

The Greatest Day

Psalm 24

*The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it,
the world, and all who live in it;*

*2 for he founded it upon the seas
and established it upon the waters.*

*3 Who may ascend the hill of the Lord?
Who may stand in his holy place?*

*4 He who has clean hands and a pure heart,
who does not lift up his soul to an idol
or swear by what is false.*

*5 He will receive blessing from the Lord
and vindication from God his Saviour.*

*6 Such is the generation of those who seek him,
who seek your face, O God of Jacob.*

*7 Lift up your heads, O you gates;
be lifted up, you ancient doors,
that the King of glory may come in.*

*8 Who is this King of glory?
The Lord strong and mighty,
the Lord mighty in battle.*

*9 Lift up your heads, O you gates;
lift them up, you ancient doors,
that the King of glory may come in.*

*10 Who is he, this King of glory?
The Lord Almighty—
he is the King of glory.*

“The greatest day...”

What would count as the greatest day of your life? How many contenders are there for the prize – “the greatest day of my life”? I once did an exercise in the life of Peter, to turn it into a graph and there were lots of peaks and troughs; the peaks were the good days and the troughs were the bad days, the tough days. If we did that for the life of David, exactly the same would be true: there would be lows when the graph plunged to the bottom of the paper and there would be highs when the graph soared to the top of the paper and maybe even off the scale. There were bad days for David, days when he was chased by his enemies, days when he made mistakes and got things horribly wrong; and there were good days, when he was very aware of God with him and God helping him to win battles or to stand firm in the face of his enemies. It would be the same for everyone of us: we all have good days and we all have bad days.

Psalm 24 reflects the mood of what has been described for David as “The greatest day in his life.” The psalm carries a mood of great celebration and a glorious day. Something wonderful is happening and David is celebrating. God is coming into the city and David writes a song to capture the mood of celebration and great joy. The doors of the city are wide open to welcome God, to embrace the coming of the Lord into the city, and the people celebrate the greatness of God in their midst. There would be trumpets and processions and great rejoicing. Psalm 24 captures that mood, that celebration day. The psalm was taken by the Church later as part of the celebration of Christ’s ascension into heaven, the doors of the heavenly city open wide to welcome the Lord of glory back to His rightful place.

At the heart of Israel’s life was a gold box; it was called the Ark of the covenant. It was a simple box, yet highly ornate, and it was profoundly symbolic. It was simple: this gold box symbolised and carried with it, the presence of God. Where the Ark went, there was God’s presence. No-one was allowed to touch it because it was holy, God’s presence was deeply connected to the box. It was carried on poles put through loops on the side of the box so that nobody need touch it. The story is told in 2 Samuel 6 of David bringing the Ark into the city of Jerusalem not long after he had made the city his own. It took two attempts to bring the Ark into the city: the first attempt was stopped when the ark nearly fell off the cart carrying it and someone tried to grab it and touched the ark and died on the spot. The second attempt was much more successful and David brought the Ark into the city with great joy in his heart; *“David danced before the Lord with all his might” (2 Samuel 6:14)* such was the joy in his heart and the sense of celebration; God was coming to live in the city; God was coming to be at the heart of the nation’s life. Is this “the greatest day in David’s life”? You can’t really argue!

Psalm 24 was written to celebrate the coming of God into the city. There are two schools of thought: either Psalm 24 was written for the day itself, being part of the events detailed in 2 Samuel 6; or Psalm 24 was written for the annual celebration of that day in later years, when Israel looked back on the great day to celebrate it all over again. It doesn’t really matter which you choose because the theme is the same. It is a very special occasion; there is a great procession; there are trumpets and musicians; the people are celebrating God living in their city; the city gates are open wide to allow Him to come in. *“Lift up your heads, O you gates; be lifted up you ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in.” (verse 7)* As if to focus their minds on who God is, the psalm begins with a reminder that God is the creator of the universe, of everything and everyone in it. Then in the middle there is a question: how do we access this God? Anyone who wants access to God needs to be holy, with *“clean hands and a pure heart...” (verse 4)* The people are celebrating: God is great and God is in their city.

In the church we need celebration mood music. We need music that captures the mood to celebrate God and what He has done for us, music that will cheer the church up. Of course, we need music that captures other moods, but we don’t have as much celebration music as maybe we should. There are some classic hymns of the church that rouse the spirits and help us celebrate; some of the new music also does that brilliantly with a rousing, celebratory tone. We need celebration mood music because we have the greatest story in the world to tell; we

need celebration mood music because God is with us and Jesus is Lord. This is something to celebrate! If all of our music is “reflective” and downbeat then we’re missing something; we need music that lifts the spirits, that makes the spirits soar with joy, celebrating the great God whom we worship and the wonderful Saviour who loves us.

We will always need this kind of celebration. The human spirit needs its celebrations; as Christians we need to celebrate Jesus. We use the words of Psalm 24 often as part of our communion service because the words remind us that Jesus is King and that He is amongst us when we worship. It can be hard to celebrate when life is tough; we don’t feel like celebrating because the mood music around our lives is different, sad, doubting, angry, anxious; that is true of us individually and it is surely true of the church as a whole in Scotland, given the uncertainties of Covid and restructuring. Nevertheless, God is still great, God is still the creator of the universe and Jesus is still Lord and is still the Saviour who died for us. All of that is still worth celebrating. God has not gone away and will not go away; we need to find time and space to celebrate God. Life can be tough; nevertheless we will celebrate and worship God.

Peter, James and John were about to have one of the greatest days of their apprenticeship as disciples. Jesus took them up onto a mountain to pray. They are about to witness something that no-one else had ever seen, nor would see. The story is called the Transfiguration, telling of Jesus’ appearance being changed, being filled with glory as He is revealed for who He really is. Moses and Elijah are there with him, also in glorious splendour, as they walked together. The disciples are lost for words as they see Jesus’ glory and then hear God’s voice bearing witness to Jesus – *“this is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to Him.”* (Luke 9:35) They have seen nothing like this before; they get to see the glory and splendour of Jesus, Jesus as He really is, the glory revealed even for only a short time. They are too confused to know what to do; can they celebrate? Not yet, but one day they will; one day all of this will make sense to them and then they will rejoice that Jesus is the Lord of glory. The words of Psalm 24 will give them words to sing in that celebration.

Psalm 24 celebrates God, the creator of the universe, coming to live in Jerusalem; the Ark is carried into the city, a marker of God’s presence. It was the greatest day of David’s life, to bring God into his city; David danced before the Lord, celebrating. I want every service that I lead to have at least one celebration hymn, one piece of music that rouses the soul and the spirit, because God is still the creator of the universe, God is still with us, and Jesus is still our Saviour and Lord. Jesus is full of glory; He is able to save us completely. He is worth celebrating with all our hearts and with voices raised in song. Let the doors of our hearts be open *“that the King of glory may come in.”* (verse 7)