

Thought for the Week 23rd August 2020

Most of us haven't been able to get away on holiday this year - "staycationing" is the new normal, but I'm sure you've experienced coming to the end of a very special holiday. It's a time of mixed feelings - in some ways we would like it to go on a bit longer, but in other ways we're looking forward to getting back home.

The pilgrims, who made their way to Jerusalem for the high holy days and sung the psalms we have been looking at over recent weeks, have now completed their acts of devotion. They are about to return home, and on the final evening before departure they would have sung this song which we know as Psalm 134.

- ¹ *Come, bless the LORD, all you servants of the LORD,
who stand by night in the house of the LORD!*
- ² *Lift up your hands to the holy place and bless the LORD!*
- ³ *May the LORD bless you from Zion, he who made heaven and earth!*

They won't be able to worship in the Temple again until their next journey to Jerusalem. But as they leave the city, and sing these words, they are encouraged to know that the worship of God will not stop at the end of the pilgrimage for it will be carried on by the Levites in their absence.

If this is the last song for the road what does the end look like? The end looks like Psalm 134 for this Psalm sums up what the Christian life is all about in some ways. It summarizes God's grace and our response. Our ultimate destination isn't the Temple in Jerusalem, but our heavenly home, our eternal dwelling place with God. The praise we offer now anticipates the final consummation of our worship in heaven. Worship is what we will be doing for all eternity. Saying "I don't want to worship" is pretty much saying, "I don't want to go to heaven."

The pilgrims had experienced wonderful worship in the temple, but now this psalm reminds them that worship of God isn't just something for the temple, it's for all of life. The New Testament writers remind us that worship isn't something we only do in a special "holy" place, our whole lives should be an act of worship to God.

In Psalm 134 the word "bless" appears three times - it is translated "praise" in some Bible versions. When we are told to "bless the Lord" here we are being told to give reverence to God. It implies a continual and conscious giving first place to God. It is telling us to be attuned to His awesome and holy presence. In the Hebrew the word "to bless" also means "to kneel." Kneeling was significant in Hebrew worship. The knees were regarded as a symbol of strength—"to bend the knee is, therefore, to bend our strength before the living God." We acknowledge all that we have comes from Him. It means, literally, bringing a gift on bended knee. In this case, we bring our gift of worship.

Kneeling in church isn't something we do on our Presbyterian tradition. Have you ever knelt while praying or worshipping? How does it make you feel? Is it hard to do? Think of it like this - traditionally, when a man proposes marriage to a woman, he gets down on his knees to do it. One source says that in doing this: "The man is offering himself wholeheartedly to the woman, without reservations, elevating her to an exalted position in their relationship, and committing to offer her the choice to determine the course of their relationship." If we were in a church service, I might be tempted to ask the husbands present if they knelt down when they proposed and if so, did they know that it meant this? Which would have to be

followed up by the question, "And have you elevated your wife to an exalted position and given her the choice to determine the course of your relationship?"

Anyhow, there are some important words in this definition of a proposal - wholeheartedly, offering, without reservations, exalted, commitment. If a man is truly in love, he should have no problems with these words. Even if we haven't done this without our spouses, should we not do this with God if we truly love him, and especially knowing how he has first loved us?

This Psalm was sung by the departing pilgrims and addressed to the Levitical priests who had the responsibility to lead worship in the Temple day and night. So, if the priests working in the Temple needed reminding to praise the Lord, how much more do we? Most of us begin the day with lots of different thoughts on our minds. Or if not, it doesn't take long before our minds fill up with everything we need to do and worry about.

One writer has said, "Since you can only think one thought at a time, the time you spend praising the Lord is time you won't be able to spend feeling bad about your situation." In other words, why not focus on the Lord in praise and blessing and worship and prayer rather than focus on all those things that make life hard and difficult? We are called here to bless the Lord—and reminded that it doesn't matter whether we feel like it or not. God wants us to shift our attention to Him. And, this isn't always easy. In fact it takes a lifetime of practice.

Now the really strange thing about this Psalm is that it not only says that we are to bless God, but that God blesses us. In verse 3 it says: "May the LORD bless you from Zion, he who made heaven and earth!" The strange thing about this is that the same word is used, the one that also means "to kneel." So, is the Psalm saying that God kneels? Yes, this is exactly what it is saying. It's not that God worships and praises us, but that He does good things to us and among us: He blesses us.

Eugene Peterson, in his book "A Long Obedience in the Same Direction", says this: "God gets down on his knees among us; gets on our level and shares himself with us. He does not reside afar off and send us diplomatic messages, he kneels among us. That posture is characteristic of God. The discovery and realization of this is what defines what we know of God as good news—God shares himself generously and graciously."

Paul tells us how God has knelt down for us in Philippians 2 when he writes:

Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷ but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. ⁸ And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

When God reveals Himself—as soon as He chooses to enter into a covenant relationship with us—He kneels. That God is so willing to bless us and so willing to reveal Himself to us and so willing to enter a relationship with us means that our God's main character feature is a forgiving and steadfast love.

Only this kind of love can explain how God's people can hope that the Lord will bless them from Zion. God's love was their only hope. God's love is our only hope; and it is this love, this God, who was made flesh and blood in Jesus Christ. Jesus is the ultimate example of God's kneeling. He kneels to our level and meets us where we are. This is what the good news is all about. It is about a God who sticks with us through hard times and good times, through laughter and tears.

And ultimately this is why we bless God. His blessing comes first, we must always remember that. When we bless, we are responding. When we kneel, we must remember that God has knelt first. He knelt to give us the gift of Himself, the gift of salvation, the gift of life, of peace, of love, of eternal blessedness in His presence.

This psalm is not addressed to individuals—the focus is corporate worship, our coming together as a body of believers. We need one another and we worship best when we're together. While the psalm singles out the Levites, we are all servants of the Lord. We're either serving, or selfishly living on our own.

Another commentator calls Psalm 134, "How to have a 'good night'." *When darkness presses in, when we're troubled or under attack, we have one recourse—to bless God. Worship is the strongest weapon of our spiritual warfare. Worship is resting in God. We can count sheep, or talk to the Shepherd!*

As we finish our look at the Songs of Ascent, this final one step ends, like all our worship services should, with the voice of praise and thanksgiving. Our prayers, worship and waiting upon the Lord should lead us to bless the Lord, and bid all others do the same.

A Doxology is an offering of praise to God in worship. The term comes from the Greek meaning "words of glory." Christians are to endeavour to make not only worship, but also life itself, an offering of praise.

Prayer of General Thanksgiving from the Book of Common Prayer

Almighty God, Father of all mercies,
we, your unworthy servants, give you humble thanks
for all your goodness and loving-kindness
to us and to all whom you have made.
We bless you for our creation, preservation,
and all the blessings of this life,
but above all for your immeasurable love
in the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ,
for the means of grace, and for the hope of glory.
And, we pray, give us such an awareness of your mercies
that with truly thankful hearts we may show forth your praise,
not only with our lips, but in our lives,
by giving up ourselves to your service,
and by walking before you
in holiness and righteousness all our days,
through Jesus Christ, our Lord,
to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit,
be honour and glory throughout all ages. Amen.

Finally, I want to tell you about our plans for the future.

We hope that from Sunday, 6th September, we will re-open both our Loanends and Killead Churches for public worship. A short service lasting 30-40 minutes and suitable for all the family will be held in Loanends Church at 10.30am and then again in the Killead Church at 11.30am. **Please note the earlier than normal times of these services.**

As the Coronavirus is still very prevalent, the Kirk Session and Committee of both congregations have been working hard to make sure that our meetinghouses are as safe a venue as possible for us to gather together for worship. We will be following government advice and guidelines from our own denomination which mean that some things will inevitably be different to normal. *Anyone who is showing any of the well-publicised symptoms of Covid-19 or has been recommended to self-isolate, should NOT attend services of worship.* Recent guidelines from our denomination "recommends and encourages" everyone to wear an appropriate face covering while in the church building, unless there are medical reasons not to wear one. Children under 11 years do not need to wear a mask. We will have some masks available, but please bring your own with you. We ask everyone to use the hand sanitisers provided at each entrance.

So that we can maintain social distancing of 2 metres and accommodate as many people as possible, on arrival you will be shown to a particular seat in the building. It will not be possible for everyone to have their choice of seat and it is important that everyone co-operates with the stewards in this. You may, if you wish, join in the singing of the hymns and songs, but please do so quietly rather than loudly and we will remain seated to sing. There will be a short address and worksheets for children, but there will be no Children's Church, so they will remain with parents/carers throughout the (shorter!) service. An offering will not be taken up but there will be plates in the vestibule for your offering as you enter.

All this is subject to no further tightening of restrictions by the NI Executive. Please consult the church websites and facebook pages for the latest information or contact one of the elders. No other church activities or organisations will re-commence at present.

After next Sunday there will be no further Thoughts for the Week in the present format, but the services in each church will be recorded live and will be available on YouTube on Sunday afternoons. We hope in the future to be able to "live stream" the services as they happen. DVD recordings of the services and a printed version of the Sermon can also be provided - please ask your district elder.

We look forward to seeing old and of course new faces as we once again join together for worship on 6th September.