

WEEK 3: SUNDAY

A small boy I knew asked his grandfather, a retired priest, what 'worship' meant. The old man paused. He was over 80 years of age, he said; he had been a clergyman most of his life; and he still found it hard to say exactly what 'worship' meant. Like someone who takes ten thousand breaths every day but still couldn't explain to a medical student what breathing is or why it's important, the old man had worshipped all his life, and led others to do so, but found it more and more mysterious.

This Psalm is one that the old clergyman would have said day by day throughout his life, because in the prayer book he used it was prescribed for every day except Easter. I myself grew up in a church where we sang this Psalm almost every Sunday. And I believe we can learn a great deal about what worship is from seeing what's going on here.

The Psalm is not addressing God directly, but calling on other people to join the poet in doing so, in praising the God he here describes. When you really discover who God is, then it is natural to 'make a joyful noise' (verse 1), to come into God's presence with thanksgiving and make music (that most mysterious of all the arts, itself joining heaven and earth) to acclaim him and proclaim his greatness.

Worship, then, is about contemplating who God is and what he's done, standing in awe and expressing that awe in thanks and praise. In the Jewish and Christian traditions, this always begins with praise to God as creator. Every step of scientific advance should increase this chorus of praise (instead of what happens at the moment, that every new scientific discovery leads someone to claim that this has disproved God's existence!). God isn't part of the natural order, though his presence permeates it. Rather, he is other than and outside it, as different from it, and hence from us, as we are from microbes and atoms — only far more so, since they and we are, at one level, all part of the same stuff. God's power holds together the deepest and the highest places on earth, the unfathomable vastness of the sea and the wonderfully sculpted dry land in all its variety.

That would by itself be enough to call us to worship: perhaps, today, you might spend some time contemplating the astonishing range of God's creation. Out of a small window where I am sitting, I can see several different colours, several types of tree and plant, various different animals, and, not least, the sky itself, a source of endless wonder. A short walk, even in an apparently dull area, can lead to wonder and praise. And if you go out on the sea, or into the mountains, or pause in a richly stocked garden, there is no end of extraordinary and beautiful things for which to give thanks.

As always in scripture, contemplating God as creator leads to the astonishing claim that he is 'our God' (verse 7). God has chosen Israel as his people; and we who believe in Jesus believe him to be the fulfilment of this promise, so that all who belong to Jesus can make the same claim. 'We are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand.' City-dwellers often suppose that animals are basically stupid. Not so. Near where I live, the elderly cows in the field know precisely which noises will signal the arrival of fresh food. They recognize voices and react accordingly. In the Middle East, to this day, the relationship of sheep and shepherd is warm and intimate, a mutual bond of knowing. That's how it should be with God and his people.

Here, in the middle of Lent, we should celebrate that and be encouraged.

That's important, because as the final verses of the Psalm remind us (sadly, some churches tend to miss them out), we can't take God for granted. The Israelites, whom God had rescued from Egypt, spent 40 years grumbling and questioning. We are warned against going the same way. The best antidote is to return to worship and praise. An older generation used to sing, 'Count your blessings, name them one by one; and it will surprise you what the Lord has done.' If you include the whole of creation, in its vast scope and tiny detail, among those blessings — as the Psalm encourages you to do — it will not only surprise you. It will take quite a long time.

TODAY

Sovereign God, we praise you for your wonderful world, and we pray that you will replace our grumbles with gratitude, and our questioning with adoration.