
Bless our God, O peoples, let the sound of His praise be heard.
Psalm 66:8

If you were to draw up two columns on a list of paper, and on the one side write a list of “Things I am thankful for”, what would be on this list? You will probably immediately think of certain things that pertain to your life-situation. And then maybe, with a little more thought and prompting, also include other things on this list. To have an idea of what we could write on this list, Luther’s Small Catechism provides an excellent guide – especially in his explanation to the Three Articles of the Apostles Creed.

In the First Article of the Creed (God our Father) we read: *“I believe that God has made me and all that exists; He has given me and still preserves my body and soul with all their powers. He provides me with food and clothing, home and family, daily work, and all I need from day to day. God also protects me in time of danger and guards me from all evil. All this He does out of fatherly and divine goodness and mercy, although I do not deserve it.”*

In the Second Article of the Creed (God the Son – Jesus our Saviour) we read: *“At great cost He has saved and redeemed me, a lost and condemned person. He has freed me from sin, death, and the power of the devil; not with gold or silver, but with His holy and precious blood and His innocent suffering and death. All this He has done so that I may be His own, live under Him in His kingdom, and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness.”*

And in the Third Article of the Creed (God the Holy Spirit – who is our Helper) we read: *“The Holy Spirit has called me through the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, and sanctified and kept me in true faith. In the same way He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth, and keeps it united with Jesus Christ in the one true faith. In this Christian church day after day He fully forgives all my sins and the sins of all believers. On the Last Day He will raise me and all the dead, and give me and all believers in Christ eternal.”*

Looking again at what one may initially write for ‘What I am thankful for’, and then Luther’s explanations to the Creed (as also other sections which speak of prayer and family life and the Sacraments and the like) we really do have a lot to be thankful.

However, if you were to list on the second column of your page “Things that cause me stress, anxiety, worry, concern, fear, and the like”, what would be in this column?

This list would also include many things for most normal people. Whilst we know that our Risen Lord Jesus speaks a word of Peace into troubled hearts and lives, the reason the Bible again and again speaks words such as “Do not be afraid” is that human emotions such as “stress, anxiety, worry, concern, fear, and the like” are a normal part of living as people in this world. It is because we care about others, and have concern for our own selves, that we do experience such emotions. There is nothing wrong in experiencing such things (they show you have feelings and you care). The critical question we need to answer is, “How shall we deal with such feeling?” And ignoring them, or telling someone to down-play them, really isn’t helpful or caring.

At the same time, however, we are not to let these feelings overwhelm our lives and negatively shape the way we live. And here we are blessed in that in our world today there are many people and resources who can help us through these difficult times. If you feel that you really have trouble getting out of bed and facing the day, if your head keeps spinning on repeat on negative thoughts, if you find that you are getting angry or crying a lot, if you experience shortness of breath or dizziness or continuing headaches, if you find you are really avoiding certain situations that are normal for people to deal with, or if you find you are using substances such as alcohol and the like, or if you feel there is some sort of obsessive behaviour, then there are excellent resources available. Your local GP is usually a good place to start. Many workplaces provide confidential counselling services. There are also many phone-in counselling services (such as Beyond Blue, or Lifeline, or various helplines that deal with specific issues). And there are also many, many other people not only at the ‘professional level’ who can provide encouragement, care, support and guidance. People are available to help and support, if we choose to allow them to do so in the appropriate time and way, recognising also the capabilities and capacities of people. You are not alone.

The Psalm for today (Psalm 66:8-20) contains a call to ‘Praise God’. Verse 8 says, “Bless our God, O peoples, let the sound of His praise be heard.” Verse 13 says, “I will come into Your house with burnt-offerings; I will pay You my vows.” Verse 17 says, “I cried aloud to Him, and He was extolled with my tongue.” And verse 20 says, “Blessed be God, because He has not rejected my prayer or removed His steadfast love from me.”

What is important to consider – as we hear these words to ‘Bless God’ and ‘Let the sound of His praise be heard’ – is the context of these words. It is much discussed as to what the original context of this Psalm may be (Is it reflecting on Israel’s deliverance from slavery in Egypt [around 1300 BC], or was it composed reflecting on a later deliverance such as when the people of Israel were delivered from the Assyrians around the time Hezekiah was king [around 700 BC]?). There is much that could be considered here. However, in spite of possibilities of dating, Psalm 66 has great value for us today.

Psalm 66 speaks of “caught in the net, burdens on backs, people riding over our heads, going through fire and water. These are descriptions of people experiencing great trial and trouble. Psalm 66 is not dismissive of the troubles people face. Indeed, Psalm 66 reminds us that we are to be honest about our trials and troubles, and we should not feel as though we ought to hide them or not speak about them (although there are appropriate times and places to do so). And, as God’s people, we do want people to be able to be honest about their trials and troubles, as also the inner battles people face.

And so we are called to ‘Bless God’ and “Let the sound of His praise be heard’. And to understand this it is also helpful to know something about this word ‘Bless’ (which is sometimes translated ‘Praise’). In Hebrew the word is *barak* (בָּרָךְ). The word *barak* (bless) is closely related to *berak* (kneel) and *berek* (knee). When the psalmist calls people to ‘Bless God’, he is calling them to kneel before the Lord. This is both an act of worship (to show reverence), but also a reminder that we are totally dependent on Him, and He indeed does provide for our true needs. To truly ‘Bless God’ is to also be totally honest about our lives and present situation. Indeed, the Psalmist can be so honest as also to admit sin (verse 18: “If I had cherished iniquity in my heart”), as also the need to be ‘tested’ and to ‘endure people riding over our backs’ in order to be ‘brought to a spacious place’ (vv.10-12).

Psalm 66 is really quite clever. Verse 1-12 are in the plural (describing a national situation of trial and trouble that affects all people). But verses 13 to 20 are in the singular, which is a call to individually reflect on God’s saving work in our lives. And when connected with other Lectionary Readings for today (Acts 17:22-31: God’s love is for all people, and He may be known; 1 Peter 3:13-22: God’s strength in Christ when experiencing times of trouble; and John 14:15-21: Jesus does not leave us as orphans but gives us the Holy Spirit as our Helper) we know God cares for us in every situation.

Is it unreasonable to say to people that we are called to ‘Bless God’ at all times, even in those incredibly difficult situations? No, it is not – as long as we know that ‘Blessing God’ and ‘Shouting His praises’ is not a call to deny the trials and trouble, and sin and evil, which we face in this life. Indeed, calling on God when one is in trouble is a form of praise.

Who among us does not have problems? We all have them in various ways and in varying degrees. As long as we live we will face trials, problems, sickness and all kinds of heartaches. This is just a part of living. Being a Christian does not prevent us from facing these things in life. We can know that God is aware of each problem we face in life. He will never allow us to be tempted beyond what we are able to bear. We have the help of God our Father, of Jesus our brother and friend, and the Spirit who is our Helper as we face these things.

We will go through trials that will test us. Sometimes, these experiences are difficult. Throughout the Bible God's people are tested and tried. Paul tells us that such testing produces character (Romans 5:1–5). Out of the trial, glory shines. Likewise, out of death Jesus experienced resurrection, and out of our death to self we too may have a new beginning. When we see God's works, we can begin to shout, sing, and say about what God is doing.

This week's psalm is an invitation to praise God. One person has once said, "Praise does more for us than it does for God." This person goes on to say, "The reason we worship is not so that God will be impressed with us. It is rather that we will become less sentimental, less self absorbed, and more realistic about the life God has given." Because we live in a time of great anxiety and boredom, we need praise more than ever. We need to be reminded of what God has done for us,

We all face trials, though some are greater. We should never diminish these trials, but we should see the ways that God is still working to bring the victory. Psalm 66 reminds us, "Come and see what God has done: he is awesome in his deeds among mortals" (66:5). God brings us through some rough stuff sometimes, and for whatever reason, we are changed people. Because of what's gone on before, we're not the same. Suffering, or whatever has gone on before, has somehow changed us.

When we see God for who He is, and consider what we really are this should prompt us to bow before Him and worship His Holy name. And our Lord has said, "I won't leave you as orphans. I will come to you." (John 14:18). "I will ask the Father, and He will send another Companion, who will be with you forever. This Companion is the Spirit of Truth" (John 14:16).

There are times in life when this can be hard to believe. Especially when life is difficult or challenging, when we suffer from physical or mental illness, grief or loss of any kind, we can start to wonder where God is and why He is letting us go through pain or emptiness. This is where we need the Spirit to lead us deeper into the Truth. We can find in Christ that, even in the darkest times of life, we are one with the Father through Jesus by the power of the Spirit, and nothing can separate us from His love for us as His children whom He Loves (Romans 8:38,39; Matthew 3:17 etc).

As Luther put it so wonderfully: "I believe that by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him, but instead the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, made me holy and kept me in the true faith."

Living in the Spirit of Truth means that whether life is good or bad, whether we are cruising or battling, even if we struggle to get out of bed in the morning or to put one foot in front of the other, the Spirit of the living Christ gives us the ability to trust that God is with us, for us and in us. As the Spirit of Truth lives in us we share in the life of Jesus, and nothing, not even death, can overcome it. Amen.