

Psalm 98:1

Sing to the LORD a new song

I recently read a letter to a magazine from an inmate of an American prison

- A 23 year old on death row, wrote as follows:

I love the fact that people are fighting for death row inmates. That gives us something to look forward to. However, there's something people have to understand – that some of us will go home, some will get life and some of us will die. I just want people to know that they have to get their soul right. Because when you die, it's too late.

I am not proposing here to debate capital punishment but simply to draw attention

- To what the inmate had written
- It is important to have something to look forward to

Like many people of my age I grew up with the music of *Pink Floyd*

- And as a 15 year old listened to their groundbreaking *Dark Side of the Moon*
- The song which forms the centre-piece of the album is simply entitled *Time*
- The theme of the lyrics is about how time can slip by
- When you are young there seems like plenty of time to waste
- And that many people do not realise the years are running by until it is too late
- And what is there to look forward to then except an early grave?
- The songwriter, Roger Waters, got the idea for the song when he realised
- He was no longer preparing for anything in life – he was right in the middle of it
- It was a song that he wrote when he was just 28 years old

If in my teenage years I was susceptible to a message of hopelessness and nihilism

- A message that so many people of my generation and those since have accepted
- That human life – past, present and future – has no ultimate meaning or purpose
- That there is no such thing as comprehensible truth or essential value
- That there is no reason to believe in the existence of a creator
- And that life is, in effect, pointless – if 30 years ago, that was the prevailing message
- These days, things have probably taken an even more depressing step

The latest film for children, widely advertised, and likely to be a box-office hit

- *The Golden Compass* is based on a novel by Philip Pullman
- Which is the first of a trilogy, followed by *The Subtle Knife* and *The Amber Spyglass*
- Books whose sales rank alongside *Harry Potter*
- *Christianity Today* recently reported that author Philip Pullman
- Seems to have pulled off the rare trick of annoying both atheists and Christians
- The atheists are annoyed because the film itself seems pretty mild and innocent
- And atheists are disappointed that the anti-Christian overtones have been toned down
- And the Christians are annoyed, because the books present a much different story
- Through which Pullman admits he is trying to undermine the basis of Christian belief
- So much so that in the final book, *The Amber Spyglass*
- Characters representing Adam and Eve, eventually kill God

So, while society around us celebrates a midwinter festival it still calls 'Christmas'

- The church moves into the season of Advent
- Which in many churches is little more than Christmas-come-early
- Where the trivialisation of the Christian message is often taken for granted
- So that even despite the carol singing and nativities
- everyone can roll into the New Year unchallenged and untouched
- while nihilism and meaninglessness continues to pervade much of our music
- and atheism makes further inroads into children's education and reading
- a world much different from Psalm 98
- a psalm which gives reasons for God's universal praise

The origin of the psalm is lost in history

- it seems to have started out as a song celebrating a victory for God's people
- but in its final form the psalm has become separated from its historical roots
- many saving events are represented as one event
- and the psalm moves its focus from a reflection on the past
- to a joyful anticipation of the universal restoration of all things
- through the coming of God's Kingdom

The church's season of Advent anticipates our celebration of Jesus' coming in history

- that is we use these four weeks to prepare for Christmas Day
- but we also think about the end of the world, the Lord's future coming in glory
- and the eternal Kingdom of God, which we call heaven

Many people in the world at large or perhaps I should simply say 'many people'

- and include church-goers as well
- many people want to keep all their options open, to have their cake and eat it
- they want to keep alive some hope of God, eternal life and heaven
- what you might call the optimism of faith
- while living a life that takes no account of that hope and lives exclusively for now
- what you might call the pessimism of unbelief

The psalm writer is having none of it and instead leads the people to

- a joyful celebration of the past acts of deliverance (vv. 1-3)
- worship of the great King
- a joyful anticipation of God's coming

The New Testament records God's greatest act of deliverance

- the Bible's great message is that God has come to us in person in Jesus Christ
- and that his death on the cross has saving significance for us all
- for by his dying he has secured for his people eternal forgiveness
- and by his rising from the dead he secured for his people eternal life
- while the gospel stories are the account of the life and teachings of Jesus Christ
- there is no doubt that what the New Testament is really interested in
- is the significance and meaning of his death on the cross and his resurrection
- causing the Christian to conclude that Jesus is the one who will overcome the enemy
- redeem his people and judge the entire earth when he comes again in glory

I SING TO THE SAVIOUR

Sing to the LORD a new song, for he has done marvellous things;
his right hand and his holy arm have worked salvation for him.
(Psalm 98:1)

Many of you will know that I am a great football fan and recently had a visit to Wembley

- it was a great occasion but I have come to the conclusion
- that football crowds don't sing like they once used to
- people certainly used to sing – but a great number of people today don't sing at all
- and if they do often seem dependent on pre-recorded music for accompaniment
- so much so if ever people of my age and younger want to sing together
- there is very little written in the last 40 years that we can sing
- but this is different from the heritage of community singing (in Britain)
- and a long way away from the freedom songs of the American civil rights movement

In modern Britain a church service is one of the few places that people are expected to sing

- and in some churches performances, live or pre-recorded, contemporary or traditional
- are more or less taking the place of congregational singing
- it is strange that today's churches seem so dependent on musical accompaniment
- when the phrase we use to mean without musical accompaniment *a cappella*
- literally means 'at the chapel'
- as people go to the mega-event to hear the band or the cathedral to hear the choir
- neither bad in themselves and I have sufficiently broad musical tastes to enjoy both
- but the psalm writer is not advertising neither a concert nor choral evensong
- he is not exhorting people to hear the new song but to sing it
- I guess because hearing it relates to the head but singing it relates to the heart

Sing to the LORD a new song, for he has done marvellous things

- Although God has neither hands nor arms we can understand what our writer means
- In the phrase 'his right hand and his holy arm have worked salvation for him'
- The new song that the believer sings celebrates God's victory
- For the Christian no victory is clearer than the death and resurrection of Jesus
- His death is a victory because as a man without sin he was not subject to death
- But he laid his life down for a purpose – the salvation of his people
- His resurrection is a victory because it finally defeats the power of death

The LORD has made his salvation known and revealed his
righteousness to the nations. He has remembered his love and his
faithfulness to the house of Israel; all the ends of the earth have
seen the salvation of our God.

(Psalm 98:2-3)

God's plan to save a people began with Israel but is extended to all the earth

- The good news of the saving power of the death and resurrection of Jesus
- Are for everyone, for Jews and Gentiles, slaves and freemen, men and women
- There is no barrier in human society that the grace of God does not overcome

II SHOUT TO THE KING

Shout for joy to the LORD, all the earth, burst into jubilant song with music; make music to the LORD with the harp, with the harp and the sound of singing, with trumpets and the blast of the ram's horn - shout for joy before the LORD, the King.

(Psalm 98:4-6)

An important thing to note is that these words, 'sing' and 'shout' are imperatives

- If the previous verses stressed the universal extent of God's salvation
- Now these verses stress that this requires a universal response
- All live on earth must join in the joyful celebration of God's kingship

Our gospel reading today is rather more seasonal at Easter than in Advent

- But Luke's narrative of the two criminals is undoubtedly a special passage
- It was customary for the crime to be put on the cross of a crucified criminal
- The notice written above Jesus was 'This is the King of the Jews'
- It was a staggering indictment – Jesus was not crucified for what he had done
- Jesus was condemned to death for who he was – King of the Jews
- The title King of the Jews is synonymous with our word 'Messiah'
- Which for us means 'Christ' or 'Saviour'

For one of the criminals the thought that Jesus was the Christ or the Saviour

- Was just a matter for ridicule – if he were the Christ he could save the three of them
- But the other criminal recognised that Jesus had done nothing wrong
- And gave the most wonderful shout to the King
- 'Jesus remember me when you come into your kingdom'
- 'I tell you the truth,' Jesus answered, 'today you will be with me in paradise.'

What an amazing promise that was from Jesus to a condemned criminal

- nearly two thousand years later the American criminal on death-row
- seems to know a similar experience and shares it with all who will read
- 'I just want people to know that they have to get their soul right'

For the last 30 or more years most churches have been caught up in the worship wars

- in many cases an unseemly struggle between those who prefer the traditional
- organ, hymns and choir and those who prefer the modern, songs, guitars and drums
- personally, I am much more interested in the content of what we sing than the style
- the content of Christian singing is praise to God for his salvation
- and that is a matter of joyful celebration – it seems to me that those people who say
- that no instrument should be used in Christian worship are wrong
- and that those who say only one instrument should be used (i.e. the organ) are wrong
- there are even some people who say only ancient Biblical instruments should be used
- I can't see that is right either – it's a matter of bursting into jubilant song
- And making music with a variety of instruments – not at the expense of singing
- And not singing at the expense of content – but singing songs of salvation
- That celebrate the greatness and goodness of God

- I SING TO THE SAVIOUR
- II SHOUT TO THE KING
- III CLAP THE JUDGE

Let the sea resound, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it. Let the rivers clap their hands, let the mountains sing together for joy; let them sing before the LORD, for he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness and the peoples with equity.

(Psalm 98:7-9)

One of the great privileges of living in our part of the world is to live near the sea

- Who can fail to be moved by its awesome power
- Although most of us enjoy a day at the seaside on a hot, summer's day
- There is something exciting about the waves crashing against the seashore
- When the sea is tempestuous – 'let the sea resound/roar/crash/thunder'
- Let everything in it praise God – the world and all who live in it, praise God
- The expression 'rivers clap their hands' is poetic
- Yet as the river runs over the stones and into pools we can hear a clapping of hands
- Let the mountains, especially with the wind rushing between them, sing for joy
- Let them sing before the LORD for he comes to *judge* the earth

Rejoicing in judgment is not a popular theme today and catches us by surprise

- In Advent, we rightly celebrate Jesus' coming in history (Christmas Day)
- But we also think about the end of the world, his future coming in glory (the last day)
- It's crazy that this month people will spend more time worrying about Christmas
- Than they will spend thinking about the last day
- But the very purpose of Christmas Day is the coming of the Lord Jesus
- As Saviour and King – into a world in desperate need of a Saviour and King

In our society, and in other parts of the world, where things have gone hopelessly wrong

- Someone will wisely say that what is needed is someone to take control
- Someone who will act with wisdom, with justice, with consistency
- That is what the Christian believes will happen when Jesus comes in glory
- It is a staggering thought – one that is hard to imagine
- But any other end to the world, which will surely end, hardly bears contemplating
- But the Psalm writer says that at his coming the Great King will rule
- With righteousness and with equity – a reign of peace, justice and joy
- This is what Paul the Apostle anticipated when he wrote:
- 'the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth'
- for the believer the arrival of the judge is not something to be feared
- but something to be celebrated and welcomed with applause
- Psalm 98 is a joyful anticipation of the universal restoration of all things
- In our hope and expectation we sing to the Saviour, who has done marvellous things
- Shout to the King – Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom
- And clap the judge who will judge the world in righteousness and ... with equity