

# A String of Pearls

## Sourcesheet 5: Praise

Praise is an integral part of worship and is woven throughout the service. The service starts with a hymn—often something rousing which draws the whole congregation into praise to God.

Hymns are an interesting study. We tend to sing along with varying levels of gusto – not necessarily paying too much attention, unless the hymn is one of which we are very fond – or is one which we really rather dislike. Many of our hymns are quite old and have some things built into their language which might give us pause nowadays. This may be the archaic use of ‘men’ for ‘humankind’ or perhaps the use of inappropriate conflict/war images as in ‘When a Knight won his Spurs’, or ‘Onward Christian Soldiers’. More modern hymns can cause equal challenges in their more ‘pop-like’ qualities which include a less careful awareness of rhyme and an approach to metre which can make the words difficult to fit to the tune. And, actually, the continual use of ‘men’...

The matter of gendered language is deliberately addressed in some Bible translation such as the NRSV, for example. In the contemporary language version of the Nicene Creed the phrase ‘for us men’ is changed to ‘for us’. These are only examples of how the language used in church has been adapted to be more accessible and non-discriminatory.

Hymns are also often prayers in which the impact of the words is sharpened by the ways in which they are emphasised by the music (melody and/or harmony and/or rhythm).

After the opening hymn the next prominent aspect of praise is the Gloria, an ancient hymn (possibly 2nd/3rd century AD) which echoes the words of the angels to the shepherds at Christmas but has other sources too. The Gloria comes after the absolution in our sample service, marking a very dramatic shift in emphasis. This is quite intentional, the order of the parts of our services is very carefully thought out and is the product of many years’ reflection and development.

The Gloria is not only an opportunity to express praise for God but also helps the liturgy to transcend time. Each time we say or sing it we are joining a stream of voices that have used these words for almost 2000 years. This is, of course, true of other parts of the service too.

The collection is also referred to as ‘offertory’. Collection and offertory have very different emphases. The former (collection) has overtones of the church taking gifts from (not unwilling) people, the latter (offertory) seems to suggest a gesture of giving.

These words from the service seem to stress the giving (back) to God of offerings rather than the gathering of gifts.

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Yours, Lord, is the greatness, the power,  
the glory, the splendour, and the majesty;  
for everything in heaven and on earth is yours.

All things come from you,  
and of your own do we give you.

*(1 Chronicles 29:11-13)*

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This reflects the words of praise found in Psalm 148 which is, perhaps, the strongest expression of praise in the Psalms. It is too long to reproduce here but it is worth reading in its entirety. There is a shift through the Old Testament away from the old order of sacrifices and offerings to an understanding of personal engagement and response as in the quite famous passage from Micah...

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With what shall I come before the Lord  
and bow down before the exalted God?  
Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,  
with calves a year old?  
Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,  
with ten thousand rivers of oil?  
Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression,  
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?  
He has shown you, O mortal, what is good.  
And what does the Lord require of you?  
To act justly and to love mercy  
and to walk humbly with your God.  
*(Micah 6: 6-8)*

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Services are often 'framed' with music. This is intended to set the scene for what is to come and create an atmosphere which can include praise. The music after the service very often has a celebratory or even triumphant flavour.

The year is divided into seasons which provide changing nuances to the liturgy. The seasons pick out aspects of the story of Jesus' life and the subsequent growth of the early church. These aspects give us things to reflect on and help us to develop our understanding of our faith. The seasons are recognised in the liturgy: the collects change for instance as do acclamations – saying 'Alleluia, alleluia' during Easter for example.

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## Talksheet 5 —Praise

### Psalm 150

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#### **WELCOME – Breaking the ice (*Aim for 10 mins*)**

##### Psalm 100

Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth.

Worship the Lord with gladness;  
come into his presence with singing.

Know that the Lord is God.

It is he that made us, and we are his;  
we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.

Enter his gates with thanksgiving,  
and his courts with praise.

Give thanks to him, bless his name.

For the Lord is good;  
his steadfast love endures forever,  
and his faithfulness to all generations.

To start the session read Psalm 100 together.  
After a moments' stillness read it again and  
think especially of the line—

*'Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth'*

**Is all our noise in worship joyful?**

**Is one person's joyful noise another's  
dreadful cacophony?**

#### **WORD – Applying the truth (*Aim for 45 mins*)**

All prayer finally, in one way or another, becomes praise. Psalm 150 is deliberately placed as the concluding prayer of the church's book of prayers. No matter how much we suffer, no matter our doubts – everything finds its way into praise, the final consummating prayer. This is not to say that other prayers are inferior to praise, only that all prayer, pursued far enough, becomes praise.

1. Read Psalm 150. How many times is the word praise used in the psalm?
2. Verse 1 tells us where the Lord is to be praised. What is the meaning in his sanctuary and in his mighty heavens?
3. Verse 2 tells us why he is to be praised. What reasons does the psalmist give?

What reasons of your own can you add?

4. Verses 3-5 tell us how to praise the Lord. As you read these verses, what kind of scene do you imagine?

How does this kind of worship compare with your own?

5. Verse 6 tells us who should praise the Lord. Do you think the “everything that has breath” is meant literally? Look hard at the exceptions. Jesus on the cross is the biggest exception – how did that give praise?

6. In Hebrew the first and last word of this prayer is hallelujah (“praise the Lord”). To what extent is your life bracketed?

7. There are no shortcuts to praise. If we maintain a sensitivity to all the psalms preceding this one, we will not be insensitive to all the tears and doubts and pain that are summed up into praise. What difficult circumstances in your life have found their way into praise?

8. Augustine claimed that a “Christian should be a hallelujah from head to foot.” Are you? Do you want to be? What needs to be done to get you there?

9. How is the spiritual practice of praise similar to or different from the ways of the world?

10. How can we use this spiritual practice of praise in our ordinary everyday Monday to Saturday lives?

## **WITNESS – Reaching out to others**

*(Aim for 20 – 30 minutes)*

### **Giving Thanks to God**

Thank God for something that helps you to praise God.

### **Praying for one another**

Ask everyone to share something they would like prayer for.

Then go round the room and pray for the person to your right,

### **Praying for those who don't yet know God**