

Sunday

26 April 2020 - Klippies Kritzinger

Dear sisters and brothers

Today I want to remind you of the comforting and challenging words of Psalm 146

Praise the LORD.

Praise the LORD, my soul.

² I will praise the LORD all my life;

I will sing praise to my God as long as I live.

³ Do not put your trust in princes,
in human beings, who cannot save.

⁴ When their spirit departs, they return to the ground;
on that very day their plans come to nothing.

⁵ Blessed are those whose help is the God of Jacob,
whose hope is in the LORD their God.

⁶ He is the Maker of heaven and earth,
the sea, and everything in them-- he remains faithful forever.

⁷ He upholds the cause of the oppressed and gives food to the hungry.

The LORD sets prisoners free,

⁸ the LORD gives sight to the blind,
the LORD lifts up those who are bowed down,
the LORD loves the righteous.

⁹ The LORD watches over the foreigner
and sustains the fatherless and the widow,
but he frustrates the ways of the wicked.

¹⁰ The LORD reigns forever,
your God, O Zion, for all generations.

Praise the LORD.

Out of this rich Psalm I just want to highlight two aspects.

1. The politics of praise (vv.1-2; 10)

The Psalm begins (vv.1-2) and ends (v.10) with praise to the LORD. While it may sometimes seem a “waste of time” to spend time singing praise to God when there is so much work to do around us, praise is in fact essential to give us a clear perspective on society and its problems. To confess that the LORD (Yahweh, Jehova) is unique and incomparable, and to worship nobody or nothing apart from God, is the best way to avoid worshipping human beings. We will avoid “putting our trust in princes” only if we have one Prince in our lives.

The stubborn refusal of the early church to confess “Caesar is Lord” was sustained by their joyful confession “Jesus is Lord!” In that basic orientation to authority they embodied the heart of the faith of Israel. Praise leads to a special kind of politics. It puts us as believers “in our place” as part of God’s merciful plan with the world. It also puts all ruling authorities – whether in government, business, education or church – “in their place” – accountable to God and to the people they govern. To worship only God does not mean to reject all human authority or expertise. It is to respect authorities but to

avoid worshipping them; to avoid being controlled by them; to avoid putting our trust in them. It is false and escapist to claim that true worship makes us unconcerned with “the things of this world.” On the contrary, worship of the living God sharpens our eyes and ears to see and hear what is really going on in society, so that we are not overawed, intimidated or manipulated by the “powers that be.” Because if that happens, we lose our freedom to do God’s will, to seek God’s kingdom, to praise God’s name.

May you, in your projects to give shelter, food and care to homeless people at this time, experience the liberating effect of praise. May you be set free from “always having to please” authorities, but also from the temptation to ignore or insult them. As you deepen your trust in one another as shelter managers and workers; as you deepen your trust in the homeless brothers and sisters in your care; as you deepen your trust in your donors and in municipal authorities, make sure that you do not “put your trust” in any of them or get “captured” by them. The apostle Paul said it clearly: “For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.” It is by giving consistent praise to the living God, “the Maker of heaven and earth” who “remains faithful forever” (v.6) that we move deeper and deeper into freedom. Praise God!

A final remark on “politics.” As you know, the word is derived from the Greek word *polis*, which means a city, a large and complex community consisting of more than one family or clan. Politics is about the affairs of a city, about making a city a just and flourishing human community. So your activities in sheltering the unsheltered is deeply political, in the best sense of that word.

2. God’s politics (vv.7-9)

But what is God’s design for a flourishing *polis*? God actions for the realisation of a human polis are clear from the verbs used in vv.7-9: upholds the cause of, gives food to, sets free, gives sight, lifts up, loves, watches over, sustains. And the persons for whom God does this are: the oppressed, the hungry, the prisoners, the blind, those bowed down, the righteous, the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow. That constitutes a huge political project, which will consume our energy and insight and resources for years and years. But please remember: This is not *our* project in the first place; it is *God’s* politics. And God has shown this to us supremely in the life, death and resurrection of the Messiah Jesus. He is what God’s politics to build a flourishing human polis looks like .

However, the season of Easter, in which we now find ourselves, is also about the risen Lord sending and authorising his disciples to become part of God’s politics: “As the Father has sent me, so I send you” (John 20:21). The Holy Spirit, blown on us and into us by the risen Christ, moves us to continue his ministry of upholding, giving, freeing, lifting up, loving, watching over, sustaining. And it is crystal clear from the life and death of the Lord Jesus that he did not do all this as benevolent or condescending charity. As Hebrews 2:11 puts it: “Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters.” The Lord Jesus became oppressed, hungry, prisoner, blind, bowed down, righteous, foreigner, fatherless, widow – and it is from that vantage point of solidarity that he saves, lifts up, heals, sets free, sustains.

May your engagement in this shelter project help you discover more about God’s liberating politics. May you be drawn more deeply and effectively into this politics of loving service. May you experience the power of the Holy Spirit to sustain you in the joy of following Jesus, unashamed to be his sister or brother, unashamed to be among his sisters and brothers.

Finally, a comment on frustration. Verse 9 says that God “frustrates the ways of the wicked.” God cannot lift up those bowed down or uphold the cause of the oppressed without working against those who are oppressing them. God undermines those who abuse power and exploit the weak. Sadly, we often allow ourselves to be frustrated by the ways of the wicked, instead of joining God to frustrate the ways of the wicked, to outwit them, to counter their evil schemes. May we all learn together how to become shrewd as snakes – and innocent as doves – in frustrating the negative politics at work in our city.

3. Conclusion

It is not difficult to praise a God with such politics, but it is often difficult to take part in it. You have made this commitment to set up and sustain a shelter for homeless people. You are showing the whole polis of Tshwane the way. May your work bear lasting fruit, to make our city more human and more inclusive, long after the COVID-19 lockdown and pandemic is over.

Prayer

Living God, we praise you because you are so praiseworthy
You reign forever
You are so highly exalted
and yet so deeply involved
We praise you for setting us free, for lifting us up, for watching over us
For drawing us into your liberating politics

Risen Lord, we hear you sending us to continue your politics
Imprint your loving solidarity in our hearts and minds
So that we may be able to see and hear and feel like you
and work with you to set people free, to lift them up, to watch over them, to sustain them

Holy Spirit, fill us with power to frustrate the evil at work in our city
Give us snake-like wisdom and dove-like innocence
That through our work your kingdom may come, your will may be done
And your name may be praised and glorified.
Amen.