

## Responding to God

“The Christian does not think God will love us because we are good, but that God will make us good because He loves us.” Those are the words of CS Lewis, and I think when he wrote those words he really captured something that is often hard to grasp. Just ponder it for a moment:

“The Christian does not think God will love us because we are good, but that God will make us good because He loves us.”

It’s one of those things that sets Christians apart from followers of other religious traditions and philosophers. In fact, it goes against what the world expects.

We, as Christians don’t believe that Jesus died for us because we were good; rather we believe exactly the opposite: that Jesus died for us because we were bad.

In our society we generally hold that rewards come to us because we do the right thing. Because we work hard. Because we are good. And sometimes, just because we’re lucky.

It’s a very human response. And even in the church we find that it’s a common attitude. The harder we work, the more God will love us. And that attitude can be a helpful thing to the church – if we view it simply as an organisation.

After all, if you are running a business or an organisation, you want its employees or its members to work hard. That’s what leads to success, doesn’t it?

But that attitude, the harder we work, the more God will love us. Can also be unhelpful. In fact it can be destructive: Because if we think “The harder we work, the more God will love us”, it follows, logically, that if we don’t work hard enough, God won’t love us anymore.

We, as Christians, need to make sure we don’t fall into thinking that. We need to grasp that truth that CS Lewis came to understand and share.

“The Christian does not think God will love us because we are good, but that God will make us good because He loves us.”

Lewis’ understanding reflects John’s writing in his first letter, where we read “This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us” (1 John 4:10)

God loves us all. Young and old. Rich and poor. Hard worker and not so hard worker. Whatever our backgrounds, whatever our traditions, God loves us.

And despite whatever we might have done, God loves us.

While “the Christian does not think God will love us because we are good...” God’s love can and does and will change us. And we mustn’t forget the second part of what CS Lewis said “....but that God will make us good because he loves us.”

God will change us. He will make us better. Through the working of the Holy Spirit, we will become more Christ like.

It’s not an instant thing. It’s a process. Or as we like to say in the Uniting Church, it’s a journey. And indeed, we won’t be made perfect until God puts all things right, at the end of that journey - when Jesus returns in glory.

And it's a process that doesn't simply happen to us. It's a process that happens within us, and we are part of that process.

God reaches out to us all in his Son, and all we need to do is respond. To turn to him in faith.

And as the Holy Spirit works within us, we need to respond to that too, we need to be part of the process.

And all of that, is a really long introduction to today's reading from the book of Psalms.

Psalm 116, *"I love the Lord, for he heard my voice; he heard my cry for mercy."*

God doesn't love the psalmist because the psalmist loved God first. Rather the psalmist responds to God, because God heard the psalmist's cry for mercy.

The psalmist responded to God because God responded to the psalmist. "He heard my voice, he heard my cry."

And then in verse two he says *"Because [God] turned his ear to me, I will call on him as long as I live."*

Because God showed love toward the psalmist (he turned his ear, he heard the cry for mercy), the psalmist is going to call on God – to praise him, to pray to him, to follow him for the psalmist's whole life.

The psalmist didn't earn God's love, he was in a dark place - as we read *"The cords of death entangled [him], the anguish of the grave came over [him]; [he] was overcome by distress and sorrow"*.

But even when he was in anguish, he responded to God's love. He could do nothing to save himself, but he *called on the name of the Lord: "Lord, save me!"*

This cry to God always reminds me of that line from the hymn Rock of Ages: "Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to your cross I cling".

Nothing that we can do can save us. But God's saving grace is there for us all in the cross of Christ.

Now our lectionary compilers in their wisdom jump from verse 4 through to verse 12. Usually, when the lectionary skips a few verses, they're verses which cover topics we don't like to talk about in church: judgement. Or sex.

But not here, I think today's edit is just to save some time. But just to quickly share the next two verses:

*Gracious is the Lord, and righteous; our God is merciful. The Lord protects the simple; when I was brought low, he saved me. (Ps 116:5-6)*

God saved the psalmist – not because of how good the psalmist was, and not because of the hard work of the psalmist. But simply because he turned to God.

For the psalmist, it is just as CS Lewis would say thousands of years later:

*"The Christian does not think God will love us because we are good,"*

The psalmist then goes on to contemplate what he will do in response to God hearing his cries; in response to God saving him.

In verse 12 he asks, *"What shall I return to the Lord for all his goodness to me?"*

I wonder how we are today at asking – and answering – that question. What shall we, each one of us – and all of us together as St Ives Uniting Church – return to the Lord for all his goodness to us?

Normally, when we receive a gift from some friend or loved one, at Christmas or on a birthday, we like to show our appreciation. But the gifts of God are on a completely different scale, but the psalmist's question demands a response – what shall we return to the Lord for all his goodness to us?

Shall we do more or give more or pray more?

The psalmist says he *"I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord."*

In holding up the metaphorical cup of salvation, he is praising God. And in calling on the name of the Lord, he is praying to God. He is keeping God at the centre of his life. Not calling on a king, or a country, or a philosophy, or on his own wealth or achievements, but calling on the name of the Lord.

And the psalmist says he will keep God's commandments, because he says he will fulfil his vows to the Lord, and he will do it in the presence of all his people.

Our modern culture often tells us that religion – faith – is a private matter, "Yes, it's okay to have religion, but don't go on about it". But for Christians, it shouldn't be a private matter – it should be a public one. We are called to declare our faith publicly, to be witnesses to Jesus wherever we may be.

As Jesus said to his disciples *"...you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."* (Acts 1:8)

And even more famously, in John's gospel (Jn 13:34-35), Jesus told them *"I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."*

The witness that we are called to is almost certainly not standing on a street corner wearing a sandwich board declaring that the end is nigh. But it is to be seen as the people of God, doing the work of God in this world, and loving each other, as much as Jesus loved his followers.

It's not an easy thing to do. Sometimes it will be hard, sometimes heartbreaking. Sometimes painful and damaging. The people of God, the followers of Jesus, are not exempted from suffering. Jesus said his followers needed to take up their cross and follow him (Luke 9:23), and that can be daunting. Why would we choose to do it?

Why? Well, I think it comes back to the psalmist's question *"What shall I return to the Lord for all his goodness to me?"* we need to remember the cost of what God has done for the psalmist and for us – God gave up his only son, to die on that cross at Calvary. God's goodness to the psalmist – and God's goodness to us – far exceeds what we could ever return to the Lord.

In the face of that, the psalmist reflects that *"Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his faithful servants."*

But even having contemplated that he declares *"Truly I am your servant, Lord; I serve you just as my mother did;"* He is part of the people of God, with his mother before him, and the faithful of all the ages. - because he acknowledges that God has freed him from his chains.

Earlier I quoted Rock of Ages, so let me quote another of the great hymns – And Can It Be: "I woke, the dungeon flamed with light! My chains fell off, my heart was free, I rose, went forth, and followed thee".

The experience that Charles Wesley described in that hymn is the experience of the psalmist. The freeing from chains, and the following of God.

Without Jesus we are slaves of sin and death. But through Jesus, we are freed from that slavery, free from the metaphoric chains of sin and death. Free to respond to God.

And then the psalmist again writes of his response to God:

*I will sacrifice a thank offering to you and call on the name of the Lord.*

He will give up some of what he has as a thank offering, just as Christians continue to do with their freewill offerings, and in their donations to charity, and in their giving up of their time for others.

Once more he says he will call on the name of the Lord. He will praise God for his saving grace. So often I think we get caught up in all the things we have to do as Christians and as a church, but praising God should be central to our Christian lives.

The psalmist repeats this phrase “calling on the name of the Lord” in this psalm because it is not something to be done as a one off, but something that needs to be part of the cycle of our lives. Together as a church, and individually as followers of Jesus.

In the same way, the psalmist emphasises that he will fulfil his vows to the Lord in the presence of all his people – it is not something to be done once or something to be done privately, but something that needs to be visibly and publicly part of his life – and all our lives.

To be publicly – visibly – God’s people. Then. Today. And always.

The psalm, is a psalm of praise, and it ends, as so many of them do, with the simple words “Praise the Lord”, or, in Hebrew “Hallelu Yah”.

Let’s embrace that insight and take it to heart. Let’s move away from wordly ideas of earning love and earning favour, and truly appreciate that God loved us even though we were not worthy of that love. He sent his son into his fallen creation not to destroy it, not to judge it, but to save it and save us. To offer himself to die in our place, so that each of us can be reconciled with God. Freeing us from the chains of sin and death, and opening the way to everlasting life.

And as we do that, let’s remember the second part of CS Lewis’ insight: that God will make us good, because he loves us. Let us as individuals and as a church be open to God’s transforming love in our lives. Let us always grow in the knowledge and love of God.

And as we do those things, let us praise God and pray to him always.

As the psalmist did in ancient times, let us continue to do today.

Praise God.

Hallelujah.

Amen.