

INSPIRING MUSIC in WORSHIP

Session 3

Commentary for Part 3: What the Bible says (page 34)

The readings in Session 3 explore different ways in which the church makes known the works of God through its worship, to those inside and outside the church. Each of these readings gives a different perspective on mission. As we worship, we tell of God's mighty acts through liturgy, prayer and music. Strangers are welcome and the troubled and bereaved may find comfort and renewed strength.

The Law: Exodus 15.1, 11, 13–14 NIV

'I will sing to the Lord, for he is highly exalted. The horse and its rider he has hurled into the sea...Who among the gods is like you, O Lord? Who is like You – majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders?... In your unfailing love you will lead the people you have redeemed. In your strength, you will guide them to your holy dwelling. The nations will hear and tremble...'

The first part of Exodus describes Israel's captivity in Egypt. Slavery was harsh and cruel, so the Israelites cried out to God for deliverance. God sent Moses to persuade Pharaoh to let the people go free. Following a series of ten plagues, God delivered his people from their captors. They escaped to the Red Sea which miraculously parted to let them cross. The Egyptians pursued the Israelites, but when they arrived at the Red Sea they were engulfed in water and swept away.

The text comes from a song of praise, sometimes known as the Song of Moses. This song is believed by some to be the oldest in the world. It takes the form of an epic poem which gives thanks to God for his mighty act of deliverance. Setting the poem to music made it easier to hand on orally from one generation to another. It acted as a reminder to Israel of God's rescue and a witness to the nations around them that the Israelites worshipped the one true God. Miriam, the sister of Moses, joined in too, taking her tambourine and leading the women in dancing (see Exodus 15.20).

History: 2 Chronicles 6.32–33 NIV

[At the dedication of the Temple] Solomon prayed: As for the foreigner who does not belong to your people Israel but has come from a distant land because of your great name and your mighty hand and your outstretched arm – when he comes and prays towards this temple, then hear from heaven, your dwelling place, and do whatever the foreigner asks of you, so that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your own people Israel.

The two books of Chronicles record the ancestry of Israel and the historical events during the reign of King David and of his son, King Solomon. There is much overlap with the books of 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings. Solomon's reign began around 970 BC. David had wanted to build the temple, but because he was a warrior, God denied his request. David had made plans and preparations, but it was Solomon who built the first temple in Jerusalem. Chapters 2–5 document the preparations and building work, giving many details of the ornately decorated temple. Chapters 5–7 recount its service of dedication.

The temple had taken seven years to build. When the building work was finished, the 'ark of the covenant' was placed in the inner sanctuary, the Most Holy Place, and the temple was dedicated. There was great celebration with much music, including cymbals, harps, lyres, 120 priests sounding trumpets and singers, who praised God for his love and goodness. Solomon then led a prayer of dedication. The temple was to be a place of prayer, where praise and thanksgiving, confession and intercession were offered with the expectation that God would hear and answer with mercy, forgiveness and restoration. Solomon specifically included foreigners who were not part of God's people. He asked God to answer their prayers too, as a sign of God's power and authority. This would bear witness to other nations of God's great love and compassion.

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Psalms: Psalm 105.1–4 NIV

Give thanks to the Lord, call on his name; make known among the nations what he has done. Sing to him, sing praise to him; tell of all his wonderful acts. Glory in his holy name; let the hearts of those who seek the Lord rejoice. Look to the Lord and his strength; seek his face always.

The first fifteen verses of this psalm also appear in 1 Chronicles 16, after the ark of God had been brought back to Jerusalem by King David. This psalm was written by David and committed to Asaph and his fellow musicians. They were to use it as part of a regular routine of praise and thanksgiving.

Many psalms were also used by those on pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the various Jewish festivals. Together with other 'Pilgrim Psalms' or 'Songs of Ascent', psalms would be sung by those who travelled up to Jerusalem, a city situated on seven hills. As they walked and sang, the Israelites did just what the words said; they made known the great deeds of God to all those they passed on their way. Not only did they proclaim God's greatness, but they encouraged one another and passers by to 'look to the Lord... and seek his face always.' The following verse begins: 'Remember...' and then goes on to recount Israel's early history. Worship and proclamation has a significant effect outside the church and we too can recount in testimony and song, what God has done in our lives.

The Prophets: Isaiah 61.1–3 NIV

The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion – to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair.

The first part of the book of Isaiah (chapter 1–39) is full of words of warning and judgment directed towards the divided kingdom of Israel in the north and Judah in the south. The prophecy warned that rebellious attitudes would not go unpunished, but also foretold the coming of a child, on whom the Spirit of wisdom, understanding, counsel, power, knowledge and fear of the Lord would rest (see Isaiah 11.2). In the second part of the book (chapters 40–66) the tone changes to words of comfort and hope. The book was popular among the Jews, as they looked forward to the coming of the Messiah, the fulfilment of God's promises, and the establishment of God's everlasting kingdom.

In the New Testament, Luke tells us that Jesus went to the synagogue on the Sabbath 'as was his custom'. This passage from Isaiah was the reading set for the day. When Jesus had finished reading, he told the gathered congregation that this passage applied to him and the prophecy was being fulfilled in their hearing (see Luke 4.16–21). Here was a man with a mission. Jesus came to bring good news to the poor, healing to the sick, freedom to those held captive by sin or addiction, and comfort to the bereaved. Jesus ministered in the power of the Holy Spirit to any who came to him. His ministry was not limited to the Jews, but it extended outwards to bring hope and healing to all. This ministry is now continued by the Christian church today.

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The Gospels: Luke 24.28–31a NIV

As the disciples approached the village..., Jesus acted as if he were going further. But they urged him strongly, 'Stay with us, for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over.' So he went in to stay with them. When he was at table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognised him...

This passage comes from the end of Luke's Gospel after Jesus has risen from the dead. The resurrection of Jesus forms the linch pin of the Christian faith. Today, we view this event with two thousand years of hindsight. It would have appeared very different to those early disciples who had just experienced the traumatic events surrounding Jesus' arrest, trial and crucifixion in the few days before. You can get a fuller picture by reading the whole of Luke 24.

Here we have two disciples, possibly even a husband and wife, walking away from the horrors of Jerusalem towards the village of Emmaus, a village about seven miles away. They were bowed down with dashed hopes, grief and despair. The disciples seem to have been so traumatised that they did not recognise who was walking along with them, even though he was able to explain the Scriptures with clarity. When they reached Emmaus, they invited Jesus in for supper. When he was at table, Jesus did what he had done so many times before: he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and gave it to them. Here symbols and actions spoke louder than words. The disciples immediately recognised Jesus. They had seen this action many times before as Jesus had eaten in other homes with his disciples and friends (see Luke 5.27–31) or in the midst of great crowds at the feeding of the five thousand (see Luke 9.10–17). Jesus also told many stories about celebration feasts where everyone was welcomed, whether people of dubious reputation exploring faith (see Luke 19.1–10) or complete strangers gathered from the streets and alleys of the town or from the country lanes (see Luke 14.15–24).

Acts: Acts 2. 1, 4 – 6, 11,12 NIV

When the day of Pentecost came, the believers were all together in one place...All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them...declaring the wonders of God in their own language. Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, 'What does this mean?'

Before his Ascension into heaven, Jesus had given his disciples instructions to wait for the power of the Holy Spirit. This power would then enable them to continue his ministry and become 'witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth' (see Acts 1.8). This major outpouring of the Spirit occurred on the day of Pentecost, which is sometimes referred to as the birthday of the Church.

Fifty days after the Passover, Pentecost coincided with another major Jewish festival, the Feast of Weeks, in which thanksgiving was offered for the wheat harvest. Jerusalem would have been full of pilgrims, an international crowd who had gathered for the celebrations. People had travelled from as far afield as Rome, Africa and Asia. They were amazed but also perplexed to hear the believers praising God for his mighty deeds in all their own native languages. In response, Peter explained what was happening, which fulfilled a prophecy by Old Testament prophet, Joel (see Joel 2.28–31). You can read what Peter said in Acts 2.14–40. When he had finished, many were baptised and about three thousand people became believers. Many of the new converts then returned to their homes, taking the good news of Jesus with them. Thus, the message spread quickly outwards to other parts of the world.