

Psalm 100 – Bach Cantata 51

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Preacher: Canon David Short

[0 : 00] I want to begin by saying thank you to Dr. Terry Fullerton, who's just about to escape into the vestry. You know that the cantatas were Terry's idea some years ago, and we're grateful to him.

I think this is number seven that we've done. And we're very grateful to the orchestra and to Charlene for leading us through the cantata this morning. It's absolutely brilliant, although I think the cantata is just a little bit short, don't you?

Do we do encores in church? We'll have to have that at a staff meeting someday. Now, of course, the only problem with listening to the beauty of Bach's cantata is it just confirms that this world is not as it ought to be.

And the lovelier the music and the more beautiful the words, we find ourselves longing for what is good and what is right, for the possibility of heaven and even for the face of God.

And that, of course, is what Bach wanted. In his early 20s, Bach worked in the city of Mulhausen, and there he didn't work for the church. He worked under the direction of city councilmen.

[1 : 14] And they asked him to write a cantata for the world-shattering event of the changing of the city council. They were so impressed with what he came up with that they engraved the cantata on copper and printed it on paper at the city expense.

It was the only cantata that Bach ever saw printed during his lifetime. But the demands of pragmatism and politics quickly took over and overwhelmed Bach's true purpose.

And a year later, he resigned his post there and he sent a resignation letter. And someone needs to collect together all the great resignation letters of history and write a book about it. In this resignation letter, Bach said his main purpose in his music, his goal, was being thwarted.

And as a throwaway line, he says, my purpose is, and this is well known, a well-regulated church music to the glory of God. And well-regulated doesn't mean music with a kind of Teutonic tidiness. He's not after music that'll just move simplistically, one, two, three, four, with a mechanical precision. Well-ordered means music that echoes the order of another world, the order of heaven.

[2 : 38] His music was intentionally trying to bring echoes and themes that are being sung in heaven as we meet together today, by angels and by seraphims who see the face of God.

And we know from the Bible that when they see the face of God, they're completely overwhelmed with joy. They fall before his face, crying out, holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts.

The whole earth is full of his glory. And Bach wanted to order, sorry, Bach wanted this order of things to regulate his music and church music so that through the exercise of this music and the enjoyment of this music and participation and celebration of this music, we too might come to see, come to glimpse the face of God and begin to understand our true joy.

The trouble is, the closer we come to see the face of God, the more we are aware that our own lives and the world which we live in are not what they ought to be.

And I'm not referring to hurricanes or to earthquakes. I'm just referring to the ordinary daily patterns of our lives. I read a wonderful illustration of this this week.

[3 : 58] In the exclusive area of the Hamptons in New Hampshire, there are two families that are feuding over the parking arrangements in their quiet, dead-end street.

Family number one have always parked their cars at the end of the road. Family number two have built a house and take exception to family number one parking their cars there and have begun a campaign of intimidation.

Lawyer for family number one said this, and I quote, which just goes to show how unbiased lawyers can be, it's not just a neighbour against neighbour thing, it's a lawyer and his very aggressive reel-to-wife against two very nice, outstanding, civic-minded, quiet and dignified people.

I told you it was unbiased. On the advice from police, family number one have planted a surveillance camera and they caught the wife of family number two hammering nails into the tyres of cars, I do not lie, of guests and visitors to the house, of flashing their house with bright lights and dousing their guests with sprinklers.

Family number two were charged, therefore, with criminal mischief and they've responded with filing a countersuit of stalking. The judge hearing the case compared the two families to Wiley, Coyote and Roadrunner in his judgement, telling them that they'd lost their perspective.

[5 : 29] So far, family number one have spent \$200,000 on their lawyers and now family two, having lost that case, are suing for intentional emotional distress.

I just thought it's a wonderful picture for us. I'm sure none of us here would ever be caught up in anything like that. But it...

I'm not saying anything. But it does illustrate... It illustrates how the world is not as it ought to be. And the cantata comes along and it brings to us an echo of heaven.

It is a great musical shout of protest against the world as it is. It points us to the place of joy. And I don't know if you noticed or not, but the aria, the key thought of the first aria, comes from Psalm 100.

And we need to look at this because Psalm 100, which Louise just read for us, shows the world as it ought to be. It's on your purple sheet at the bottom of the second page.

[6 : 38] If you grew up in a church, you'll be very familiar with this psalm. It's called the Jubilate. It's sung every morning prayer in the Anglican services and it's the basis of a number of very well-known hymns, including the hymn we've just sung.

And if you just... I don't know whether you pay attention, but if, as Louise read it, the first thing that strikes you about the psalm is an overwhelming, spontaneous outburst of joy.

You see, verse 1, make a joyful noise. Verse 2, serve the Lord with gladness. Come into his presence with singing. Verse 4, enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise.

And each of those joyful words are a massive contradiction to our normal lives. You see, in verse 2, it says, serve the Lord with gladness.

That word, gladness, it means it's an extreme delight. It comes about when we are rescued from death.

[7 : 43] It's when something happens to us that's such a surprise of joy. We can do nothing but just laugh or weep. And sometimes when we come to God, we bring our tears to him, and that is right to do.

And sometimes when we come to God, we crawl to him, feeling weighed down by pain and by guilt of what we've done and what others have done to us. But Psalm 100 tells us that if we could just glimpse the way things really were, our spontaneous response, our overpowering response, would just be a giddy gladness.

If you and I could see the face of God for just a moment, if we could glimpse the depth of his goodness, our mouths would fall open with songs of joy.

And that is why, if you look down the left-hand side, I've underlined these words. The backbone of the psalm is seven commands. You know what happens when we get commands.

We don't like commands. They're not there to make us feel comfortable. Commands are to tell us that we're not doing exactly the right thing. But look down the left-hand side. Make a joyful noise. Serve.

[8 : 56] Come. Know. Enter. Give thanks. Bless him. They are commands that will help us see the face of God and to have the joy that we are made for.

And the psalm itself, the centre of the psalm, are two windows that open onto God, two statements about God, and I want to focus on these.

In verse 3, you can see in the centre, the Lord is God, and in verse 5, the Lord is good. And the first half of the psalm is all built around the fact that the Lord is God.

And just in case you missed the reading, why don't we read together, if you have the purple sheet, let me say, I don't want to embarrass anyone. If you don't want to read it, you don't have to read it with me.

But it would be good for us to read out loud verses 1 to 3 so that I know you are awake. Let's read 1 to 3 together. Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the lands, serve the Lord with gladness, come into his presence.

[10 : 06] Thank you very much.

Well done. That wasn't too gloomy. The first command, make a joyful noise, is literally, make a great shout of joy, all the earth.

Now, this has always been very encouraging to those of us who cannot read music or who cannot keep a tune because the first command and what God requires is not a sumptuous song sung with perfect pitch, but it is a joyful noise.

And some of you know more about that than others. The issue is not the amount of sound or its tunefulness. The issue is the fact of its joyfulness because of to whom the sound is made.

Make a joyful noise to the Lord. Now, I want you to look down at that psalm and you see everywhere the Lord is referred to, it's in capitals. The whole word is in capitals.

[11 : 19] That is not just any old Lord. That is not a generic name for any old God. It is the private name for God which God revealed to Moses in the burning bush.

If he hadn't revealed it, we wouldn't know it. And it translates four Hebrew letters that we say pronounce Yahweh. When God spoke to Moses through the burning bush, he said that he would deliver his people from slavery, that he would bring them out of Egypt into a good land and a great land, a land flowing with milk and honey.

And Moses said to God, who are you? What is your name? And God said to Moses, I am who I am, from the verb to be, or I will be who I will be.

Say this to the people of Israel, I am has sent me to you, Yahweh, Lord, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob has sent me to you.

Why am I saying this? Because when the psalm says, make a joyful noise to Yahweh, it's not saying, you sing to your God and I'll sing to my God, whoever you conceive him, her, or it to be.

[12 : 32] It is a command for us to shout for joy to the one God, to Yahweh himself. And it's not just a call to Israel, it's a call to all the earth. It's not just a call to people who call themselves Christians or people who come to church.

It is a total, absolute, worldwide, earth call, irrespective of race, language, tribe, colour, or religion, to join together in joyful praise of Yahweh the Lord.

Why? Verse 3, because the Lord is God. It is he that made us and we are his, we are his people and the sheep of his pasture.

There is no such thing as a self-made man, self-made woman, and I don't suppose many of us here pretend to have the arrogance that we made ourselves. Don't you think in Vancouver there is this general sense that we are very fortunate to live where we do?

Physical beauty, the mountains, the ocean, the weather. The mountains, the ocean, the physical beauty. Maybe a weather report.

[13 : 42] Maybe a weather report. I think, though, we don't, it never becomes genuine thanks to God.

It sort of, it mutates into a general sense of entitlement. But what the psalm does is it pushes us much deeper. We may be happy to call God creator in a general abstract sense, yes, but we have a great deal of difficulty with the implications of that.

And the psalm says the implication, if God is creator, we are his. We belong to him. I do not own myself. I am owned by him.

I am not my own. You are not your own. We are God's. We are his. We are his people. We are the sheep of his pasture. Which means not only that God made us, but that he cares for us and he made us for a purpose.

We are not the result of a lab experiment. We haven't been, we are not like dice thrown out by accident onto this nice green planet to fend for ourselves and to create our own purpose.

[14 : 52] The Bible is very clear that God creates us with a purpose in mind. And it means that your life and my life and the world that we have has meaning. But that the meaning is not in your hands and my hands to decide, but it comes out of God's purpose.

I think that's what it means when he says that we are the sheep of his pasture. We didn't make the pasture. We depend on God.

He does not depend on us. We need him. He doesn't need us. Yahweh, the Lord God of all the earth, is not an insecure deity, looking for our validation.

He doesn't need our worship. It's not as though if we live a good life and floss daily and visit him occasionally and sometimes say a prayer, God ought to be grateful. The truth is that Yahweh, the

Lord, is God.

And we cannot begin to answer the question of who we are without knowing him. We are not masters of our own destiny. We are not the result of blind chance, cosmic fate.

[15:57] But the central and decisive truth about every single one of us is that we were made by him and that we are his. And we can only start to understand ourselves when we come to know him and we see ourselves in relation to him.

That's why it's no surprise that at the core of our lives is a deep hunger for God. Because if we live our lives just for this world and for each other but not towards God, we will miss out on God's purpose for us.

And if we ignore the fact that we were made by God and belong to him, we miss God's intention for us. It's wonderful really. It's very clear. God is not a cosmic energy force field.

He's not a block of wood. He's our maker. He created us for face-to-face friendship. And I think that explains why the words and the commands in Psalm 100 are so fiercely personal.

That word in verse 3, know the Lord is God, is the word used for marital partners and their intimacy together. When it says come into his presence, it literally says come to his face, singing.

[17:10] Because the greatest experience that any human being can ever have is to encounter the face of the living God. And do you know much later when the New Testament opens in the Gospel of John, we read these words about Jesus.

No one has ever seen God. The only Son who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known. If we want to see the face of God, we look at Jesus Christ. He is the full and final revelation of God.

It is in Jesus that all the fullness of God dwells. And that is the first window in this psalm. The Lord is God. And I move very quickly to the second. The Lord is good and I need you to help me read the next two verses.

Let's just read four and five together. Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise. Give thanks to him and bless his name.

For the Lord is good, his steadfast and the Lord is good. And his faithful is to all the nations. Do you not think it is a great relief that the God who made us and claims us for his own, who desires face-to-face friendship is good?

[18:21] I mean, what would face-to-face friendship with a God who is not good be like? Two weeks ago, I went to see the ancient Greek play *The House of Atreus*. Some of you may have seen it.

Agamemnon comes home from the Trojan War only to be murdered by his wife, Clytemnestra. She does the deed because Agamemnon had sacrificed one of their children to the gods as required for victory.

And then, urged on by the god Apollo, Agamemnon's son, Orestes, kills his mother. It's a terrible scene. And then it puts the gods into a great conflict and power struggle with one another and the entire third act is a trial where the gods squabble with each other, defending their actions and justifying their outrageous vindications.

And in the end, there's a hung jury and the goddess Athena casts the deciding vote which leaves the audience feeling deeply suspicious that justice has not been done.

It's a great play but it would be a depressing universe to live in, don't you think? But Yahweh, the Lord of Israel, is good.

[19:37] He's not capricious. He's thoroughly good. He's not gracious one day and flies off the handle the next.

He's not under control of His moods. Look at verse 5. His love is steadfast, endures forever. His faithfulness to all generations. And I think it's because of His goodness that the psalm calls on us to enter His gates with praise and His courts with thanksgiving.

It's another way of speaking, of coming into face-to-face friendship with Him. He's made us for Himself. He's made us for this face-to-face fellowship. And I think this is how Bach's Cantata helps us.

It fans into flame the desire that we have and the longing we have to see the face of God. We see for just a moment in the music and in the words the world as it ought to be.

And we see that I am not as I should be. Because instead of knowing Yahweh as God the Lord, I, like you, have tried to play God.

[20 : 45] And instead of trusting Him to be good and serving Him with gladness, I've worked very hard to find my own satisfaction in meeting my own desires.

But such is the goodness of God that He calls us back. And such is the goodness of God that astonishingly He makes the way open for us to come back to Him through Jesus Christ. And that is why Jesus came. He came not just to reveal the goodness of God, He came to open these very gates that are spoken about here in the psalm. God so loved the world that He gave His only Son.

Whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. And when it says that God gave His Son, it doesn't just mean His life and His teaching. It's not just referring to the fact that He turned water into wine and fed the 5,000 and gave sight to the blind that He raised the dead.

It does mean that in part. And if you look at the Gospels and if you look at the life of Jesus Christ, everything He does reveals the absolutely piercing, melting goodness of God.

[21 : 58] There's nothing that Jesus says or does which doesn't reveal the fact that God is God and that God is good. But when it says that God gave His Son, it means above everything else that Jesus laid His life down for us.

And in His death, Jesus opens the gate of heaven so that we might receive everlasting life, which is not life that just goes on and on and on, but it is life lived in the presence of God.

It is the life lived where we see God face to face. It is the life that has started to be pictured here of gladness, of spontaneous, of overwhelming joy, thanksgiving, and goodness.

This is what life is about. And this is what the Cantata is about. And if you just turn to the back page, I want to show you in the final chorale where Bach is taking us.

I would read it in the German, but that would not help you, nor me. But down in the English translation, in the sixth line, completely ourselves in trust to Him, with all our heart upon Him build, so that our heart, metal, and mind to Him firmly would adhere.

[23 : 13] Thereupon sing we at this hour. Amen. Bach is saying, let's turn away from playing God. Let's place our trust on His goodness and grace and build our hearts on Him.

the whole Cantata is an invitation to us this morning to know that the Lord is God and that the Lord is good to receive the gift of everlasting life, to enter His gates with thanksgiving and to come into His courts and His presence with a very high joy.

And if the Psalm and if the Cantata describes something that's foreign to your experience and you know you have never encountered the face of God but you feel that your heart is stirred within you and you wish to have this life that the Lord Jesus Christ has brought, you're tired of trying to play God, you want to know and see the goodness of God's face, the Bible says, taste and see.

Come to Him as your Lord, speak to Him and tell Him that you want to see His face of love. Do not turn back, do not hold back, but enter His gates with thanksgiving and His courts with praise.