

Psalm 99

1. *The Lord is king: let the peoples tremble;
he is enthroned above the cherubim: let the earth shake.*
2. *The Lord is great in Zion and high above all peoples.*
3. *Let them praise your name, which is great and awesome;
the Lord our God is holy.*
4. *Mighty king, who loves justice, you have established equity;
you have executed justice and righteousness in Jacob.*
5. ***Exalt the Lord our God; bow down before his footstool for he is holy.***
6. *Moses and Aaron among his priests and Samuel among those who
call upon his name; they called upon the Lord and he answered them.*
7. *He spoke to them out of the pillar of cloud;
they kept his testimonies and the law that he gave them.*
8. *You answered them, O Lord our God; you were a God who forgave
them and pardoned them for their offences.*
9. ***Exalt the Lord our God and worship him upon his holy hill,
for the Lord our God is holy.***

Refrain

Exalt the Lord our God;
bow down before his footstool, for he is holy.

Psalm 99 is a hymn for the enthronement festival. It emphasises God's presence with his people in great majesty and stresses God's holiness, especially on the holy mountain, that is, the temple.

The first part (vv.1-5) celebrates God's dominion over the whole world and his justice as seen in the creation of the world and in history. (v.4, 'Mighty king, who loves justice, you have established equity; you have executed justice and righteousness in Jacob.')

God's heavenly throne has its counterpart on earth in the ark, which was carried in procession into the temple. It was a box, with two cherubim over it, forming the sides of the throne, and the outstretched wings were the seat. The golden lid was the footstool for the invisible King. (v.5, 'Exalt the Lord our God; bow down before his footstool, for he is holy.')

In the second part, vv.6-9, God's justice is shown in the covenant with Israel. Moses, Aaron and Samuel were the characters through whom the covenant reached the people. They prayed to God on behalf of the people and revealed his law to them. (v.6, 'Moses and Aaron among his priests and Samuel among those who call upon his name; they called upon the Lord and he answered them.')

God is revealed as a God of forgiveness. (v.8, 'You answered them, O Lord our God; you were a God who forgave them and pardoned them for their offences.')

The pillar of cloud (v.7) was a symbol of God's presence and was associated with the tabernacle at the time of Moses, a place of revelation, as seen in Exodus 40,34, 'Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle.'

The tabernacle was moved to Samuel's shrine at Shiloh and eventually to the temple in Jerusalem.

Psalms 99 is one of the psalms appointed for the Transfiguration, where Jesus appears before Moses, who represents the law, and Elijah, who represents the prophets. Here also there is a cloud, and God speaks to the disciples from the cloud.

We all need something to worship. Often, we need to be able to see beyond ourselves, to be raised beyond our everyday concerns and to have a glimpse of holiness. Perhaps we all need people to look up to and respect. I remember my French master at school, Mr. Nicholls, who was not only an excellent teacher, but a person of great courtesy and efficiency. I shall never forget how much he influenced us. Psalm 99 begins with the idea of looking beyond ourselves and sees God as being enthroned in holiness. (v.1, 'The Lord is king: let the peoples tremble; he is enthroned upon the cherubim: let the earth shake.')

So, we are encouraged to look beyond ourselves to a God of love, who wants to share our lives and who wants us to grow and develop. In church, and especially at the Eucharist, we are transported into a world where we receive the life of God in the bread and wine, and where we are given strength to grow and to be disciples. Without this, we may lose the sense of holiness and knowledge of the God who never stops loving, and we may begin to worship other things, which in the end are transient and not fulfilling.

Prayer

Almighty Father,
whose Son was revealed in majesty
before he suffered death upon the cross:
give us grace to perceive his glory,
that we may be strengthened to suffer with him
and be changed into his likeness, from glory to glory;
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.

Amen.

(Collect for the Sunday Next Before Lent)