

Invited to divine praise and enjoyment

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 15 January 2023

A Reflection by Rev Dr Josephine Inkpin

Epiphany 2 A

**Contemporary Reading: from 'A Word about Praise' by C S Lewis in
Reflections on the Psalms; John 1: 29-42**

This worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

Our Gospel readings, this week and next, relate to what has traditionally been termed '*the call*' of Jesus. Like the often very institutional church calls to 'mission', about which I spoke a fortnight ago, this call can often be interpreted quite narrowly, even oppressively. Indeed, it has sometimes been treated as a demand. Yet, in reality, as we see in both this week and next week's Gospel's readings, the call of Jesus is not so much a demand as an invitation. It seeks, as I said a fortnight ago, to draw us not drive us: to draw us into divine love and new life, not drive us into anything else, however admirable.

For note well Jesus' specific words in today's reading from John's Gospel: '*come and see*'. Like the words '*follow me*' in Matthew's Gospel next week, whilst Jesus invites, there is no compulsion. Nor is particular direction or content provided, although the Gospel record provides us early Christian understandings. Rather the invitation is primarily to an adventure of faith and experience. There is no requirement of belief as such, though that might emerge to give expression to the experience of the journey. There is no clear timetable, shape or schedule, or obvious destination. Jesus simply calls on those who will to set out on a shared pathway, walking together in trust. Is that how we see faith today

As we focus at this time on the pathways of invitation into which God may be calling our particular community, we might usefully reflect upon a vital related core question. It comes from the heart of the Reformed Christian traditions, and those who were raised in the Presbyterian tradition will recognise it quickly. For it is the most famous question in the Westminster Shorter Catechism, drawn up in 1646 and 1647 by an assembly of English and Scottish Reformed theologians.

This Catechism was an educational complement to the Westminster Confession, drawn up by the same body, which is the one of the great historic formularies of the Uniting Church, and which we are commended, by the Basis of Union, to study from time to time. After all, if we are to take new steps on the pathway of faith, it is helpful to know from where we have come. The question, in old-fashioned language, is this: '*what is the chief end of man?*' And the answer is: '*Man's chief end is to glorify God, and enjoy Him forever.*' This is the pathway to which we are called in Christ.

Now, we might want to rephrase the words of the question and the answer. After all, not only is the word '*man*' seen as limited, and not inclusive, today, but the words '*chief end*' also need a bit of unpacking. The Greek, scriptural, word it represents is *telos*, which means much more than a destination or a terminus as we might hear it today. Perhaps 'goal', or 'purpose' is a little better translation.

Yet, in our postmodern world, 'goal', and even 'purpose' have philosophical difficulties, and an old-fashioned ring. 'Point', or 'fulfilment', is therefore maybe nearer the mark as a translation of *telos* for us, whilst we might also use the word 'ultimate' rather than 'chief'.

Then, we might say, following the Westminster divines, as our key question: what is the ultimate point – or fulfilment – of human beings? And, shifting the word 'glorify' slightly, we might respond with this answer: the ultimate point – or fulfilment – of human beings is to give praise, and enjoy divine life forever. Or, even more simply: the ultimate point – or fulfilment – of human beings is to share praise and joy, aka love, forever. How does that sound?

I have to admit that, when I was younger, brought up in the Church of England, the Presbyterian tradition often seemed quite forbidding, even at times quite life-denying. After all, at that time in Britain some of the worst aspects of Irish (Ulster) Protestantism and the more extreme forms of Scottish Presbyterianism were well to the fore. Neither praise, nor certainly joy, seemed to be their main characteristics – rather the opposite! Perhaps you have had some of that kind of experience too?

Those aspects have certainly shaped strong features of religion in Sydney down the years. That key question of the Westminster Shorter Catechism always fascinated me however. It still does. For regenerating the 17th century Westminster foundations of the Uniting Church does not seem like a wonderful idea as such, but the Presbyterians hit the core of faith in this. Surely the heart of faith is praise and joy, otherwise known as divine love? If it is, what difference would it make for us, and all Christians, to be so renewed? Is this not the heart of the 'call' of Jesus?

Now, at once, modern human beings are still a bit jumpy, aren't they – aren't we?! Particularly when it comes to praise. Yes, we might go for the joy thing, which is of course much more than happiness. But praise – especially related to prayer and worship – what is all that about?

Well, for me, the 20th century writer C.S. Lewis is helpful in this, particularly in his essay we heard read today, entitled '*A Word About Praising*'.¹ For whilst C.S. Lewis was also a person of his own time, and we might want to critique his own reflections further, he very much shared modern viewpoints in approaching faith. Indeed, his famous autobiographical journey to faith was called, significantly, *Surprised by Joy*, precisely because his experiences of joy broke through, against his very best efforts, his narrow confinements to modern ways of thinking, particularly as an Oxford University academic.

For, as the Westminster divines knew well, divine joy has a way of breaking through, despite the best efforts of our attempts to live life without it, seeking to achieve ultimate satisfaction without the mystery of grace. So far so good perhaps, for C.S. Lewis, and for us. But what about this praise thing?

Lewis' way of looking at praise was to see it, like the wider call of Jesus, not as a command or demand, but as an invitation: an invitation which arises naturally out of the experience of love. That is crucial. When praise, and worship generally, is regarded as a demand, a command, even a duty, we have lost the plot. Instead, it is best expressed as a response, an experience, a relationship.

Lewis put it this way:

*the most obvious fact about praise — whether of God or anything — strangely escaped me. I thought of it in terms of compliment, approval, or the giving of honour. I had never noticed that **all enjoyment spontaneously overflows into praise** unless . . . shyness or the fear of boring others is deliberately brought in to check it.*

'The world rings with praise', Lewis observed: whether the praise of lovers or of other things. He was right, wasn't he? Why then would we not give praise to the ultimate mystery, the source of all life, and the experiences of transcendent beauty, truth and love that we experience? Praise of God is an inevitable outflowing of human beings who have a sacred sense. As Lewis observed, in relation to the biblical psalms, which are so full of praise and encouragement to praise:

The Psalmists in telling everyone to praise God are doing what all do when they speak of what they care about.

Worship, in other words, is an invitation to share our experiences of sacred mystery and love. In doing so, it can help us find our own fulfilment. For as C.S Lewis put it:

*Except where intolerably adverse circumstances interfere, praise almost seems to be inner health made audible ...we delight to praise what we enjoy because **the praise not merely expresses but completes the enjoyment; it is its appointed consummation.** It is not out of compliment that lovers keep on telling one another how beautiful they are; the delight is incomplete till it is expressed.*

Worship of course, like psalms, includes other things. Vitality, it helps us share common stories and helps bind us together in other ways. It also, importantly, involves lament, supplication, and confession at times. Yet praise and joy are central, as the Westminster divines identified: praise and joy which are to be lived out in every aspect of our life, as such a spirit of worship is not something reserved for special Sunday or other moments, but is given to us to suffuse our whole lives.

To pick up today's Gospel story, another way of putting this is to say that the core invitation of the God of Jesus is to share the pathway of divine love – aka praise and joy - together. Other things may flow out of this: such as the search for justice, life-giving expressions of spirituality; engaging with others; and the nurturing of community and resources – themes we will reflect upon in the next few weeks as part of our exploration of our Pathway (aka Mission) Plan. Yet, at the heart of all of these is this shared invitation to joy and praise. If we miss that, then we not only miss the central point of our life together, but we will attempt to be community with way too much concern and anxiety. Rather we are invited into praise and joy.

This is strongly evident in today's Gospel reading. For whilst there are many powerful theological terms in this passage, not least highly significant names that the first followers later gave to their experiences of Jesus, these terms themselves were born out of the pathway of love, praise and joy, which the first followers chose to step along. Jesus did not force the first disciples, threaten them, or even cajole them. Undoubtedly, as for us too, there were also other factors at play. They may have had other reasons to follow Jesus, including particular needs and curiosity. However something more was surely present, and this something more was the invitation to experience divine love more deeply.

'Come and see' says Jesus in today's Gospel reading. It is an invitation we can choose not to take up. We can devote ourselves to other things and to other pathways.

Yet, as the Westminster divines were clear, to do so risks missing our 'chief end', our *telos*, the ultimate point and fulfilment of our existence.

Of course, this pathway of Christ is not an easy one. As the Gospels themselves disclose, on the way, the first followers of Jesus themselves experienced doubts, disillusionment, conflict and even despair, and they frequently misunderstood the pathway and lost track from time to time.

For as Shakespeare put it, '*the course of true love never did run smooth.*'ⁱⁱ

Nonetheless they persisted, and in this found their fulfilment, their praise and joy.

In the Name of Jesus: pioneer, pathway and power of Love. Amen.

ⁱ 1 See further <https://www.cslewis.com/why-should-we-sing-praises-to-god/>

ⁱⁱ A Midsummer's Night Dream, Act 1 Scene 1