

Sunday 7th August 2022 – HALLEL PSALMS (2) – Psalm 115 ‘Glory to the Lord alone’

Like many of you, I’ve been enjoying the Commonwealth Games over this last week or more. It’s always fun watching sports you wouldn’t normally watch, as well as the familiar events and famous faces. And one phrase you’ll hear again and again is that all the competitors are competing for ‘Commonwealth Games Glory’. To be the champion, to get a medal round your neck – many people would describe that as something which brings the winners glory.

Google the phrase ‘Commonwealth Games Glory’ and you’ll see the idea of glory as common currency around the world. From the Buxton Advertiser to the Belfast Telegraph to Australia’s ABC news broadcast, local favourites are going not just for gold, but for glory.

So it’s quite striking, and timely, that today’s psalm begins with a famous verse: **‘Not to us, Lord, not to us but to your name be the glory, because of your love and faithfulness.’** Whatever human honour we might receive here on this earth, it seems to say, glory ultimately belongs to God alone.

So is it wrong to talk of glory when it comes to athletes or other winners in life? To try and answer that question we need to explore the idea of glory in a bit more detail. I’ve talked about this before, but not for a few years, so a recap is probably useful! **The Hebrew word in the bible which we translate as ‘glory’ is *kabod*, and it literally means weight, or heaviness.** Although the word appears twice in the book of Genesis with reference to Jacob and then Joseph, *kabod* is first used about God in the book of Exodus, right after the Passover and the crossing of the Red Sea – which is why it appears here in the Hallel Psalms, which are sung at the annual Passover meal. (The context of Ps 115 is just after the actual Passover, hence it is the first Psalm sung after the meal.)

After the original Passover, when Israel was complaining in Exodus ch16 about where they would get food in the desert, we get these words: ‘they looked towards the desert, and there was the glory of the Lord appearing in the cloud.’ (Exodus 16:10) They see it again a little while later as Moses goes up to meet with God on the mountain in Exodus 24: ‘the glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai...To the Israelites the glory of the Lord looked like a consuming fire on top of the mountain.’

So God’s glory appeared first in cloud and then in fire. As they journey through the desert, it was these two signs of the ‘weight’ (the *kabod*) of God which led the Israelites: God travelled with them in a pillar of cloud by day, and a pillar of fire by night. In other words, the *kabod* of God was the visible sign of his manifest presence among his people.

Once Israel had settled in the Promised Land, they rarely saw the visible presence of God in the same way, so the idea of God’s glory took on a broader meaning: either signs that pointed to his presence, or more generally the sense that God was being honoured. Hence the idea of glory moved from being a visible appearance of weight, to symbols of honour. And this of course is how we use the word today. The medals we put round people’s necks are obviously worth something financially - but what they symbolise is more important. They are signs of honour and greatness, and hence we can use the word ‘glory’ to describe them.

But there's a cautionary tale here. **Whatever glory we humans can receive, only one Being deserves the real glory: and that is the Lord, the one true God** – whom the Israelites worship as Yahweh, and we worship as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Not to us, *not to us* be the glory, but to the Lord's name alone. It's why you'll often see Christian athletes who win or score pointing to the heavens or kneeling in worship – and as an aside, one of the highlights of the Commonwealth Games is always to see the Pacific Islands competing, because so many of their sports stars are so open about their Christian faith.

But to come back to the Psalm, the major theme is one we've been looking in our Daily Inspirations this week, and it's simply this: who do we choose to worship? In other words, who gets the glory? To whom do we give our honour? Israel was constantly surrounded by other cultures, other worldviews, all of whom had their own gods. These gods were often worshipped in the form of idols. The deities they represented were volatile, insecure, unpredictable. And **God's constant message to Israel is: I am not like that! I am your help and shield**, I am faithful and good to you, and my heart is to bless you – all themes of the second half of this psalm

The middle of this psalm is also its heart. If idols are useless, and the Lord is the one true God, what is the obvious response: **we put our trust in the Lord**. And in case we don't get the message loud and clear, the psalmist repeats it three times: 'trust in the Lord... trust in the Lord... trust in the Lord.'

That is the message for us today. But it's so important to notice that this psalm uses God's personal name, the special one he gave to his people the Jews. It doesn't refer to 'God' in a general sense, but to the Lord – the one who revealed himself to Moses, who saved them in Egypt, who kept on saving them in the wilderness, and the one who ultimately sent an anointed rescuer a Messiah, Jesus the Christ – who became the Lord not just for one nation, but for the world.

Imagine reading this psalm straight after the Passover meal, having been reminded in the meal of all the ways God saved his people – and then reading or singing these words: 'Not to us, not to us but to your name be the glory... All you Israelites, trust in the Lord.'

And today we too can own these words, we too are called to give glory to the Lord alone, because of his love and faithfulness. And the psalm reminds us that this is not just an exercise in healthy humility, it is a matter of life and death. The long description of the uselessness of idols is really a way of saying that these images and statues have no life in them, they are dead. And it warns us: 'those who make them will be like them, and so will all who trust in them.'

But this God, the Lord of heaven and earth, is the God of the living. The God who has life within himself, and makes all those who trust in him come alive. And so the psalm finishes: 'It is not the dead who praise the Lord... it is we who extol the Lord, both now and for evermore.' In the end perhaps the most important question in life is this: who do we worship? Do we worship the One who brings life, or things that only lead to death? This psalm offers us the key to life – may God grant us all grace to dedicate ourselves to this life-giving God, and to join with the psalmist, today and every day: '**Not to us, Lord, not to us but to your name be the glory, because of your love and faithfulness.**' Amen.