

Psalm 95:1

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

Venite, exultemus Domine – O come, let us sing to the Lord!

- These words are as much a summons to worship
- As the tolling of the bell at the parish church
- For Psalm 95, which opens in this way
- Is one of the four Psalms that the Book of Common Prayer prescribes for daily use
- This Psalm is supposed to be used in every parish every day
- The Prayer Book renders the purpose of the service in this way
- ‘to set forth his most worthy praise’
- ‘to hear his most holy word’

It’s certainly not an unworthy target for this to take place every day

- but realistically, at least we can focus upon this every Sunday
- I am as guilty of it as anyone
- but the modern distinction between ‘worship’ and ‘word’ is not really unhelpful
- people speak of ‘worship’ as if it something that can stand separately from ‘word’
- but I think this important Psalm teaches that we must keep the two together

In many churches today, after the service has been running for about 20 minutes

- someone, often with a guitar, will say, ‘now let’s move into a time of worship’
- what they typically mean by that is a time of singing songs
- people could justifiably ask what they have been doing for the last 20 minutes
- but when we call singing (whether it be songs or hymns) ‘worship’
- and the scripture reading, preaching and teaching ‘word’
- it implies that it is all right to separate the two – and I don’t accept that

The typical argument in Christian communities today is often called ‘worship wars’

- some people (often younger but not exclusively so)
- contend that God is truly worshipped only with songs written since 1980
- but basically speaking, the newer – the better
- other people (often older but not exclusively so)
- contend that God is truly worshipped only with hymns in the classical style
- the more classical and the older – the better
- what is then called ‘worship’ tends to be a matter of musical preference
- or maybe even of emotional experience
- and if people enjoy or become emotional with a certain kind of music
- then very soon they equate those experiences with worship and wars begin

Psalm 95 takes a different line altogether - the people are gathered

- they sing for joy, they bow down, they listen to his word
- it’s a celebration of the presence and greatness of God
- in which they are encouraged and edified – it’s a call to:

- I OPEN YOUR LIPS
- II OPEN YOUR EARS
- III OPEN YOUR HEARTS

I OPEN YOUR LIPS

The community is summoned to come together to celebrate God's saving grace

- Come, let us sing for joy to the LORD
- let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation
- Let us come before him with thanksgiving
- and extol him with music and song

Communal singing is something that we are doing less and less in our society

- but one place that some of us more enlightened people encounter vigorous singing is at a football match
- I enjoy watching football on television but you can never enter into the atmosphere
- It's especially nice to be in a tightly packed crowd, to hear the songs of victory
- And to offer to the opposition that most derisory of chants to the vanquished foe 'You're not singing any more!'
- songs in football grounds are set to pop music, hymn tunes and classical music

Time and time again we have to see that the ingredients of worship

- are not about a particular kind of song
- but are about the right focus
- it is about singing for joy to the Lord
- the call to gather together is met with a choral response
- the object of this joyous ceremony is none other than the LORD
- this is not singing or praise without reason
- the LORD is the Rock of our salvation

The rock of our salvation is applied to God in his role as Divine Warrior

- one who defends and delivers his people (Psalm 98:2)
- calling God the 'rock' is not uncommon in the Old Testament
- but when we get to the New Testament 'rock' is rarely used
- when it is used it is very revealing, for Paul writes to the Corinthians:

For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers, that our forefathers were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea. They were all baptised into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. They all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ.

(1 Corinthians 10:1-4)

In short, the spiritual salvation that they received from God came through Christ

- praise and thanksgiving focus on God's mighty acts of salvation
- it is right that the Christian community worships the Lord in word and music
- when we praise God with our voice we tell of his greatness
- we encourage one another to respond to his grace
- like instruments in the orchestra – our melody is missed when we are not there
- and the absence of our part diminishes the whole

Praise and singing need to focus upon the Lord

- the LORD is the great God, the great King above all gods
- this does not mean that the Psalmist thinks that there are other gods
- it is simply a figure of speech
- why would anyone bother to sing the praises of other gods
- is any other god, the creator of the depths of the earth or of the mountains
- did any other god make the sea, or with his hands form the dry land?
- The text has the 'LORD' in four block capitals
- There is no slippery, jiggery-pokery here – this is the God of Israel
- The God who revealed himself to Moses in the burning bush
- The God who gave the Ten Commandments and the Law
- This is, in fact, the one true God – the great God, the great King
- All other gods are the contemptible fictions of the imaginations of man (von Rad)
- If God created everything, no created thing can be made into an idol
- All the gods of the nations are idols (Psalm 96:5)

Some commentators suggest that the first section of the Psalm

- Is a call to worship that takes place outside the temple court
- And that the next section takes place inside the temple court
- In any event there is a change of mood
- The Psalm begins 'Come let us sing for joy to the LORD;
- Let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation
- Let us come before him with thanksgiving
- And extol him with music and song'
- The Psalm continues with the reasons for such singing and shouting
- But with the second major bidding the mood changes
- 'Come, let us bow down in worship,
- Let us kneel before the LORD our Maker'
- Again this is not worship without a thoughtful reason
- 'for he is our God
- and we are the people of his pasture
- the flock under his care'
- but this is a prelude to hearing God voice

II OPEN YOUR EARS

In this second section of the Psalm (from verse 6 onwards)

- there is a renewal of the call to worship
- let us bow down, let us kneel – so we are ready to hear his word
- it is a call to open your ears

The other day I had arranged to meet Janet but she was a little delayed

- consequently, I was able to engage in a little people watching
- as people made their way home from school or work
- I suppose I already knew it and yet I was surprised
- So many people walking up the road were either wearing headphones
- Or talking on their mobile phones – lots of people were putting their ears to work

Many of you will know that while I realise they have their uses

- I am not really a great fan of mobile phones
- What really gets me more than anything is that you can be talking to someone
- And suddenly they pick up their mobile phone to receive or make a call
- Or to receive or make a text message – as soon as this happens I walk off
- More often than not they don't ask why but if they should ask why
- I would point out that they are not really listening so I am going

Those who point out that our times of worship are not something that we can switch on

- Are quite right – some people are even resisting calling services worship at all
- So as not to delude people that turning up and singing hymns or songs is worship
- We have to worship God with our lips but also with our ears
- Open your lips, open your ears

The Psalmist knows that there is a place for singing for joy, for shouting aloud

- There is a place for thanksgiving, for exalting God with music and song
- And there is an important place for humble reverence and holy awe before God
- Some people have mistaken something that is simply deathly dull for reverence
- But others have mistaken something that is simply lively for worship
- Attending a service with all the vitality of a mortuary is not Christian worship
- But neither is a service with all the reverence of a rave-up Christian worship
- As with most things it is a matter of balance
- We need to remember the greatness of God and the wonder of his saving grace
- We need to remember the wrath of God and how much we need his mercy
- We need to remember God's universal kingship and his loving promises to his people
- We should expect times of rejoicing and of reverence
- Of celebration and of seriousness
- Of songs of victory and of great humility

The Psalm writer does not invite us bow down in worship and to kneel without reason

- God is the LORD – the God who is faithful to his promises – he is our Maker
- The word the NIV renders 'for', 'for he is our God' (v. 7) means 'truly'
- 'Truly he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture
- the flock under his care'
- The God who is our Creator is also our Shepherd
- In other words, the great God who created the universe cares about us

Yet even hearing God's voice is not without purpose

- There is another mood change in the Psalm as God speaks
- 'Today, if you hear his voice
- Do not harden your hearts as you did at Meribah
- As you did that day at Massah in the desert
- Where your fathers tested and tried me, though they had seen what I did'
- It is a call for those who sing gospel psalms to lead gospel lives
- To hear the voice of God's word
- If we are not prepared to listen to God
- How can we expect that he will listen to our prayers and praises

The Psalm begins with an exhortation:

I OPEN YOUR LIPS

It continues with the exhortation

II OPEN YOUR EARS

It concludes with the exhortation

III OPEN YOUR HEARTS

Throughout Israel's history two great things have spoiled the people's relationship with God

- Apathy and disobedience
- But the Psalmist calls for a different response
- There is an urgency about it, 'Today, if you hear his voice'

The story of the Exodus begins in Exodus 12

- After the death of Joseph, the Israelites fell into slavery in Egypt
- When Pharaoh commanded the Israelites to make bricks without straw
- Moses cried out to God and God promised to deliver them (Exodus 5)
- A series of plagues came upon the Egyptians
- The last of which was the death of the firstborn
- Israel was saved from the death of the firstborn by obeying God's command
- To mark their houses with the blood of the Passover Lamb
- Under God's judgment, the Egyptians wanted the Israelite people to go
- In Exodus 13 and 14, by the grace of God, they crossed the Red Sea
- They were led by a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night
- Exodus 15 is a celebration, a song to the Lord, for his mighty deliverance
- Exodus 16 records the provision of manna and quail of the people to eat
- Exodus 17 records the provision of water from the rock
- But just three days after they had crossed the Red Sea the people were quarrelling
- At Massah and Meribah, and asking, 'Is the LORD among us or not?'
- 'Meribah' means 'contending' and Massah means 'testing'
- These words came to characterise a whole generation of faithless people
- Despite all the mighty works of god they had witnessed
- In Egypt, at the Red Sea, and his provision in the wilderness
- The people grumbled, complained and challenged God's Lordship

If God is truly our God then we must acknowledge the nature of that relationship

- He is our Creator, we must kneel before the Lord our Maker
- He is our Saviour, the rock of our salvation
- Not simply the founder, but the very foundation
- That rock is Christ, to him, therefore, we must sing our songs of praises
- To him that sits upon the throne and to the Lamb
- For Jesus is the ultimate Passover Lamb
- And it is by the shedding of his blood, and taking that covering to ourselves by faith
- That is the only way that we can be saved from God's judgment
- We have been redeemed by Jesus' blood and we are his, under all possible obligations
- We are the people of his pasture and the sheep of his hand
- The gospel church is Christ's flock and he is the great and good Shepherd of it

The implication of this part of the Psalm is really plain to see

- Here you are singing and bowing but are you really listening
- You are as likely as your forebears to harden your hearts
- But if, today, you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts (Hebrews 3:7)
- For God's saving acts of the past are proof of his saving power today

The psychology is simple enough – I might not fancy opening my heart today

- But don't worry, I can always do it tomorrow and if not tomorrow then soon
- But in thinking like this we forget who is really in control, for God says
- 'For forty years I was angry with that generation; I said,
- "They are a people whose hearts go astray, and they have not known my ways."
- So I declared on oath in my anger
- "They shall never enter my rest."

'Rest' is an important theme in the Bible – it does not mean inactivity

- so much as returning to a relationship of peace and blessing with God
- in one sense a restoration of Eden, in another sense heaven
- which for Israel was foreshadowed by their entering into the Promised Land, Canaan
- but which a whole generation missed out on because of the hardness of their hearts
- in Jesus, 'rest' – a relationship of peace and blessing with God is offered 'today'

One of the problems of our age is that although we readily speak of 'community'

- we are inclined to think that God treats us only as individuals
- in a right understanding of the Christian community
- we belong to God and to each other – it is that partnership with each other
- that is properly called 'fellowship' – being Christians together
- as Christians together we need open lips, open ears and open hearts

From the beginning the Methodist emphasis (shared with other believers too)

- is that becoming a Christian by the grace of God, through repentance and faith
- is not the end of our journey but the beginning – the end is to be Christ-like (holy)
- to be Christ-like and holy is salvation in its fullest sense
- sin (unbelief and disobedience) that we hold on to indicates a hardness of heart
- Methodists always affirmed the possibility of victorious Christian living
- This Psalm invites us: open your lips, open your ears, open your hearts
- To do the first of these can simply be about singing songs
- To do the second of these can simply be about hearing words
- But to do all three is truly Christian worship

The prayer of the believer is summed up in these words:

O that I now, from sin released,
Thy word may to the utmost prove,
Enter into the promised rest,
The Canaan of thy perfect love!