

4. Worshipping inspires our everyday speech

So far during our sermon series on worship, we've looked at how all we do in our everyday, ordinary lives can be offered to God as worship; how worship can offer fresh insights into seeing ourselves as God sees us – as the focus of his love and with power to continue his work on earth; and how worship can transform our work lives, creating opportunities to share God's love with work colleagues and others we meet in an ordinary week.

This week we have the opportunity to explore how the words of our worship shape us to speak in the world. How the words we read in the Bible through daily reading and prayer can make a difference not only to us, but to others, as well as the words we share in song and liturgy on a Sunday morning. Together, we have the opportunity to learn new language that gives us a bigger sense of who God is and how he is involved in our everyday lives. But along with language, we learn new responses that can be life changing for us and for others with whom we come into contact. In a world of grumbling, we learn to dig out the blessings and give thanks for them. In a world that reacts to suffering with despair and cynicism, we learn words of lament that are rooted in hope. In a world where we fear the stranger, we learn to greet others in the name of Jesus and find that they become our brother or sister. All this helps us to see the world differently, and to speak and pray in line with God's heart.

(Let's have a look at a short piece of film to illustrate more clearly today's theme).

Now I wonder if there are words or passages from the Bible that are really dear to you. Words that have strengthened you in times of difficulty, given you hope when it's been hard to see the way forward, and sustained you in your faith through changing times.

In June 2010, I had been the manager of a children's centre in Peterborough for 5 years, working for a local authority that I'd been with for 20 years. It was a job that I loved, was good at – the centre was rated as 'outstanding' by Ofsted standards – and I had a great team. And we were making a real difference to the lives of children and families in the very deprived community that we served. But a departmental re-structure, in response to a reduction in government funding, had placed my job at risk. A process of consultation had begun in January that year and the proposal was to do away with centre managers and outsource the entire service to independent organisations. The

consultation process took months, as they often do, meetings were held, written responses to proposals sought and finally the decisions were made.

Throughout this time, I'd begun following the lectionary readings each day – a daily Psalm, and a reading from both the Old Testament and the New. I found these helpful and, some days, they seemed to speak right into my situation. On Monday 28th June 2010, I received the news that I had been dreading – on July 1st, just three days later, my job would be no more. On the 28th of June that year, the Old Testament reading for the day was Isaiah 43 v1-7. On that day, as I responded to the very worst of news, I read the following words in the Message translation, which go like this:

“Don't be afraid, I've redeemed you.
I've called your name. You're mine.
When you're in over your head, I'll be there with you.
When you're in rough waters, you will not go down.
When you're between a rock and a hard place,
it won't be a dead end—
Because I am God, your personal God,
The Holy of Israel, your Saviour.
Don't be afraid: I'm with you.’

The context of these words, spoken by Isaiah, was God's promise to deliver the people of Israel from captivity in Babylon. He had created the nation of Israel – had called it by name – they were precious to him, and his promise was to redeem them, to rescue them, to bring Israel's children back to their homeland. Such was his love for them.

And what did it mean for me to read those words, over two millennia later, in an entirely different context? As moving as they were, they told me several things that pass the test of time:

- that God knew me by name
- that I was *his* – a precious child of God
- and that, whatever the future held, he would always be with me.

In the years since, I've drawn on those words from Isaiah 43 again and again, because they're great words. And I've used them also to encourage others. When a friend recently was going through a similarly difficult time, I was able to say, *'Do you know, when I was really struggling, I came across some words from deep in the Old Testament that really helped. Can I share them with you*

as they might help you too?’ And that’s how it works. Using God’s word to transform our *own* lives – to see ourselves and to see the world as God sees it, but also speaking them *into* the world to transform the lives of others. [Or, as the film said, *‘our language breathing heaven into the lives of those we meet’.*] So, have a think when you get home today, what words from the Bible, or from a prayer, or from a hymn or song, have been important to you? Maybe write them down, or learn them, so that you can use them to encourage or build up someone else.

In our reading from James this morning, he writes:

Is any of you in trouble? Pray.

Is anyone happy? Sing songs of praise.

Is any one of you sick? Call the elders of the church to pray and anoint you with oil in the name of the Lord.

This passage from James reminds us of several things. Firstly, it reminds us that words matter.

They matter in all seasons of our lives. Our worship includes times of trouble or sickness, or great sadness, when we might choose to cry out, as the Psalmist did, *‘Lord, have mercy’* or *‘Lord, how long?’* Where you might say, ‘I believe in the God who multiplied fish and loaves to feed the hungry. I believe in the God who says I’m always with you. And right now, it’s achingly clear – heartbreakingly, angrily clear – isn’t it, that we who believe in God also believe in the God who is hidden sometimes, sometimes when we are most in need, to whom the Psalmist cried out, *‘How long, oh Lord, how long?’* I’m sure there are many among us this morning for who that cry has been true.

Our worship also includes times of happiness and joy where we might want to yell *‘Hallelujah!’* or *‘Thank you.’* Meister Eckhart, the thirteenth century theologian and philosopher famously said, *‘If the only prayer you said in your whole life was ‘thank you’, that would be sufficient.’*

Our worship also includes times when we’re looking for wisdom or discernment in a difficult situation, and our cry might be one of *‘Come Holy Spirit’.* *‘Come, shine the light of Jesus in this particular circumstance. Show me the path ahead.’*

I wonder which of these words or phrases you’d like to use more of in your daily life.

Secondly, our passage from James also reminds us that everyone is included and everyone matters. It must have been encouraging to hear that everyone had a part in helping one another. James had a vision of the church where the poor were given dignity, and where the rich were made aware of the particular temptations that their situation could provoke. They were a community dependent on one another. So, during our worship, when we pray for one another, when we rejoice with one another for God's goodness, when we confess our failures to one another, we use our words not only to support each other, but to create a different kind of community and a different way of life. A community where everyone matters, where everyone is important, where everyone can make a difference.

And thirdly, James also reminds us that our words spoken in worship are directed to God who hears and acts. Whilst we might benefit from words spoken on a Sunday morning. Whilst we might have a preference for BCP or Common Worship, or for ancient or modern hymns, our worship is for God. Our prayers are to God, and our thanksgiving is because of God. And he acts. These words are powerful because God hears them, and he acts on them – when we're together, gathered in worship, and when we're apart, scattered in our various activities throughout the week. The example James uses is of Elijah. Elijah brought his words before God about the situation that people were facing as a nation. He was human just like us, frail and flawed. But God heard his prayers and acted on them, with remarkable results. And from our gospel reading today, Jesus says to his disciples, *'Have faith in God... Whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.'*

All of this suggests that we might need to take more risks with our words in church and outside church. Do we need to learn to pray more boldly and speak up for God's kingdom? And what might God do if we did?

[As we prepare to receive communion this morning, a song will play – 'Speak O Lord' – the first verse of which is an excellent prayer with which to finish:

Speak O Lord as we come to you
to receive the food of your holy word.
Take your truth, plant it deep in us
shape and fashion us in your likeness.
That the light of Christ may be seen today
in our acts of love and our deeds of faith.
Speak O Lord, and fulfil in us all your purposes for your glory. Amen.]