**Psalm 48**

**Four unchanging characteristics of the Christian faith**

We’ve thought a lot over the last few months about how this church here at St. Andrew’s has adapted and changed over the centuries; how successive priests and people have recognized the world changing around them and made changes to the building of the church and how mission and ministry is carried out in order to continue as a useful body of believers for the local community.

So much change over so many years…

But whilst the form of church constantly changes, the Christian Gospel and the reality of God does not change and it remains constant. And because the Christian Gospel remains constant, there are some characteristics of the church that should never change, even if the form of buildings and worship do need to adapt on a regular basis.

We are continuing our series of sermons on the Psalms today and this morning, we are considering Psalm 48. And this is an interesting Psalm, I think, because it draws out for us four particular characteristics of the church that do not change through the years but remain our constant experience as Christians. These four characteristics are fundamental to what it means for us to be disciples of Jesus and worshippers of our God and I want to spend a bit of time this morning thinking about this Psalm and these four characteristics in a bit more depth.

**Characteristic #1: Passion for the church**

What are you passionate about? What do you get excited about? What gets your motor running?

We are all passionate about something; we all have things in our lives or things in this world that compel us to participate or share our opinions with others. Passion in life is a good thing and it makes for a really interesting world when people are passionate about different things.

And, as Christians, we are called to be passionate about God and his church. Now, for many people, and even those who are regular attenders and members of the church, that may feel like a weird idea: to be passionate about church. Each one of us is drawn to come to worship for our own reasons and there are many different reasons why we come here on a Sunday or on other days of the week. But is ‘passion for the church’ one of those reasons?

What is there to be passionate about? Sometimes the building is cold, the pews are uncomfortable, nothing very much different happens here on a Sunday, it’s fairly predictable, the hymns are pretty much the same, the refreshments are the same, my sermons are pretty much the same. What is it about the church that can stir our passion?

Well, the opening two verses of Psalm 48 show us that it is not exactly the church itself about which we can be passionate, but what the church represents and, most importantly, what the church contains, what it houses…

What do I mean by that?

Verses 1 and 2 start off like this: “Great is the Lord and greatly to be praised in the city of our God! His holy mountain, beautiful in elevation is the joy of all the earth, Mount Zion in the far north, the city of the great King.”

In the Old Testament, Mount Zion is Jerusalem. And it is mentioned many times as the place where God dwells, which is why the Temple was built in Jerusalem. In 2 Samuel 5, David took Zion from the Jebusites and the Ark of the Covenant was brought into the city as the great symbol of God’s presence with his people. In 1 Kings 8, Solomon moved the ark into the Temple and that became the home of God where his people gathered to worship and celebrate their faith together through many generations. And here, in Psalm 48:2, Jerusalem is described as the city of the great King: not King David, but God the King, who rules over all the earth. And as we know, even today, Jerusalem is the focus of the Jewish faith and that is why it still has such religious and political importance to the Jewish people.

But there’s also a sense in which Jerusalem, or Mount Zion as it is called in this Psalm, acts as a metaphor for something much greater to come. Throughout the Bible, Jerusalem becomes a metaphor for God’s presence with his people. The Old Testament prophets believed that. For example, in Zechariah 2:10-11, God says this: “Sing and rejoice, O daughter of Zion, for I come and I will dwell in your midst…and many nations shall join themselves to the Lord on that day…” Isaiah, in 2:23, wrote this: “It shall come to pass in the last days that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains…and the nations shall flow to it…and out of Zion shall go the law and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.”

There’s loads more examples, of course, but we can see that Jerusalem was considered to be a metaphor of God’s presence with his people.

And God’s presence with his people eventually became most completely realized in the incarnation of Jesus that first Christmas-time: the Word become flesh, Emmanuel, God-with-us.

“The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth”.

The hope of Jerusalem and all that it stood for became ultimately realized in the person of Jesus Christ as God dwelt among us in human form.

And so, as Christians, there is a sense in which we believe the church to be the new Jerusalem: the community of God, with God at the heart of it. In Christ, we are citizens of the new Jerusalem, we are members of the community of faith and God dwells in the midst of us. As John wrote in the Book of Revelation, chapter 21: “And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Behold, the dwelling place of God is with human beings. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people…”

Now, in verse 2 of this Psalm, Mount Zion is called ‘beautiful’ – ‘a beautiful elevation’. But what made it so beautiful? And what makes the church, the new Jerusalem, so beautiful?

Well, its beauty derives not so much from what it is in itself but the fact that God is present and dwells there, in Jerusalem, and in the church, the new Jerusalem. So we should be passionate about the church not so much because of the hymns or sermons or pews or liturgy, but passionate about the church because it is the dwelling place of God. Church, in a metaphorical sense, is where God dwells amongst his people and he is the focus of all that we do and all that we say and all that we sing and so our passion for the church is actually a passion for worshipping and serving God.

Christians are a people of passion – passionate about the church - because it is the place where we meet with Emmanuel, God-with-us, and where we worship him in spirit and in truth.

So the form of church can change from generation to generation - how we do things, how we shape the building, the styles of worship can change - but God’s presence with us is constant. And it is the constancy of God’s presence, not a personal preference for how we do things, that stirs up our passion for the church.

**Characteristic #2: Concern for the persecuted**

In verse 4 onwards, the Psalmist writes this: “For behold, the kings assembled; they came on together. As soon as they saw [Mount Zion], they were astounded; they were in panic; they took to flight…As we have heard, so have we seen in the city of the Lord of hosts, in the city of our God, which God will establish forever.”

The history of the Old Testament is a history of the people of God, the Israelites, so often under siege from the nations around them. The Ammonites, the Moabites, the Jebusites, the Philistines and so many others were constantly attacking the Israelites and they were constantly thrown back on relying on the strength of God to protect them and give them the victory.

We don’t know which attack this Psalm is specifically referring to in historic terms, but regardless of what attack it was the Psalmist is clear that the victory belongs to God. Yes, the people of God overcame their enemies but it was in the strength of God that they were victorious.

And again for us, I think there is a metaphor here for God strengthening his people to help the church continue and flourish. As Jesus said about the church in Matthew 16:18: “The gates of hell shall not prevail against it”.

It’s hard for us in our current context to recognize the importance of this because to a large extent, we are free to worship how we like in the UK in 2019: we can worship God how we want, when we want, where we want without any real fear of persecution. But that has not been the case throughout history, of course, when many were martyred in the UK for doing exactly what we are doing here today. That’s not the case in Sri Lanka, still reeling after the recent terrorist attacks on their churches. That’s not the case in Iraq and Syria and Saudi Arabia and India and Pakistan and so many other countries around the world where so many of our brothers and sisters are being persecuted and killed for worshipping God.

And they – and we – are driven on in the hope that, one day, God will show his victory in all its fullness and the faith of the martyrs and the persecuted will be vindicated and the Kingdom of God will flourish as a place of healing and peace. History bears witness to the fact that even though many have tried to silence the church through the centuries, it continue to grow and flourish through the blood of the martyrs and the Gospel of Jesus Christ will always flourish. As the Psalmist writes here, “As we have heard, so have we seen…”

I think that, as a church, we must not take for granted the privilege we have of worshipping God in freedom and without fear. And perhaps we need to think more deeply in the coming years about what we can do to support and encourage those in other parts of the world where there is persecution and martyrdom. To pray for our brothers and sisters, yes - but perhaps also to engage in a more active way with highlighting the evil of religious persecution and encouraging those who have the power to respond accordingly.

So, we are called to be passionate for the church.

We are called to be prayerful for the persecuted.

**Characteristic #3: A joyful faith**

In verse 9-11, the Psalmist writes this: “We have thought on your steadfast love, O God, in the midst of your temple. As your name, O God, so your praise reaches to the ends of the earth. Your right hand is filled with righteousness. Let Mount Zion be glad! Let the daughters of Judah rejoice because of your judgments!”

As we consider the reality of God’s presence here with us, as we consider the privilege we have to worship in freedom, and as we really let these two truths sink deep into our psyches, how could we not then be joyful in our worship?

And that’s what we see in this section of the Psalm: the people of God joyfully worshipping him. “Let Mount Zion be glad! Let the daughters of Judah rejoice!”

Our church services on a Sunday are not something we just turn up to and have the leader do something for us whilst we passively sit and receive…Instead, it is the people of God coming together in the presence of God to remember his goodness, to remember his faithfulness, to celebrate his forgiveness and healing and salvation and grace and love, and to joyfully respond to all that God has done for us through Jesus Christ.

God is raising his people up onto a mountain – Mount Zion - to be a people of praise high on the hill, to be the light of the world. Our acts of praise and thanksgiving can have a transformative impact on our community as more people come and join the church here at St. Andrew’s and realize all that God has done for us and what it means to follow him, so that we can have life in all its fullness.

We have a Gospel to proclaim, we know the love of God in our lives. So let’s be joyful about that and share the joy of our experience with others so that they can come to know the love of God for themselves too.

**Characteristic #4: A people with a story to tell**

The Psalmist ends his Psalm with these words: “Tell the next generation that this is God, our God forever and ever. He will guide us forever.”

Now that is a really simple instruction but it can be difficult for us to absorb the consequences of this. Because the truth is that all of us want to be comfortable in church and do things the way we like them to be done because, after all, why would we attend a church that we don’t enjoy? Well, it’s a fair point, and I hope that, by and large, we are creating a church at St. Andrew’s in which we feel fairly comfortable and which is fairly enjoyable even…

But that is not the end goal that we are working towards.

The end goal of our purpose as a church is wrapped up in this final instruction from Psalm 48: “Tell the next generation that this is God”.

“Tell the next generation that this is God”.

That is what we are here for. That is what we must do.

I like to think of the church – the history of the church, of which we are a part – as a relay race. For a short period, you and I are handed the baton of the Gospel and our task is to run as fast as we can with that baton before handing it on to the next runners in the race.

Essentially, our ministry together is all about legacy: what legacy will our generation leave at St. Andrew’s? Will we be more concerned about creating a place that we can enjoy for ourselves but without any hope of passing it on to the next generation because we have disenfranchised them and bored them into submission? Or will we run our leg of the relay and, with enthusiasm, hand the baton of faith on to the next generation of faithful Christians?

It’s all about legacy – what we leave behind for the next generation, the form of faith that we can pass on to the next generation.

Our task, as a Mission-Shaped Church, is to invest ourselves in the next generation of faith, to model faithful living to them and to encourage them to take up the baton and run their own leg of the race. As we do that, we will increasingly become the Mission-Shaped Church that we have committed ourselves to be.

So Psalm 48 gives us four characteristics – four unchanging characteristics - of the Christian church in a changing world. Not the only four characteristics, of course, but important ones, nevertheless.

We are to be Passionate about Church.

We are to be Prayerful for the persecuted.

We are to be Joyful in faith.

We are to be a People with a story to tell.

Let’s recommit ourselves to becoming this church today and begin by giving thanks to God for the privilege of being chosen by him as we share Holy Communion together in a few minutes time.