

Sunday 24 August 2025 – Littlebourne

118 *Oh give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures for ever!*

² *Let Israel say, "His steadfast love endures for ever."*

³ *Let the house of Aaron say, "His steadfast love endures for ever."*

⁴ *Let those who fear the Lord say, "His steadfast love endures for ever."*

⁵ *Out of my distress I called on the Lord; the Lord answered me and set me free.*

⁶ *The Lord is on my side; I will not fear. What can man do to me?*

⁷ *The Lord is on my side as my helper; I shall look in triumph on those who hate me.*

⁸ *It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to trust in man.*

⁹ *It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to trust in princes.*

¹⁰ *All nations surrounded me; in the name of the Lord I cut them off!*

¹¹ *They surrounded me, surrounded me on every side; in the name of the Lord I cut them off! ¹² They surrounded me like bees; they went out like a fire among thorns; in the name of the Lord I cut them off!*

¹³ *I was pushed hard, so that I was falling, but the Lord helped me. ¹⁴ The Lord is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation. ¹⁵ Glad songs of salvation are in the tents of the righteous: "The right hand of the Lord does valiantly,*

¹⁶ *the right hand of the Lord exalts, the right hand of the Lord does valiantly!"*

¹⁷ *I shall not die, but I shall live, and recount the deeds of the Lord. ¹⁸ The Lord has disciplined me severely, but he has not given me over to death.*

¹⁹ *Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the Lord.*

²⁰ *This is the gate of the Lord; the righteous shall enter through it.*

²¹ *I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation.*

²² *The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.*

²³ *This is the Lord's doing; it is marvellous in our eyes. ²⁴ This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it. ²⁵ Save us, we pray, O Lord! O Lord, we pray, give us success! ²⁶ Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! We bless you from the house of the Lord. ²⁷ The Lord is God, and he has made his light to shine upon us. Bind the festal sacrifice with cords, up to the horns of the altar!*

²⁸ *You are my God, and I will give thanks to you; you are my God; I will extol you.*

²⁹ *Oh give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures for ever!*

While we've been on holiday. Jonathan and I have looked at a couple of books on worship. They were both written by American Reformed ministers concerned that the Protestant church has forgotten why for hundreds of years there were set liturgies with an order of events. We have moved away from prayer books, written liturgies, and formality and changed into more informal services which may exclude some important aspects of corporate worship.

However, the question that first needs answering is why do we need to worship together as church? We all know the text from Hebrews telling us not to neglect meeting together. Hebrews 10: 23-24

²⁴ *And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, ²⁵ not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.* But meeting together how is not specified.

The Old Testament model of meeting together at festivals and other times involved sacrifices. These sacrifices came in a set of three. First the sacrifice for sin – the guilt offering of an animal for personal sin – then secondly the ascension or thanksgiving offering (often called the whole burnt offering as

the whole animal was burnt and the smoke from it went up to heaven) and finally thirdly the peace offering – again of an animal or bird presented at the altar and then to be eaten by those who brought it and could be shared with others.

We see this threefold pattern in the sacrifices offered throughout the Old Testament. For example, when the high priest went into the most holy place once a year, we see the pattern for both Him and the people. Sacrifices for sin, sacrifices for consecration of Him and the people to come into God's presence, and sacrifice to share with God, to commune with God.

We see also the threefold pattern in all the individual sacrifices themselves. First, the animal died, atoning for sin. Then the priest would prepare the sacrifice, chop it up and consecrate it for the altar. Lastly, the sacrifice ascends onto the altar to meet God.

As the people brought their animals to be sacrificed, they were offering a substitute. Part of the protocol was to lay hands on the animal before it was sacrificed – effectively to 'ordain' the animal as a representative for whoever was offering it. When that animal died, it was like the worshipper died. When the animal was processed, made clean for the altar, it was as if the worshipper was processed and consecrated for being presented to God, and when that animal went on the altar, it's as if the worshipper went on the altar to meet God.

Romans 6:23: For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

We don't have to procure animals now, because God has gifted us the ultimate sacrifice, in our representative Jesus Christ. Where the animals once represented us, now Christ represents us. In His death, we too die with Him, as those worshippers of old metaphorically died in the death of the animal they presented.

Romans 6:7-8 For one who has died has been set free from sin. ⁸Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him.

The Old Testament system didn't just provide a practical source of food for the priesthood, and not just a good time for the people. The sacrificial system was about the reconciliation of God and man; it was about worship. Giving to God and receiving from Him.

This Old Testament model was a shadow of things to come. The need for animal sacrifices is no longer needed because Jesus is the sacrifice made for all time and for every sin. The church in Acts 2 met daily breaking bread in house to house, praising God.

The point of collective worship is to give to God prayers and praise so that it is like the incense that ascends to heaven (Revelation 8:3-4) *Another angel, who had a golden censer, came and stood at the altar. He was given much incense to offer, with the prayers of all God's people, on the golden altar in front of the throne. ⁴The smoke of the incense, together with the prayers of God's people, went up before God from the angel's hand.* As part of the covenant made between God and man, God expects worship and praise from us because we are his creation and because he wants us to acknowledge him and have a relationship with him. In the beginning Adam walked with God every day in the cool of the evening. Being together with God is the reason for human existence. Relationships are a two-way thing so we also receive from God. He deserves our praise as we recognise who he is. He in return wants to bless us and wants us to hear what He wants to say to us whether through his inerrant Word or through his Holy Spirit.

The order of service in most of the church for almost 2,000 years until recently was similar to the Anglican Prayer Book.

The people and the priest

- ¶ greet each other in the Lord's name, and acknowledge that God is calling them to worship
- ¶ confess their sins and are assured of God's forgiveness
- ¶ keep silence and pray a Collect (a prayer that sums up petitions said together)
- ¶ confess together a Creed (statement of belief)
- ¶ proclaim and respond to the word of God
- ¶ pray for the Church and the world
- ¶ exchange the Peace
- ¶ prepare the table
- ¶ pray the Eucharistic Prayer
- ¶ break the bread
- ¶ receive communion
- ¶ depart with God's blessing

The Catholic mass is pretty much the same in its substance, because the Church of England followed the same tradition used over the previous 1500 years.

While we in a Reformed church won't necessarily follow that precisely, it is worth remembering that a lot of thought went into getting this order together in the right way.

Notice that the structure mirrors the threefold pattern of Old Testament sacrifices. We might do something similar today:

We commune with God as we eat with Him, through bread and wine. We recognise how blessed we are having done all this. So our revised "liturgy" would be:

- 1 Welcome and confession of sin and seeking of forgiveness. Having acknowledged that God calls us to worship, we confess our sinfulness. A period of silence while we do this is worth having. We then experience atonement in the assurance of forgiveness that we can trust in. Just as the shedding of the sacrificial animal's blood made atonement, we look to Christ as our atoning sacrifice, who atones for all our sin. All that then follows in the service we can do knowing we are not under God's condemnation. We can thus confidently and joyfully praise and pray to God in thanksgiving and adoration.
- 2 Next the corresponding OT ascension / thanksgiving offering, or stage where the animal is prepared and consecrated. The monetary offering can come in here before the reading the Word. . In the OT the sacrificial offerings would be cut up at this point in their worship. We experience consecration, transformation, in the wielding of the Word of God, which 'chops us up' like the priest's ceremonial sword would. Hebrews 4:12: For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul

and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

- 3 Celebration of Holy Communion. Obeying the command of Jesus to remember all he has done and the price he paid. This corresponds to the OT peace offering. Unleavened bread and sharing of a meal. Those who brought the sacrifice would be allowed to eat the animals sacrificed. God and man are at peace around the table. Having experienced atonement earlier in the service, this is a joyful feast together with God. After this, we can consider ourselves blessed – we have the benediction. We may share the peace here. And then we go out into the week having been refreshed and equipped.
- 4 God wants to receive the honour due to him from his people. This is why we have a day of rest enshrined in the commandments. This is a time for the saints (that's us as the holy royal priesthood) to be living sacrifices as we come into the presence of God, along with all the other saints all over the world doing the same thing.

The NIV study Bible puts it this way:

When more than one kind of offering was presented (see Numbers 6:16-17) the procedure was usually as follows: (1) sin offering or guilt offering, (2) burnt offering, (3) fellowship and grain offering (along with drink offering). This sequence furnishes part of the spiritual significance of the sacrificial system. First, sin had to be dealt with (sin/guilt offering). Second, the worshipper committed himself completely to God (burnt/grain offering). Third, fellowship or communion between the Lord, the priest and the worshipper (fellowship offering) was established. To state it another way, there were sacrifices of expiation, consecration and communion – this last one, the fellowship offerings included vow offerings, thanks offerings, and freewill offerings.

To sum up, God calls us together, cleans us up, tells us how to live, fuels us for service in his kingdom and sends us out to do his work.

Back to Psalm 118. The first four verses are what the people say together, which is an instruction to do this. Let's say together : *Oh give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures for ever!* ² *Let Israel say, "His steadfast love endures for ever."* ³ *Let the house of Aaron say, "His steadfast love endures for ever."* ⁴ *Let those who fear the Lord say, "His steadfast love endures for ever."*

The steadfast love of the Lord endures forever. Verses 5 to 14 are personal. This psalm is probably from David and relates to his circumstances when surrounded by enemies. Then verses 15 to 17 say what happens when the people gather – they sing glad songs of salvation and know that the Lord is victorious. Verses 18 to 21 again relate to God's mercy towards David. It then becomes prophetic and tells of God's nature and goodness in verses 22 to 27. The psalm ends with praise in verses 28&29. That's a quick run through, but let's look at verses 22&23 in more detail.

²² *The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.*

²³ *This is the Lord's doing; it is marvellous in our eyes.*

The 'capstone' was an important stone that held two rows of stones together in a corner ('cornerstone') or stabilized the stones at the foundation or elsewhere. I've looked at a commentary on these verses. Two quotes from theologians:

"Now he is the bond of the building, holding Jew and Gentile in firm unity. This precious cornerstone binds God and man together in wondrous amity, for he is both in one. He joins earth and heaven together, for he participates in each. He joins time and eternity together, for he was a man of few years, and yet he is the Ancient of Days. Wondrous cornerstone!" (Spurgeon)

Jesus was and will be exalted. "It would be far better for Jesus to be exalted by your praise of his great grace and mercy in saving you than to be exalted in his power as he judges you justly for your sin." (Boice)

Continuing with the commentary: It is hard to imagine Jesus singing this the night before His great rejection, leading to His suffering and crucifixion, *without* tears in His eyes. He would be rejected, and He would become the chief cornerstone. This is the LORD's doing: The exaltation of Jesus from the cross to the resurrection to the right hand of God on high is the work of God *alone*. Who lifted Jesus high again, exalting Him above all?

- Not the religious leaders – they rejected Him.
- Not the Roman leaders – they crucified Him.
- Not the Jewish multitudes – they chose another.
- Not the disciples – they cowered in fear.
- Not His influential followers – they buried Him.
- Not the devoted women – they were beset by grief.
- Only God the Father Himself could lift Jesus high.

Spurgeon wrote "What astonishment will then take hold upon those who refused his righteous claims. Then will they know that this is the Lord's doing; though it will be terrible in their eyes. All intelligent beings, even down to the blackest devil of hell, shall at the second advent of our Lord be obliged to confess that the stone which the builders refused hath become the head stone of the corner."

(Quotes above from enduringword.com)

Jesus turned the world upside down, doing the opposite of what the Jewish leaders expected their concept of a Messiah to do. He still does the opposite of what human nature tends to do... he changes our nature so that we are full of *love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.* (Galatians 5:22-23), while the world is full of hate, unhappiness, war, intolerance, unkindness, selfishness, deception and lack of self-control. Praise God that we can ask Holy Spirit to help us in times when we face difficulties and praise God that he answers prayers. Amen.