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November 26th: Psalm 66 & Acts 21:17-36

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A psalm of communal and individual praise. Paul taken in the temple.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

Psalm 66 To the Choir Master A song, a psalm Shout for joy to God all the earth Sing the glory of His name Give to Him glorious praise Say to God, How awesome are your deeds! So great is your power that your enemies come cringing to you. All the earth worships you, and sings praises to you. They sing praises to your name.

Come and see what God has done. He is awesome in His deeds toward the children of man. He turned the sea into dry land.

They passed through the river on foot. There did we rejoice in Him, who rules by His might forever. Whose eyes keep watch on the nations, let not the rebellious exalt themselves.

Bless our God, O peoples! Let the sound of His praise be heard, who has kept our soul among the living, and has not let our feet slip. For you, O God, have tested us. You have

tried us as silver is tried.

You brought us into the net. You laid a crushing burden on our backs. You let men ride over our heads.

We went through fire and through water. Yet you have brought us out to a place of abundance. I will come into your house with burnt offerings.

I will perform my vows to you, that which my lips uttered and my mouth promised when I was in trouble. I will offer to you burnt offerings of fattened animals, with the smoke of the sacrifice of rams. I will make an offering of bulls and goats.

Come and hear all you who fear God, and I will tell you what He has done for my soul. I cried to Him with my mouth, and high praise was on my tongue. If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened.

But truly God has listened. He has attended to the voice of my prayer. Blessed be God, because He has not rejected my prayer or removed His steadfast love from me.

Psalm 66 seems to be connected to the psalm that precedes it. Psalm 65 ends with the image of the earth, visited by and clothed with God's bounteous gifts, rejoicing before Him. Psalm 66 seems to pick up the same image at its outset.

Shout for joy to God, all the earth. Sing the glory of His name. Give to Him glorious praise.

And all the earth worships you and sings praises to you. They sing praises to your name. The psalm divides into two larger sections.

Conrad Schaefer argues that the first section, in verses 1-12, is more of a community hymn, while the second, in verses 13-20, is individual thanksgiving. Beth Tanner subdivides the two sections further as follows. Section 1, in verses 1-12, can be divided into Praise to the God of all, in verses 1-4, Praise to the God of the waters, in verses 5-7, Praise to the God of guidance, in verses 8-12, and then section 2, in verses 13-20, can be subdivided into verses 13-15, bringing sacrifices to God, and verses 16-20, telling of God's goodness.

The psalmist begins with a summons to the whole earth to join together in praising God for His great deeds. God is worthy of praise on account of the greatness of His works and the greatness of His power. His power is such that even His enemies must bow the knee to Him.

Every knee must bow and every tongue must confess His lordship, whether joyously or reluctantly. The submission is universal. His reign is universal.

Whereas verses 1-4 spoke about the great deeds of the Lord more generically, verses 5-

7 turn to God's great demonstration of His power before the nations in the Exodus, in particular in the climactic event of the crossing of the Red Sea. The plagues and the deliverance of the Exodus was a manifestation of the Lord's supremacy over the false gods of the nations and a proof of His sovereignty in every arena of creation and human affairs. His deeds aren't just great deeds as such here.

They are deeds exercised toward the children of man, mighty deeds exercised for the protection and the deliverance of His people. The power to turn the sea into dry land recalls the original creation, in which the land was drawn up out of the sea on the third day of the creation. God's might in the creation is a might by which He keeps the proud designs of the rebellious nations in check.

They may seek to lift themselves up, vaunting themselves in their power, but God is able to bring them low. And God demonstrated that He had this power in creation in the events of the Exodus. Continuing the theme of general praise, the psalmist calls all peoples to glorify God for His providential guidance through history.

The paths of our lives are surrounded by unseen reefs and shoals, dangers of which we are unaware, but which could easily bring us to ruin. God is the great pilot, charting a course for peoples and nations through their history, for His great purposes. God's providence is a source of great comfort in a world where we are flanked by hidden dangers on all sides.

We are ultimately in His hands, not our own, nor are we adrift on treacherous waters driven by the fickle winds of chance or fate. He preserves His people, even as He tests them. The hearer might recall here the scriptural descriptions of Israel's experience during the Exodus.

The Lord led His people out of Egypt, guarding, providing for, and directing them on the way, while judging and testing them, so that they might be tested and proven. In the end it becomes clearly apparent that God's purpose through it all is a good and a gracious one. Even when He brought Israel into the net or laid a crushing burden on their backs, His ultimate purpose was their growth, to the point where they could enter into the goodness of His inheritance.

Deuteronomy chapter 8 verses 2-10 expresses this. Deuteronomy chapter 8 verses 2-10 God is bringing you into a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and springs, flowing out in the valleys and hills, a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey, a land in which you will eat bread without scarcity, in which you will lack nothing, a land whose stones are iron, and out of whose hills you can dig copper, and you shall eat and be full, and you shall bless the Lord your God for the good land He has given you. God's deliverance leads to the formation of the people through God's guidance and discipline, so that Israel might truly enter into the reality of what it means to be the Lord's firstborn son.

All of the nations are invited to join in the praise here. God's formation of the people of Israel is not merely for their own sake, they are to be a light and a blessing to the wider nations. At verse 13 the psalm shifts from being more of a collective psalm of praise to being one of individual thanksgiving.

The focus now is not God and His great works, but the response of the individual to the goodness and the deliverance of God. It isn't easy to connect the second section of this psalm with the first, and various hypotheses have been put forward. Some have offered a supposed explanation in the form of Israel's worship, or speculated that two distinct psalms were joined together.

While we may feel a jolt in moving from one half to another, this might be in part because we have failed adequately to appreciate the connection between the communal and the individual in worship. Schaeffer notes, for instance, a symmetry exists in the relationships. What Israel is to the nations, the first movement, the individual is for the devout community, the second movement.

The individual invites the community to recognise God. In verse 16, just as the community invites the peoples to praise. In verse 8, Furthermore, the individual here is likely not just a random Israelite layperson.

He speaks about performing his vows. He was in trouble, sought the Lord's deliverance, vowing to offer great sacrifices upon his deliverance, and now he is performing them. The burnt offerings that he offers are very large offerings, rams, bulls and goats.

Perhaps this is hyperbole, but it is also possible that the person in view is the king or some other leader of the people, who is speaking not just in his private capacity, but in his representative office. The payment of vows to the Lord is only part of what the worshipper does here. Testimony to others is consistently presented as an integral part of the proper response to deliverance.

Those who are delivered ought to present their example to others, encouraging them to call upon the Lord in their own distress, and also to invite others to share in their thanksgiving. The worshipping community is spurred to greater worship as they hear the great deeds of the Lord on account of members of their community. The psalmist makes clear that the person who expects to be heard by the Lord must not cherish iniquity in their heart.

Their hearts and their voices must both be turned towards the Lord, and they must reject and confess their sins. This doesn't mean that they must be sinlessly perfect, but they must relate to God from a true heart. The psalm began with the might of God's deeds in the whole earth, and it ends with the steadfastness of his love towards the person who seeks him with this pure heart.

The deep relationship between the cosmic and the particular, between the communal and the individual that is suggested here, should not be missed. A question to consider, what are some of the various ways that communal praise and individual praise can be connected or intertwined? Acts chapter 21 verses 17 to 36. When we had come to Jerusalem, the brothers received us gladly.

On the following day, Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present. After greeting them, he related one by one the things that God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. And when they heard it, they glorified God.

And they said to him, You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed. They are all zealous for the law, and they have been told about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or walk according to our customs. What then is to be done? They will certainly hear that you have come.

Do therefore what we tell you. We have four men who are under a vow. Take these men and purify yourself along with them, and pay their expenses, so that they may shave their heads.

Thus all will know that there is nothing in what they have been told about you, but that you yourself also live in observance of the law. But as for the Gentiles who have believed, we have sent a letter with our judgment that they should abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality. Then Paul took the men, and the next day he purified himself along with them, and went into the temple, giving notice when the days of purification would be fulfilled, and the offering presented for each one of them.

When the seven days were almost completed, the Jews from Asia, seeing him in the temple, stirred up the whole crowd, and laid hands on him, crying out, Men of Israel, help! This is the man who is teaching everyone everywhere against the people, and the law, and this place. Moreover he even brought Greeks into the temple, and has defiled this holy place. For they had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian with him in the city, and they supposed that Paul had brought him into the temple.

Then all the city was stirred up, and the people ran together. They seized Paul, and dragged him out of the temple, and at once the gates were shut. And as they were seeking to kill him, word came to the tribune of the cohort that all Jerusalem was in confusion.

He at once took soldiers and centurions, and ran down to them. And when they saw the tribune and the soldiers, they stopped beating Paul. Then the tribune came up and arrested him, and ordered him to be bound with two chains.

He inquired who he was, and what he had done. Some in the crowd were shouting one thing, some another. And as he could not learn the facts because of the uproar, he ordered him to be brought into the barracks.

And when he came to the steps, he was actually carried by the soldiers because of the violence of the crowd. For the mob of the people followed, crying out, Away with him! Paul, in the second half of Acts chapter 21, on his return from his third missionary journey, has just arrived in Jerusalem from Caesarea. He has been accompanied by some Christians from Caesarea, and a company of Gentiles and others that he had brought with him.

This is presumably near the time of Pentecost, as it had been Paul's intention to be in Jerusalem for Pentecost, perhaps as a symbolically appropriate time to present the Gentile believers as first fruits of the harvest field of the nations, and to present the gift that had been gathered among the Gentiles for the poor Christians in Jerusalem to the church there. It had been foretold that suffering and persecution awaited him in Jerusalem, and many of the disciples had to discourage him from going there on his journey back. But the Holy Spirit was constraining him to go, so he wasn't going to turn aside.

Luke has been framing Paul's journey towards Jerusalem as a playing out of the pattern of Christ's life in Paul's own. Paul is walking in the footsteps of his master. However, there are other matters more immediately at play.

The Gentile mission had been rapidly growing, and the appropriate relationship between Jews and Gentiles was an issue of great concern, and has been throughout the book to this point. The more that the Gentile mission expands, and the more that pagan Gentiles convert and come into the church, the more that the relationship between Jews and Gentiles would be a cause of concerns, suspicions and tensions. A very great deal depends upon Paul's relationship with the Christian leaders in Jerusalem.

The Jewish Christians in Jerusalem would largely have been pious Jews who followed Jesus. The rising numbers of Gentile Christians, who by now would have been far more than a merely peripheral group around a Jewish movement, would have caused tensions for Judean Jewish Christians, who might have been wondering what implications the rise of a Jew-Gentile church had for their relationship to their Jewish heritage. The situation had been exacerbated by rumours that had been spreading concerning Paul, that he had been opposing Jewish practices and traditions among the Diaspora Jews, that he was intentionally Gentilising the church.

If the issue of Judaising was the pressing problem when the first Gentiles were converting, now that great numbers of Gentiles are converting, the fear of Gentilising is the more pressing one. As Craig Keener makes clear, at issue here is the spirit of the Jerusalem Decree. The Jerusalem Council had determined to ensure that the Gentile

converts would be free to live as converted Gentiles.

Implicit in this agreement was the reciprocal recognition of Jews by Gentiles, that Jews should not Judaise the Gentiles and the Gentiles should not Gentilise the Jews. Also at stake was the witness of the church to the observant Jews in Jerusalem and elsewhere, who had heard the slander that Paul was a subversive Gentiliser. John Barclay, cited by Keener, offers three helpful categories for thinking through some of the issues at stake.

The first is that of assimilation, which is integrating into Greco-Roman society and abandoning distinctive Jewish customs. The second category is acculturation, which is the acquisition of the language and literary heritage of the majority culture through education and other means. And the third is accommodation, which refers to the ways in which Jews could express their own faith in terms of the values, ideals and forms of Hellenistic culture and literature.

In terms of these three categories, Barclay argues that Paul was highly assimilated on account of his eating and associating with Gentiles. He was only moderately acculturated, his canon was clearly scripture, and while he had some knowledge of rhetoric and a rudimentary awareness of Greek literature and philosophy, he does not seem to have been especially knowledgeable in these areas, and he operated principally in traditional Jewish categories. Finally, he wasn't very accommodated.

For Paul, the Gentile world was a sinful one, and he clearly sets himself against it and its moral values. Paul doesn't try to transpose scriptural conceptual structures and language into those of the wider Gentile society. His approach on issues such as sexuality, idolatry and scripture are manifestly those of an observant Jew.

Paul's assimilation was, as we see elsewhere, for the sake of mission, as he puts it in 1 Corinthians 9, 19-23, For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law, I became as one under the law, though not being myself under the law, that I might win those under the law.

To those outside the law, I became as one outside the law, not being outside the law of God, but under the law of Christ, that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some.

I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings. Paul doesn't seem to have completely abandoned Jewish practices, however he is prepared to put such practices to one side for the sake of mission. Although this does not mean that he is requiring Jews in general to lay aside their culture, it does serve to relativise those practices in a way that would have led many to view Paul as a serious compromiser or even as an apostate, especially as claims about Paul were exaggerated through the

spread of rumours concerning him.

This would cause particular problems for the Jerusalem Christians as they related to the Jews around them. They were presenting themselves as pious and observant Jews and yet they countenanced Paul's supposedly Gentilising mission. Meeting with James and the elders, Paul and his companions were welcomed and recounted all that God accomplished through them, leading the elders to glorify God.

However, James and the elders are concerned to deal with the rumours that have been spreading, which have been dismaying observant Jewish Christians and harming their witness among their fellow Jews. Paul has seemingly come to Jerusalem with the express aim of strengthening relations between Jews and Gentiles within the church. The collection for the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem has been a repeated issue of concern in his epistles as a very practical expression of the union of Jews and Gentiles that he proclaims.

Now he arrives in Jerusalem, it seems as if this great unifying gesture of Paul and the company of Gentiles that he has brought with him, bringing the gifts of their various churches, is in danger of being entirely in vain, as unsettling rumours concerning him are provoking deeply damaging distrust in the very place where he is seeking reciprocal recognition and love. We should also consider the tensions that have been rising in Jerusalem for some time. Jewish nationalism had become much more pronounced and there were a number of instances of serious violence.

News will have gotten around that Paul is now in the city and people's eyes will be trained upon him and upon the Jerusalem leaders in their handling of him. Without compromising the understanding of salvation that had been presented by the Jerusalem council, the Jerusalem leaders want Paul publicly to perform an action that manifests the fact that he honours Jewish customs and isn't a Gentiliser. The leaders make clear that this is not in any sense meant to compromise the statement they made at the Jerusalem council.

Such Jewish practices are not being required for standing before God. Nor do they themselves believe that the claims of Paul's accusers really have great substance to them. Although Paul may be more assimilated in the context of the Gentile mission, this does not mean that he ceases to regard himself as a Jew or that he has just shrugged off Jewish customs.

In chapter 16 verse 3, Paul himself circumcised Timothy in order to respect Jewish scruples. Jewish customs may not be required for standing before God but they have a continuing cultural significance and more than that represent a sort of religious practice, in a somewhat older sense of that term religious. Like the monastic might adopt religious orders as a form for their Christian piety, for these Jewish Christians, Jewish practices may have been regarded as a context for the practice of their Christian faith.

The practices are not incumbent upon everyone, they don't establish the person who adopts them on a special footing with God, but they do represent a framework of piety that can assist them in their spiritual practice, in their growth, in their witness and in their enjoyment of faithful community. The Jewish leaders propose a plan, there are four men under a vow and Paul should pay their expenses and join with them in purifying himself, thereby demonstrating his respect for and support for the continued practice of Jewish customs. The exact nature of the vows of the men in question is not entirely clear and a number of suggestions have been advanced.

Daryl Bach lists four of these. First, Paul is being purified for traveling in Gentile areas whereas for the others it is in connection with a Nazarite vow. Second, Paul is sharing in the end of the men's vow for the remaining week.

Third, the four men have contracted uncleanness and need to be cleansed. Or four, Paul's cleansing is for his own vow mentioned in chapter 18 verse 18. The text doesn't seem to settle the question for us and while a few of these options are possible, none is without its attendant questions or problems.

The men performing a Nazarite vow does seem more likely though. Paul seems to be entirely willing to comply and he initiates the process of purification with these four men in the temple. The purification period is almost over when some diaspora Jews from Asia recognize Paul in the temple and stir up the crowd against him.

It is likely that this was during the feast of Pentecost for which Paul had wanted to be back in Jerusalem and that the Jews from the province of Asia were visiting for that. Paul had been the cause of eruptions in the Jewish community in Ephesus. A number of people had split off from the synagogue there and joined his school.

While the Judean Jews had their issues with and their suspicions of Paul, they were unlikely to be quite as fiercely opposed to him as the Jews from the province of Asia. They accuse Paul of The first charge is that he teaches everyone everywhere against the people and the law and the temple. The accusation here is similar to that made against Stephen in chapter 6 verses 11-14.

The accusation that he taught against the people might have arisen from his assimilation with Gentiles in certain contexts. The second charge is that he has brought Trophimus, an Ephesian Greek, into the temple, defiling it. This was a mistaken charge, albeit one that they seemed to think was accurate.

A Gentile was not supposed to enter the court of the Israelites in the temple. Hearing these charges, the whole city was stirred up. They seized Paul and dragged him out of the temple.

Word of the mob and the commotion reached the tribune, who led a cohort of a

thousand men. He took a large contingent of soldiers with him. As he was accompanied by centurions, we might surmise that at least 200 men would be present, as Bach reasons.

And he rushed to defuse the situation. When the Jews saw the soldiers coming, they stopped beating Paul. The tribune tried to discover the cause of the commotion, but he could not get a clear picture from the crowd.

The crowd was confused. They didn't agree among themselves. Unable to discover the cause, the tribune removed Paul from the scene.

The soldiers actually have to carry him up the steps because the crowd is so violent. Much as they had done with Christ, the crowd followed, crying out that Paul should be executed. The description of the confused violent mob here is also very similar to the violent mob of chapter 19 in Ephesus.

A question to consider. The limitations of ancient channels of communication made inaccurate and hostile reports and rumours a very real danger, instilling distrust and stirring up anger in situations where the record often could not be set correct swiftly or straightforwardly. Are there any lessons that we can learn from the New Testament church's handling of and defusing of rumours?