

SERMON- HOW GREAT THOU ART - FINAL

Let me begin by asking you a question. If you were to gather the crown jewels of spiritual wisdom, across time and tradition ... known as *Perennial Wisdom Tradition*. What do you think is one of the most foundational attitudes of heart, mind and soul that these traditions urge us to cultivate, for our emotional, spiritual well-being? Any thoughts?

Well, what all these wisdom traditions do, is remind us of how important it is to cultivate a grateful heart. An attitude of gratitude. And modern science of course, is now proving why this wisdom is so core. Gratitude is the spiritual soil from which the fruit of contentment and the spirit of joy can flourish.

Think about the ancient Christian spiritual practice of *Examen*. It's all about reflecting on the events of our day to become more aware of God's work and presence in our lives. Saying grace before meals is to give grateful thanks for our daily bread. And those core Anglican Words of liturgy... **'This is the day the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it'**. All of these are about forming our hearts and lives into the shape of gratitude and joy. Think of St Paul words, **"Be thankful in ALL circumstances - Rejoice in the Lord always."**

Why do I tell you all this? Because today I'm celebrating one of the truly all-time great Spiritual songs to God. And why it's so perennial in its appeal and resonance, for me is very simple. From the very first line to the very last word, every single word expresses, exudes, overflows with the spirit of not just gratitude... but what I would describe as an **astonished gratitude**. Listen to the first verse and the beautiful chorus. It is an ode to joy.

PLAY CHRIS RICE FIRST VERSE

What a glorious opening line to set the tone of this song. Singing from the depths of our souls in a spirit of astonished gratitude. **O Lord my God when I in awesome wonder, consider all the worlds your hands have made.** Like all the truly great spiritual songs, it's echoing the divine wisdom of Holy Scripture. **Psalm 8 ... O Lord, our God, your majestic name fills the earth! 3 When I look at the night sky and see the work of your fingers— the moon and the stars you set in place— 4 what are mere mortals that you should think about them,**

I've listened to this song many times this past week. And on several occasions, I experienced what Chris mentioned last week and many of you have told us you've experienced throughout this series. This song brought to tears. It's an interesting process to observe in yourself. Why is this song doing this? What's being evoked deep in my soul?

What I recognised in myself, is that quite often recently, I've had a familiar feeling in the pit of my stomach. It's the grip of anxiety. But as I listened to these sublime words and let the song wash over me, I experienced the profound truth of this Perennial wisdom. When we fill our hearts with the spirit of gratitude...there's less room for the spirit of anxiety.

Because this is a song that reminds us, that we are part of something so much bigger than ourselves. A God whose majesty and splendour is revealed in ALL creation from the galaxies to the butterfly.

It reminds us, that **everything is gift**, and if we can see the world through the eyes of awe, wonder and astonished gratitude, then our anxieties can give way to joy.

It reminds us, that when the divine chord in our soul is touched by the divine finger of God in a beautiful song of worship. Or any expression of beauty, we often a few grateful tears.

WHICH BRINGS US TO VERSE 2 VIDEO CLIP

**When through the woods, and forest glades I wander,
And hear the birds sing sweetly in the trees.
When I look down, from lofty mountain grandeur
And see the brook and feel the gentle breeze.**

After a celebrating God's cosmic greatness, throughout the universe displayed, this verse celebrates the Gift of nature that we experience in the everyday of our lives. Did you notice last week in our Kids and youth prayer pictures, how many of them gave thanks for the blessing of nature and God's creatures? For me this is quite telling. Children have a natural connection to the sacred in nature because they see pretty much everything through eyes of awe and wonder.

But I'm guessing that many of you, like me, have also found that one of the spiritual practices that has helped keep us sane in these lockdown weeks, is having the huge privilege of being able to walk among the trees? To hear the birds singing sweetly in the trees. To be able to climb the lofty mountain grandeur of One Tree Hill, Mt Eden or Mt Hobson.

Again, these words echo the spirit of the Psalms. Psalm 98 is a beautiful picture of nature itself, rejoicing with astonished gratitude. **4 Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth, burst into jubilant song with music; 7 Let the sea resound, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it. 8 Let the rivers clap their hands, let the mountains sing together for joy.** An inspiring picture of ALL the earth, ALL of nature expressing the pure joy of being created.

And that brings me to a little point of interest that I want to raise. Throughout this last week, I've listened to many, many versions of this song and as I did, I began to see a curious pattern emerging. Most of the versions, even the ones I loved, would mostly leave this verse out. And it got me thinking why. Why is this verse is so readily and so often left out? Well, I have a theory.

I have a sneaking suspicion that in part, it reflects the part of our Christian theology, that hasn't always given God's glorious gift of nature, its due place of reverence. It's as if all this stunning diversity that God created and declared very good, is just there for mere decoration.

And I think we can learn from the Psalms. Because the Psalms are God's people singing songs of worship to God ... and they made sure they celebrated with '**astonished gratitude**', the glories of nature. And we should always do the same.

There is a reason WHY our salvation story is SUCH good news. It's about the restoration of ALL creation. It's not just about US. 'God so loved the **world** that he gave his only Son'. Last time I looked, the woods, mountains, brooks and streams and all creatures great and small, are part of this world that God so loves.

And all of this, brings us to the momentous words of verse 3. A glorious celebration of the Incarnation and the Cross.

**And when I think, that God, His Son not sparing;
Sent Him to die, I scarce can take it in;
That on a Cross, my burdens gladly bearing,
He bled and died to take away my sin.**

What's the pivotal word in this verse? It's the word SENT. Because this is the incarnation. And the miracle of 'the word made flesh' is the greatest wonder of them all. Without the Incarnation there is no Cross, there is no Resurrection, and no New Creation. It all begins with Christ being SENT.

And that God in Christ became one of us, is so astonishing, we scarce can take it in. For me, this verse is just a grateful reminder that there is nothing in our world, that is so broken, that it cannot be redeemed by the saving, healing power of the Cross. On the Cross, Jesus absorbs all the burden of humanity's hate and hostility and recycles it into love and forgiveness. As the prophet and poet Isaiah so beautifully puts it. **"By his wounds we are healed."**

And so to the final verse of this epic hymn. But before we do, I want to spend a few minutes honouring one of the most magnificent choruses in all of Hymn-dom.

I've mentioned a few times in this series about the need for the perfect marriage between melody and words. The magic happens when music and the words enhance each other. Well nowhere will you find a more perfect marriage than the first four words of this chorus. Because both words and music radiate the joy of astonished gratitude. And it's all in the leap to the high note. The sings my soul my saviour God to thee... EVERYONE loves singing this part. And I've put together a few clips to show this. Notice that whatever the musical style- whatever the generation – everyone loves soaring to the high note!

CLIPS of CHORUS

Could you get a more fitting finale than an ariel shot of the Royal Albert Hall? So how will the final verse live up to this sense of climax? Well, what better way, than the grand climax of our Christian story - the climax of human history.

**When Christ shall come, with shouts of acclamation,
And take me home, what joy shall fill my heart.
Then I shall bow, in humble adoration,
And then proclaim: "My God, how great Thou art!"**

Here in these final words for me, is the whole spirit of this song - **Astonished gratitude at the works of God – so we bow in humble adoration – and our hearts filled with the Spirit of JOY.** It's truly glorious song that strikes the divine chord that resides in every human soul.

FINAL THOUGHT.

I was talking to Bruce Nicholls the other day. And in the conversation, he said to me... "Josh I believe in a God who out of LOVE created ALL things and out of LOVE will restore ALL things." And I said... "Bruce that's our good news in a sentence. Its why I believe in a sentence". It's also what this majestic hymn sings about in every sentence.

Out of Love we see the fingers of God throughout the universe and nature displayed.

Out of love, we see the saving, healing power of the cross.

Out of love the final consummation and the final restoration.

What else is there left for us to do, except proclaim and sing ... **My God how great thou art.**