertain ones were hesitant, off-beat and made mistakes as they gazed at one

another and their cheeks reddened with embarrassment. The earlier focus on worship degenerated into an awareness of one another and ultimately an awareness of self which hindered their praise.....

If an African choir were to suddenly appear at the front door of the church and march down the aisles praising and dancing and making quite a noise, how would we react? I suppose it would vary with each individual but for many of us we would be self-conscious. Instead of allowing the others to draw us into praise we might be thinking how foolish we looked as we tried to join in

with our raised hands and our dodgy sense of bodily rhythm; or even if we decided to sit tight, on our hands! Much of our reticence comes down to a preoccupation with self. We can become so preconditioned to think of our own bearing in relation to others that we struggle to take our attention off ourselves and onto God. That kind of preoccupation will stifle praise.

Psalm 150 is some psalm to end the psalter. In essence, it is very straightforward. We don't find developed theology here; instead we are instructed again and again to praise the Lord. Walter Brueggemann, the German

theologian, wrote that this psalm “is the extreme case of inutility. It asks nothing. Indeed it almost claims nothing. It nearly says nothing.”<sup>1</sup> And yet that’s why it’s the perfect conclusion to the psalter, which began with a call to meditate on the law of the Lord, because in the sentiment of Sir Thomas More when everything else is stripped away we need no longer serve God wittily in the tangle of our minds but simply with all that we have. Psalm 150 begins with the same two Hebrew words which we all know well - Hallelu Yah: Praise the Lord! It

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<sup>1</sup> Brueggemann, W. 1995 *The Psalms and the Life of Faith* Minneapolis: Fortress Press p125

is framed as such because that is the sole preoccupation of the Psalm and ultimately will be the sole preoccupation of the human being. Notice that the Psalm concludes with the imperative that everything that has life in it, praises the Lord - absolutely everything. That is as precise a vision of ultimate reality that we find in all Scripture.

Now, all of that is well and good but we may not feel like praising God! After all, the Second Sunday of Easter can be a real downer. After the shout; "He is risen!" we're brought back down to the reality of the struggle of everyday living. It's not for

nothing that this Sunday is described as 'Low Sunday'. And our Gospel reading helps to explain why, for there we find Thomas. I think that I encounter more disciples like Thomas than any other disciple. He represents, for me, the often encountered northern European tendency for gloominess or despondency. And that kind of personality trait has the capacity to spoil our praise.

In America there is a much loved Viking comic strip character called Hagar the Horrible. In one episode we find Hagar kneeling in prayer. "It's not easy to believe in



you God. We never see you. How come you never show yourself? How do we know you even exist...” Next we see:

a flower springing into life beside Hagar,  
a volcano erupting in the distance,  
an eclipse of the sun turning the sky black,  
a star shooting across the stratosphere;  
a tidal wave rushing over Hagar,  
lightning flashing,  
a bush beginning to burn,  
a stone rolling away from the entrance to a tomb.

Hagar pulls himself from the mud, dripping wet, surrounded by darkness. “OK, OK. I give

up! Every time I bring up this subject, all we get is interruptions!”

That’s the spirit of Thomas. We can become so self-possessed that we’re not able to perceive what is evident around us. We cannot praise God if we do not open ourselves to him. The beauty of the Thomas story is that when he eventually meets with the risen Jesus he is able to worship with the words; “My Lord and my God”. Even Thomas is included in the final words of Psalm 150; “let everything that breathes praise the Lord”.

An Hasidic story tells of a tailor who approached his rabbi and said, “I have a problem with my prayers. I am a tailor, and from time to time people compliment me on my skills. It is very satisfying to hear their praise. One kind word can keep me going for a week. But if people came to me all day every day saying, “Mendel, you are a wonderful tailor”, “Mendel, you are a wonderful tailor”, “Mendel, you are a wonderful tailor” it would drive me crazy. It would get to the point I wouldn’t want to hear another compliment ever again! I would tell everyone to go away and leave me to

work in peace. And this is what bothers me about prayer. If just once a week we told God how wonderful he is, and just a couple of us did this each week, that is all God would need. Is God really so insecure that he needs us all to praise him morning, noon and night? Hundreds, thousands, millions of people praying, all praising him. Surely this would drive God crazy?!”

The rabbi smiled and said, “Mendel, you are absolutely right. You have no idea how difficult it is for God to listen to all our praises, day in, day out, 24 hours a day. But God knows how important it is for us to offer

our praise, and so, because of God's great love God tolerates all of our prayers."<sup>2</sup>

We are made to praise the Lord. May we be led, like Thomas, to stand before Jesus and praise Him as our Lord and our God this Eastertide. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Kushner H. 1989 *Who Needs God* Fireside Press