

SERMON – 4/8/24

Psalm 24:1-10

'Lift up your heads, you gates; lift them up, you ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in. ' (Psalm 24:9)

I'm probably not the only one who has received an invitation this week. Perhaps you have also had an invitation from someone recently – it might have been a formal one that comes on a fancy card in an envelope, or it might have been a friend just asking you if you wanted to come round for a coffee. Actually, in case you missed it, I extended an invitation to all of you at the beginning of the service this morning to come before God in worship, and in particular to gather at the Lord's Table.

But let me tell you about the two formal invitations I received in the post last week, because there are things about them that also appear in our reading this morning from Psalm 24 and that help us to recognise something of the character of God the Creator as the One who is inviting us to enter into a relationship with Him.

The first envelope arrived with nice neat handwriting on it and as I opened the envelope I wondered what might be inside it. I began to read: Ailsa and Calum would like to invite Alan and Christine to their wedding on Friday 30th August at 11am. It's always lovely to get a wedding invitation but this one really warmed my heart especially since I first met the bride when I held her as a tiny baby.

The second invitation arrived in an official type-written envelope and I knew exactly what was coming because I had already had an email about it in my capacity as Moderator of the Presbytery of Perth. Inside, the printed card read: The Provost and Chapter of the Cathedral Church of St Andrew, Dundee, joyfully invites the Rev Alan Reid to the Episcopal Ordination of the Right Reverend Andrew McKenzie as Bishop of Dunkeld on Saturday 10th August at 11am. Again, it's always lovely to be invited to a special occasion and it's a great honour to be asked to represent the Church of Scotland at a significant event, although I expect I will feel rather more out of place than I do at most church events!

But both invitations make it very clear *who* is giving the invitation, *what* it is I'm being invited to and *where* and *when* the event is taking place. In one case, the invitation is to me personally and in the other case it is to both Christine and me. And both invitations ask for a response. RSVP to a named person by a particular date. You know the kind of thing, I'm sure.

But what I want to suggest to you this morning is that Psalm 24, whilst not couched in exactly the same terms as the invitations that came to me in the post last week, displays many of the same characteristics, and so I want to explore this morning's reading as an invitation that is addressed to us today and that seeks a response from us today.

First of all, then, who is it that is extending the invitation here? Well, if it was coming to us in an envelope, I think it would have some kind of gold-leafed crest embossed on the back, and not just 'On His Majesty's Service' for this is from the King of kings, the One who is described here as the Lord of everything, the Creator of the world, the Holy One, God our Saviour, the God of Jacob, the King of glory, the Lord Almighty. Wow, it's some invitation!

We really ought to be humbled as we realise that the One who is addressing us here, and addressing the most ordinary of folk like you and me personally, is in fact the Lord of eternity, the Creator of the universe, the One who is worthy of all praise and honour.

During Family Week one of the Bible stories that formed the basis of the teaching one day was the story of when Peter and his brother were washing their fishing nets at the water's edge after a fruitless night's work when they had caught absolutely nothing. Jesus was teaching on the shore and a large crowd had gathered so He asked Peter and Andrew if He could get into their boat and if they could put out a bit from the shore so He could be heard by all the people. After He had finished speaking He asked the fishermen to go out to deeper water and let down their nets again for a catch. Although, having caught nothing all night, Peter was sceptical he obeyed Jesus' command and he and Andrew caught such a large number of fish that they needed a second boat and the assistance of James and John to land the catch. We're told that Peter fell at Jesus' knees and said, "Go away from me, Lord,

for I am a sinful man.” (Luke 5:8) Peter has recognised that this Jesus is no ordinary teacher – this is the very Son of God.

Which takes us, secondly, to the psalm's invitation to ascend the hill of the Lord, to stand in His holy place, to receive blessing from the Lord and vindication from God. There is a huge amount that could be said about these verses because in a way they actually encapsulate the whole Gospel message.

Like Peter, when we come face to face with God in Jesus Christ we are not only left awe-stricken by His greatness and majesty, we immediately recognise our unworthiness on account of our sin, but what the Gospel teaches us is that in Christ there is forgiveness of our sins and salvation from the penalty we deserve, so that far from being condemned we are in fact blessed and far from being cast out we are warmly welcomed.

Sometimes on an invitation there is an indication of the kind of dress that people are expected to wear to the event – black tie, or cocktail dress, bright colours, or casual – well the psalmist asks the question of God: “Who may ascend the hill of the Lord? Who may stand in His holy place?” (v.3) and the answer comes back: “The one who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not trust in an idol or swear by a false god.” (v.4) And perhaps that should make us think twice about whether we are eligible to accept God's invitation, for none of us is without sin and all of us are idolatrous by giving a higher place to people and to things than we do to God.

Jesus once told a parable about those invited to a royal wedding banquet in which the king spotted a guest inappropriately dressed and had them thrown out, but while none of us is worthy of ourselves to attend the feast in God's Kingdom, the good news is that by faith in Christ we are clothed in the righteousness of Christ. The same parable tells of the many who are invited who find every excuse under the sun why they cannot accept the invitation. Don't let's ignore or reject the gracious invitation that God, the Almighty, extends to us, even to the least of us. Why on earth would we not receive the blessings of the salvation that are offered to us in Christ and the place that is offered to us at the feast in God's eternal Kingdom.

There is no date for the RSVP in God's invitation, but as the apostle Paul writes to the Corinthians, "Now is the time of God's favour, *now* is the day of salvation" (2 Cor.6:2) so don't delay, whatever you do, but take hold of what God is holding out to you right now.

In fact our Psalm this morning even gives us words that we can use in framing our response, because in addition to standing as an invitation *from* God, the psalm invites us to invite God to come to us. The closing verses of Psalm 24 are familiar to many in the Church of Scotland from a setting that is sometimes sung at a communion service – and which we will sing ourselves in a few moments: "Ye gates, lift up your heads on high."

As with many older hymns I sometimes think people sing them without necessarily realising the full significance of what they are singing so I want to close this morning by trying to set the context for using the words of the hymn to make a response to God from the heart.

If you are among those who, in the words of the psalmist, "seek God and seek His face," (v.6) – that is to say those who want to know God and in hearing His invitation to come to Him long to respond like Peter and Andrew and James and John did that day on the shores of Galilee and like countless millions have done down through the ages – then invite God in the person of Jesus Christ to enter in to your life by the Holy Spirit.

Although the psalmist's words would originally have referred to the gates of the Temple in Jerusalem, we can take them up in relation to the gates of our heart and mind and soul, which we often keep bolted shut and impregnable. God's desire is that our bodies may become a Temple of the Holy Spirit, that Christ may make His home in our hearts, so let's address the words of the psalm to the closed doors of our lives:

"Lift up your heads, you gates,
Be lifted up you everlasting doors,
that the King of Glory may come in." (v.7)

Are you ready to open the door of your eternal soul to God this morning? In the words of Jesus with which I opened the service today, "Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears

my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with them, and they with me." (Rev.3:20)

The psalmist repeats the refrain and even if you have prayed to ask Christ into your life before, then ask Him again today.

"Lift up your heads, you gates,
Lift them up you everlasting doors,
that the King of Glory may come in." (v.9)

My friends, God Himself is extending an invitation to you this morning and asking for your response. Don't delay your RSVP a moment longer. You can even do it in the remaining moments of this service as we sing and as we pray, as we present our offerings and as we open ourselves to God's promised blessing. Will you invite Jesus Christ to come to you today and make His home with you forever?

Prayer – Lord, the earth is yours and everything in it. We are yours, though we seldom live like we belong to you. You invite and call us to draw near to you, yet we hesitate because our hands are not clean and our hearts are not pure and we are apt to put our faith in anyone or anything but you. Gracious God, you long to bless us, you have given your Son Jesus to be our Saviour and by your Spirit you have given us a desire to seek you with our whole heart, and so today we ask that you would enable us to lift up the gates of our hearts and welcome you into our lives. Come, Lord Jesus, and make your home in us and with us and among us now and forever. Amen.