

## Sunday 31<sup>st</sup> July 2022 – HALLEL PSALMS (1) – Psalms 113 & 114 ‘Glorious and Gentle’

In a small convent in Milan is one of the world’s most famous and revolutionary paintings. On the wall of the Refectory in Santa Maria delle Grazie Leonardo da Vinci painted ‘The Last Supper’. Painted directly onto the wall using egg-based paint, within decades the painting deteriorated and almost none of the original is left – what we see now is several layers of restoration. Nevertheless, the world of art changed when Leonardo painted this scene, and it did so for two reasons: first, Leonardo gave us a new perspective on the iconic story. When you think of the last Supper, nearly everyone will think about the bread and wine – but Leonardo paints the moment when Jesus has just told his disciples that one of them will betray him, and captures the shock and horror brilliantly.

Second, because of this switch of emphasis, Leonardo forces us to make a much more direct, human connection with the story. We can *feel* the emotional temperature, it becomes a scene in which we can place ourselves – it is no longer a mystical theological juggernaut, it’s a room where some friend are sharing a meal: people like you and me.

What’s this got to do with Psalms 113 and 114, I can almost hear you thinking? As it happens, quite a lot. Today we begin a new series on Psalms 113-118, which are known as the Hallel Psalms – *hallel* is the Hebrew word for praise. **What makes these psalms special is that they are the psalms which are usually sung at a Jewish Passover meal** – and have been for thousands of years. Passover is the great celebration of Israel’s rescue from Egypt, known as the exodus; and since the time of Moses, Jewish people have commemorated this rescue with the annual Seder (or Passover) meal. Jesus himself celebrated this every year, including with his friends in Jerusalem just before he dies, in what is now known as The Last Supper.

This tells us two very important things about these psalms, just like Leonardo’s painting. First, they give us a new perspective on the Last Supper. When we think about the Last Supper we think about the bread and wine, we think about Judas – but we don’t always think about what else goes on at the meal. But today, what we’ve just heard as our bible readings are the two psalms which are read or sung before the Passover meal starts. In other words, what we’ve just heard is what Jesus and the disciples would have read or sung together at the actual Last Supper!

And if you take a moment to imagine that, to picture yourself there, you’ve just done the other thing the Leonardo painting does: **it makes the Last Supper very real doesn’t it? You’re hearing the exact same words Jesus and the disciples heard as they began their meal.**

Why do the Jewish people use Psalms 113-118? Well, although we don’t know the exact backstory of each psalm – when it was written and who wrote it – what we do know is that these psalms were deliberately grouped together because they told the story of the exodus. One bible scholar describes it like this:

*‘Psalm 113 grounds the whole enterprise in the Lord – how it is intrinsic to his exalted dignity to exalt the poor and needy. Psalm 114 majestically records the exodus as the Creator manages his creation for his people’s welfare.*

*'Psalms 115 and 116 balance each other as, respectively, the community and the individual rescued from spiritual and physical death. Psalm 117 extends exodus truth to its worldwide limits – what was done for Israel was done for all. Finally Psalm 118 enables us to join in the great procession through the gates and into the very presence of the Lord himself.'*

**It's the story in six psalms.** So Psalms 113 and 114 come before the meal, reminding the people of what God did. Psalms 115-118 are read or sung after the meal, focusing more on the meaning and significance of this mighty act of God. If any of you remember that verse at the end of the Last Supper narrative in the gospels – 'when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives' – and found yourself wondering what the 'hymn' was: well, now you know! The 'hymn' was almost certainly Psalms 115-118. We'll be looking at these over the next three weeks, and again, as they're read, take a moment to imagine the Last Supper ending, with thoughts of Jesus betrayal and death buzzing around in your mind as you head out to the quietness of the garden.

Psalms like these are important because they make the grounding of our faith come alive. Suddenly we're in the room with Jesus, we're connected to the story in a real and intimate way. But these first two Hallel Psalms are also important because they remind us of two other very important things. **First, we can see how glorious God is.** Psalm 114 in particular carries that sense of awe: v7 'Tremble, earth, at the presence of the Lord, at the presence of the God of Jacob.' This God makes the sea flee, and the mountains leap like rams.

We also see it in Psalm 113: God's name is praised three times in verses 1-3 and then he is exalted three times in verses 4-6: 'his glory is above the heavens'; he 'sits enthroned on high'.

**And yet this same God shares his glory with us.** Indeed, he is gentle, he cares for those who need his help. Verses 7-9 echo the story of the exodus: the 'poor' who are in the dust of v7 are the Israelite slaves; these liberated people are seated with the prince in v8, which is probably a reference to Moses who had effectively been a 'prince' in Egypt before he led his people out of slavery; and the suffering of childless women in v9 probably refers to Pharaoh's instruction to kill all Israelite babies at the start of the story.

But these references are not just to the story: their meaning is broader. This God is on the side of the underdog; he sees human suffering and it matters to him. He doesn't just sit up in heaven being glorious: indeed the fact that God's people became his sanctuary in Psalm 114 is basically religious language for the simple truth that God dwells with his people. God dwells with us! He is not just in heaven, he is here!

That's a wonderful thing to declare at the start of the Passover meal. It's also a wonderful thing to declare now. God is with us. With us in our trials; with us in bread and wine, which we'll be sharing shortly; which of course reminds us that he is supremely with us in the coming of Christ.

**The Hallel Psalms ultimately point us back to Christ:** the one who came to rescue not just one people, but the whole world. The one who stooped down to look on this earth, and then raised us from the dust that we might be seated with him in the heavenly realms around the throne of God in time to come. And may that amazing thought cause us to declare with the psalmist: 'From the rising of the sun, to the place where it sets, the name of the Lord is to be praised.' Amen!