

Psalm 33

¹ Rejoice in the LORD, O you righteous.

Praise befits the upright.

² Praise the LORD with the lyre;
make melody to God with the harp of ten strings.

³ Sing to the Lord a new song;
play skilfully on the strings, with loud shouts.

⁴ For the word of the LORD is upright,
and all God's work is done in faithfulness.

⁵ God loves righteousness and justice;
the earth is full of the steadfast love of the LORD.

This psalm tells us how to praise God and why we should praise God. But before we reflect on the how and why of praise, we need to reflect on praise itself. What does it mean to praise? The dictionary definition of praise is: "to express warm approval or admiration of". I hope most of us have praised people at some point and in some way, or we have been praised ourselves... a beautiful experience indeed! But what about God? Have you ever praised God in a way where you feel it deep inside?

According to neuroscientific study, praise taps into a part of the brain that shifts our chemistry, especially if we are feeling down or depressed. And the kind of praising the psalmist counsels would definitely get the chemistry changing and blood flowing! It's about singing from the heart with gusto. And even as there is a beautiful kind of music to move us through meditation or lament, praise music is sung with "loud shouts." It is also played with musical instruments. This psalm refers to a stringed instrument, but other praise psalms add horns and pipes as well as clashing cymbals to their instrumental ensemble!

Sadly, though, a lot of the "praise" music we listen to in churches doesn't necessarily get us feeling like praising. Why? Is it the "happy, clappy" superficiality of the words and music? Is it a lack of connection with others that make it feel like genuine communal praise? Certainly, for the psalmist, praise is not the only component of worship but an important part of worship, as is lament, supplication and thanksgiving.

But why praise, and why praise God? Is it just about changing the brain chemistry from a gloomier state to a more joyous one, or is it also about expressing something more profound from our hearts? Praise, like joy and like gratitude comes from a place of fullness. Indeed, sometimes can feel so full inside that it feels like our hearts will burst. We need creative ways to express such fullness, and so we sing at the top of our lungs

and we play music, and, if it's praise music we play it loud! We clap and move and dance too.

But is there also a spiritual substance to praise, or is it just an emotion and feeling?

The psalmist refers to "God's work", to God's steadfast love, to God's love for righteousness and justice (related words put sung/spoken together for emphasis).

When we experience a fullness of love inside and when we experience that justice and right have been established in some way in a world of sadness, cruelty, misfortune and neglect, then praise is a fitting response. When love wins and justice is achieved, God is there moving, provoking and flowing through.

So what about you in your life? Is there a place and a space for praise in your life? What does praise look like in your life? Is it connected to joy or gratitude? Are there times when you feel justice and righteousness are being served and love has found your heart again in a new way?

PRAYER: Dear God, flow through my heart... flow through my heart so fully and freely that I'll want to jump up and praise you with "loud shouts." I know that praise can't always be the way. Sometimes we need to sit still, ponder in silence, and shed some tears as a reminder that we are human and vulnerable and we hurt for ourselves and others. But we also need to praise, O God, and praise you... I need praise in my life... And so, I call on you to flow into me and through me... fill me to bursting with love and give me new wings to fly in this new time of my life... Amen.