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Praise: Being Transformed in Joy By David Ford and Chris Russell

‘You can live rent-free and will be doing the community a service’. The offer sounded too good to be true. It came from the head of a housing association, a charitable organization that was dedicated to renewing the run-down housing stock in part of inner-city Birmingham, Britain’s second largest city. He wanted meⁱ to live in a partly derelict three-storey house and be its caretaker until his association found the funding and received permission from the city to renovate it and turn it into ‘social housing’ for low-income tenants. That is how I came to have my first experience of life in quite a tough inner-city area. At the same time I was coping with my first teaching job, in the Theology Department of the University of Birmingham, often preparing classes till the early hours of the morning. So life felt stressful and demanding. But in the midst of it all there were three weekly oases.

Three Oases – Sunday, Thursday and Saturday

One was the parish church on Sunday. I had never as an adult been part of a local worshipping community, but in advance of moving I had taken a resolution to join the nearest Anglican parish church, whatever it was like. It turned out to be a small but warm and growing community, led by an utterly dedicated priest and his equally dedicated wife. There I slowly learned, for the first time in my life, what it was like to belong to a group that worshipped wholeheartedly, was a genuinely family-like body with many friendships across generations and across educational, social, and racial and backgrounds, and was strongly committed to the flourishing of everyone in the wider local community, whatever their identity.

The second oasis was every Thursday. I would spend the whole morning in my small inner-city apartment with a senior colleague in the university, an American theologian, Dan

Hardy. And we would simply talk theology hour after hour. It was theology in the full sense: engaging with God and everything in relation to God. We ranged through history and around the world today, we thought about the church and about other religions, about society and its problems, about personal things, about culture and the arts, about the sciences, politics and the economy, about education, and, above all, about the deep questions of meaning and purpose. How to go deeper into the question of God? What about vocation and orientation in life? What of evil, sin, suffering, tragedy, death? What of goodness, love, justice, generosity, hope, joy? Who is Jesus? What about the Holy Spirit? And so on. Anyone who knows the writings of Dan Hardy will recognise the scope. I had never experienced anything like it before. Here was someone who had read so much, thought so much, lived so much, and here we were, sitting together, able freely, hour after hour, week after week, month after month, and year after year, to stretch our minds, hearts and imaginations together.

The third oasis was on Saturday evenings. Two remarkable, wise women, then in their seventies, Miss Fisher and Miss Reeve, had many years earlier founded Hockley Pentecostal Church in a working class area of Birmingham. Every Saturday evening, they hosted an open evening of worship and praise attended by people of all ages from all over the city and from many different churches – I was introduced to it by a Catholic priest academic. I had never experienced anything like this before, either. The trombone player alone was worth going for! From time to time, Dan Hardy used to come too. Between us, Dan and I had had a variety of worship experience, from Quaker silence through sober Anglican Book of Common Prayer, Protestant evangelical, Catholic, and Eastern Orthodox, but somehow it was the youngest tradition, that of Hockley Pentecostal Church, and especially the wisdom, joy, humour, and sheer energy of Miss Fisher and Miss Reeve, that gave the decisive stimulus to where our theological conversations on Thursday mornings came to focus.

The Point is Praise

Slowly, as we ranged widely and probed deeply, a central theme gripped us more and more. It took us by surprise, but the more we explored it the more it seemed to be the key integrator of all our concerns. We eventually co-authored a book on it, and that book has been through three editions and three different titles. The first title was *Jubilate: Theology in Praise*. The second was *Praising and Knowing God*. The third, the version currently in print, is *Living in Praise: Worshipping and Knowing God*. I think the point should be clear: the gripping, integrating theme, for knowing and for living, is praise.

The Central Truth: Who God Is

How so? We will try to answer that question, but the primary, central, basic, embracing question (and the more I have gone on as a theologian the more I have become convinced of this) is not about how: it is *Who?* The core truth is very simple: *Praise is central because of who is being praised, because of who God is.*

Amazement at who God is is at the heart of praise. Because God is the living God, continually active and creative, we need to be continually alert and open to new dimensions of who God is and how God is present and active, and therefore be inspired to ever-fresh amazement and praise. Because God is love, with love for us and for all people and all creation, we can utterly trust that we are loved beyond anything we can imagine, and so we can enjoy being loved, and we are freed to adore wholeheartedly the One who loves us all. Because God is infinite, limitless, and eternal, this joy, adoration, and praise are always appropriate, and they can go on and on, continually opening up new, inexhaustible dimensions of who God. Because God is wise, true and creative, our minds, hearts and imaginations are stretched. Because God is loving, good, just and compassionate, our commitments, our habits and practices, our actions and our vocations are constantly challenged, energised, oriented and reoriented.

And because God is free to express fully who God is and free to be completely self-giving, because that has, amazingly, actually happened in Jesus Christ, we can worship and praise God in and through Jesus. Because Jesus has sounded the depths of evil, suffering, sin and

death, we can be confident that they never have the last word. We are free to lament in the face of the terrible things that happen to us and others, to cry out as Jesus cried out on the cross, to enter into dark places – in ourselves, in the church, in the world – confident that the darkness does not overcome the light. Jesus on the cross cried out in the words of Psalms, those most amazing of all examples, not only of praise, gratitude and rejoicing, but also at the same time of utter realism about all that can go tragically wrong with ourselves, our communities and our world. Above all, the Psalms draw us into a fundamental trust in who God is, despite inevitable times of darkness, doubt and radical questioning.

What I was learning and relearning during those Sundays, Thursdays, and Saturdays in Birmingham – and I think I have never learned anything more important or transformative – was daily amazement at who God is, and the wisdom of praising God, the wisdom of the Psalms, the wisdom of St Paul who cries out to the Philippians: **‘Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice!’** (Philippians 4:4). It is a wisdom that all traditions of the Church, in gloriously diverse ways, have – at their best – learned and lived by down the centuries; and it is a wisdom that can be as relevant, important, and transformative for young people now as it has been for me and those Christian communities in Birmingham and all through Christian history and around the world today. Chris Russell will tell about his remarkable involvement over many years in helping this happen for young people in England. But first I want to tackle what I see as the main problem to be faced in praising God.

Praising and Glorifying God: The Main Problem

I approach the main problem through the Gospel of John.

For the past 15 years I have been engaged in writing a commentary on John’s Gospel, during which I have found that text more and more amazing – more and more meaning, depth beneath depth, more and more appreciation of the literary skill of the author, and more and more light on the great themes of God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, life, love, friendship, discipleship, believing, prayer, truth, glory; and much, much more. This is a Gospel of superabundance:

gallons and gallons of water turned into wine, water gushing up to eternal life, food for thousands with baskets of leftovers, love for the whole world, light for the whole world, Jesus coming so that people may have life in abundance, the Spirit given ‘without measure’, and that final huge catch of fish.

This poses a very unusual problem. It is not the sort of thing that is generally seen as a great problem. Yet I think that, if we take this problem seriously, we will find here the deepest secret for coping with many of the things we do consider problems. And if we allow ourselves, in youth or in age, to be gripped above all by this problem, to grapple with it day after day and year after year, then we will find our lives profoundly transformed, both individually and as communities.

The problem is: how can we cope with all that abundance? How can we cope, above all, with a God of abundance, of generosity, of love without limit, of mercy and forgiveness, of endless wisdom, of creative, overflowing blessing, of overwhelming glory, and of the deepest, most intense joy?

One of my favourite 20th century poets, Denise Levertov, in her glorious poem, ‘To Live in the Mercy of God’, sees God’s love for the world as a waterfall flinging itself on us:

To live in the mercy of God.

To feel vibrate the enraptured

waterfall flinging itself

unabating down and down

to clenched fists of rock.

Swiftness of plunge,

hour after year after century,

O or Ah

uninterrupted, voice

many-stranded.

To breathe

spray. The smoke of it.

Arcs

of steelwhite foam, glissades

of fugitive jade barely perceptible. Such passion –

rage or joy?

Thus, not mild, not temperate,

God's love for the world. Vast

flood of mery

Flung on resistance.ⁱⁱ

God's love and mercy 'flung on resistance'! The thing I like best about the 'Joy and Adolescent Faith and Flourishing' project at Yale Divinity School, is that it has had the courage to take on that resistance, to take seriously the waterfall of divine love and joy, and to work at ways of trying to cope with it, of letting it shape flourishing lives.

The scandal of Christianity is not just the cross; it is also, inseparably, the joy of the resurrection and the transformative outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Do we dare to take all this seriously? The last words on his deathbed of the theologian Karl Barth – who, the older he got, the more his theology was one of freedom in the Spirit, culminating in that extraordinary Volume IV.3 of his *Church Dogmatics* – his last words were: 'Fröhlich ernstnehmen' ('Joyfully to take seriously') – and he was someone who had faced the First World War, Nazism, and the pathologies both of capitalism and of the church, and had found the resources to cope with them through Jesus Christ and his life, death and resurrection, and through being, as a fellow theologian called him, 'a God-intoxicated man'.

And, as Barth well knew, one of the main ways of coping with the problem of divine abundance is to respond to it with wholehearted praise, and freely-expressed amazement, adoration, gratitude, joy.

But, all that water pouring down ‘hour after year after century’ needs to be channelled, it needs to go places. Praising and loving God needs to overflow in all directions. We are not praising the real God of love if our worship does not overflow in love to others. We are not truly loving the God who loves the world, and sent Jesus to bring abundant life and light to it, if we are not engaged in creating new signs of abundant life and light as Jesus did – the joy of abundant wine at a wedding, feedings, healings, teachings, forgiveness, friendship, foot-washing, a community of love and worship.

The more I have read and reread John’s Gospel the more I see it written in order to help readers cope with this abundance in the long term, and to let it be fruitful for more and more people. One of John’s great words, which gathers more and more meaning as the Gospel goes on, is the Greek *menein*, variously translated as abide, remain, rest, endure, continue, stay, live or dwell. It is first used in Chapter 1 to describe the Holy Spirit remaining, resting, abiding on Jesus, then again when the first disciples ask Jesus: ‘Where are you staying, dwelling, living?’ The climax of its use is in Chapter 15:1-17 when Jesus, on the night before his death, pictures himself as a vine and his followers as the branches: ‘Abide in me as I abide in you... If you abide in me and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish...’ The overflow of this abiding is to ‘bear much fruit’, which is seen as a form of praising and honouring God: ‘My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.’ And this abiding and glorifying is deeply connected with joy: ‘I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.’

The deepest secret of this abiding, glorifying, and complete joy is given here too: ‘As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.’ And then, two chapters later, in

John 17, the inner mystery of that secret is opened up when Jesus prays to his Father, in what I sometimes think is the deepest chapter in the Bible, and one that can lead us further and further, year after year, into the practice of worship, into the reality of who God is. I encourage you as readers to meditate on it, to pray it, to let its words abide in you, to explore its multiple connections with the Lord's Prayer, and with that other amazing prayer, Ephesians 3:14-21. And I leave you also to work out, with the help of John's Gospel, together with the many other resources within and beyond the Bible, how to begin to shape your lives around the practice of praising God, or, if you have already begun to do this, how to go on deepening and reshaping your habits and practices.

At the opening of John 17 is the astonishing vision of the divine life of loving and glorifying: 'So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed' (17:5). Then later, and perhaps even more astonishing, comes the opening up of that glory, that presence, to us – we are to be utterly immersed in it, in union with Jesus, for the sake of the world: 'The glory you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world...?' (17:22-24)

How can we cope? One thing is sure: not by ourselves – such life, love and joy is all about community. Chris Russell is one of the people I most respect for the way he has built up a community of praise that also has young people at its heart.

The Greenhouse Moment

Iⁱⁱⁱ still remember the moment the penny dropped.

We had been in the town of Reading for around 15 months, having moved as a family to take up the Bishop of Reading's challenge and invitation to begin something new in an ancient church building. St Laurence church stands in the centre of Reading, a town of around 200,000 people, with around a third of that number under the age of 18. The congregation had dwindled to around 11 every week, in a building that could seat 600. The idea was to release St Laurence to be a church which was missional with young people.

In the DNA of the Church of England is a rootedness in the particular; a particular place (parish), a particular area (diocese), in this particular country. At St Laurence our particular focus wasn't so much on the geographical area around the church building, in reality town centres don't have many residents. Rather it was a vocation to a particular group of people – teenagers. We are, if you like, the parish church for the young people of Reading. And this charism is carried by the whole community of St Laurence who are multigenerational. Together we have been compelled from the first to seek to give everything to this:

We will tell the next generation

the praiseworthy deeds of the LORD,

his power, and the wonders he has done.

..... so that the next generation would know them,

even the children yet to be born,

and they in turn would tell their children.

Then they would put their trust in God. Psalm 78: 4

At this point, just over a year in, there was just a handful of us. We had already learnt a huge amount about building relationally with young people who had no contact with the church, we had grown significant contact through the gold seams of favour and trust that God had opened up for us, and a group of around 15 young people were coming every week to explore the Christian faith in an informal discussion group, mostly using film, music and the stories of

Jesus. Then one of the 15 year olds hijacked my well planned session, by interjecting the question, ‘Why can’t I become a Christian now.....?’

One of the most wonderful privileges is having a sideline seat to the work of the Spirit. I still count it as my greatest joy to see the renewing work of God in lives. It was clear this young person wasn’t alone, as when we asked if anyone else felt ready to become a disciple of Jesus, two others said it was what they wanted. In front of their peers we knelt and prayed together as they gave their lives over into the hands of God.

But what now? As a small team of young adults we had been meeting weekly to worship. It had been creative, immediate, moving and transformative for us all. But it had just been for us. Now we had to work out what to do with these newborns whose only experience of the faith had been through us. We debated about what we should do – should we begin something new just for these teenagers, or should they come into what was already happening. But if they came into what was already happening it would certainly have to change. Also how could these young people engage in praise and worship that was meaningful and authentic to them? Should we sing? But there was no point in their lives to date where they sung. How could we incorporate them into the life of the Body of Christ without them having to learn a whole lot of middle class ways of doing and expressing things?

Then came the moment. One of my keenest, most committed young adults said confidently, ‘We don’t need to worry about this, when someone becomes a Christian they know instinctively how to pray and automatically how to worship. We just need to get them in and let them lead us.’

It was a ‘Eureka’ moment for me, as I realised how untenable and irresponsible it was to hold such a position. It would be like saying to my children, ‘Why don’t you tell us what you want to eat tonight?’ Why on earth would I trust their instincts, they would just rehearse the limited experience they had, and it would be MacDonald’s every time. The same with these young people: of course they didn’t know how to pray, of course they couldn’t know how to

hear the voice of God in scripture. The Holy Spirit had clearly enabled them to recognise Jesus as Lord, and call God Father, but to sit back and expect the Spirit to form in them praising and praying lives was an abrogation of our vocation.

We came to see it, in that moment, as one of our fundamental vocations as a church; to create the conditions for young people to learn how to pray, to read the Bible, to worship and to confess, to give and receive. St Laurence church was being called, in effect, to become a greenhouse for praise.

Shaping lives of praise

How then is this to be done? Our contention and joy is that this is done as the community orientates itself around the one who was and is and is to come. There is a continuity with the past, a rootedness in the belief and practice of the church. There is a contemporary attention to what this one who 'is' is doing now in our midst. And there is an imagining of what will be, the anticipation of what we experience as simply firstfruits. As the ordained minister of this community my primary responsibility was shaping the life of the community before the face of God. The shaping of these lives is set by the habits of the community. We therefore set about exploring how to do this by living by God's rhythm and ways.

This is not simply our distinct task at St Laurence. Yes, ours was a particular vocation with young people but this is the task of the church of Jesus Christ, because this is the great vocation of the church. To live utterly orientated around God and because of who this God is to call every person to do the same.

The only way someone gets to know the good news of Jesus Christ is if someone tells them. The community of praise therefore proclaims why God is worthy of praise. Without hesitation or apology – this is evangelism, and we are utterly committed to it simply because God is so worthy of praise. Far too much evangelism is driven by fear. As if we must give ourselves to recruiting more people or else the future of the church is in doubt – as if it is for our own

survival. That is not evangelism. Evangelism is simply a response to the love of Christ, ‘For the love of Christ compels us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them.’ (2 Corinthians 5:14)

For this is good news. In every way, for every aspect of life. Yet the majority of young people have absolutely no comprehension of the goodness of God. No doubt young people have particular pressures and challenges – working your way through adolescence to adulthood has probably always been tricky, but we live in a new climate, and the culture in which these young lives are shaped is vastly different to my teenage years. The challenge of formation is real for all of society. For example there is a great disquiet around the impact of screens and social media on the shaping of lives. However, the joyful news of the gospel is that there is One whose love for us is the defining reality upon which to build our lives.

The good news of God’s life and love – the ‘who’ that God is and all that is offered to all in Jesus Christ – is so good. For young people this is so compelling. It is identity-giving and identity-forming. Identity is not formed not online or by the individual having to bear the burden to ‘be themselves’ by themselves. But worth, value, identity and meaning are a gift of the one in whose image we have been lovingly created. Eugene Peterson pleads,

If you want to know who I am and what makes me tick, don’t for heaven’s sake look up my IQ or give me a Myers-Briggs profile... but set me in the company of the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit.”^{iv}

It meets each of us while we are not as we would be – here I can come clean, I can have the courage to accept acceptance – in spite of what I think you would do to me if you truly knew. Here is grace and forgiveness, a present and future not simply defined by what has been. There is then an opening up of life, beyond simply being the sum of the hand I have been dealt or the reality of what has gone on. There are vicious circles which can be broken, and there is

transformation that is real, and all because of the power of the Holy Spirit poured into hearts, making real the life-changing love of God in Christ.

And there is belonging – the complex, always at play, desire for acceptance and a place to belong. Here it is in this community, based on no other ground than the loving, accepting, redeeming, transforming welcome of God to all in Christ. And this community of belonging turns us inside out, which is wonderful news among a generation who are inclined towards narcissism, first towards God and, because of who this God is, then to all others.

For those of us who have grown up with this, it is easy to become rather immune to the goodness of this news. But make no mistake. This is news. For the majority of young people I work with this is entirely new news. They have never heard the like of it before. After a recent evening when we gathered to talk about Jesus, one 14 year old girl, among us for the first time, having been brought by her step-brother, simply asked, ‘Why has no one ever told me this before?’

The shaping of these lives in praise happens as we live the life of faith together. The gathering of the people of praise is formative. Worship is the orientation of life around God. It’s a response to the love of God which has addressed us, captured us, brought us into being, and given us hope. The church is not anything as banal as a museum of information about God, defenders of ancient doctrines or beliefs, but the people who attend to and experience this God and know him as present to them. It’s God’s presence that is cherished, celebrated and desired above all else.

The ekklesia, the church family, is the gathered body who meet to encounter God. This has been done week in week out, in song and psalms, in listening to scripture and prayer, in confessing sins, and breaking bread and sharing wine. There is a content in what Christians do when they gather together that makes us church. But the form that content takes differs from

congregation to congregation, dependent on who we are, the culture we are part of, and what God is doing among us at this time.

Of course it begins in baptism, the official entry into the community of praise is to be immersed in the waters of baptism. To be named in the company of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is to find my place in the community of praise. Here young people stand before family and friends, who themselves are utterly new to what is going on, and they declare their desire to be one with Christ in his death and in his life. They give testimony to what God has done for them and in them, and declare ‘This is my faith’, as they step into the waters that signify their new birth.

The community of praise is shaped around the Lord’s table. A few years ago during a Eucharist I asked the young people about their habit of meals at home. How many of them ate around a table? 2 out of 40. The majority took their food up to their rooms to eat alone. The majority of their households didn’t even have a table. The Christian community intent of being defined by praise takes a table and places it in the middle of the community, and here the defining meal is celebrated week in week out. A meal which unites us with others around the world. We imagine the practice of this across cultures and locations – in refugee camps and basilicas, in prisons and palaces – this is the power of a common meal. It makes us part of something.

Here we are on common but holy ground and what we share is our need. It is not my table, Jesus Christ is the host. And we are only present because of his invitation, extended to each of us not on the basis of our qualifications, but because of his grace. And as we gather we face the contingency of our lives, we don’t know what is in store for us, just as those who ate the Last Supper with Jesus had no comprehension of what was going to happen. But this meal speaks of God’s great trustworthiness and presence in the midst of pain. We meet in a world of

great contingency and difficulty. There is so much we don't know, but here, around this table we celebrate what we can and do know: God is worthy to be praised because he loves us to death.

Scripture is opened and God's voice is attended to. This is not some little instruction book for our individual life, not some kind of provider of a cross-reference for today's problems. For these scriptures provide a map of the terrain, stories for the journey, and a sense of thrill about the destination. Putting the Bible into the hands of young people is not a one off activity. It has to be a regular commitment in gathered groups, where commitment to each other and expectation is high. God's story needs to be opened up with care, patience and careful attention as young people are invited in, to make this story their own. And, as this occurs, young people discover for themselves ten thousand reasons that God is worthy of praise. In our context so few young people read, or even own books. Therefore the opening and attending to the voice of God in scripture only takes place in individuals' lives as it is practised corporately. As Rowan Williams says, 'Church is an echo chamber for the divine word'.

Lives of praise shaped in God's time

We build a community of praise by living God's time. This helps us with our orientation around this God, and it gifts us with a sense of God's timing, again rewiring our immediacy and short-sightedness. It takes time to be a Christian. Some things may make sense quickly, others take far more time. I remember David Ford encouraging people who wanted to commit to following Jesus, to commit to do it for at least a year, so as to live in God's time. Lives of praise are shaped in the practice of the Christian year – here we are all placed in a wider context.

Advent – *Key themes: Watching, waiting, expecting, imagining.*

Christmas - *Key themes: Joy, wonder, love and delight.*

Epiphany – *Key themes: Listening, marking, committing, obeying.*

Lent – *Key themes: Repentance, truth-facing, rigour, honesty.*

Holy week and Good Friday – *Key themes: Betrayal, suffering, pain, god-forsakenness, death.*

Easter – *Key themes: Surprise, hope, light, praise, expectation, a thousand new starts.*

Pentecost – *Key themes: Empowering, gifts, need, community.*

If we live this Christian year, we live every emotion and incident of our own story, and each one is addressed in the context of God's great story in Jesus Christ. There are highs and lows, up times and down times, intense times and spacious times. We do not attempt to live on a constant manufactured high. A life of praise isn't helped by unreality or escapism. In fact, God is worthy of praise because to live orientated around this God enables us to live life as it truly is.

However, what we are doing isn't simply handing on a set way of doing things, keeping a tradition looking exactly as it has always looked. Lives of praise must be open-ended and alive to what is yet to come. The compelling image for me in this is the story in 1 Samuel 17. The young boy David, sent to deliver food to his brothers, has stepped forward as the only one prepared to fight the giant Goliath. When he stepped forward he was given King Saul's armour. Yet it was cumbersome and unwieldy, he was unable to move and walk. In shaping lives of praise we cannot expect, or even insist, that young people simply do all that we do, as sometimes what we have to give to them is about as useful to them as Saul's armour. However we are inspired by the Holy Spirit who is among us as the Spirit of the future, what we know so far are simply the first fruits, the down-payment of what will one day be. Surely the Spirit can be trusted to form in these young lives a community of praise which enables it to be open to all that God has yet to do?

There is, then, a great unknown about what this community of praise needs to look like. But what we must insist is that it does not simply look like a replication of what already exists. For we meet in the name of the one who was and who is and who is to come.

Conclusion

Praising God is both ordinary – the daily lived experience of millions of people around the world – and extraordinary – because the living, loving God is both endlessly amazing and constantly surprising. As the greatest surprise, Jesus shocks and disorients, encourages and

reorients, and scandalously inspires a life of praise and joy in the face of evil, death, and all that we and others do wrong. To be gripped by this reality is to be transformed in joy because of who God is and what God does. It is, of course, possible to be gripped at any age, but the reality is so good that the maxim must be ‘the younger the better’. And the last thing we should want is to hear someone say later in life: ‘Why has no one ever told me this before?’

¹⁷ O God, from my youth you have taught me,

and I still proclaim your wondrous deeds.

¹⁸ So even to old age and gray hairs,

O God, do not forsake me,

until I proclaim your might

to all the generations to come. Psalm 71: 17f

Questions for Reflection

- What are the challenges to living a life of praise?
- What resources do you draw on with young people that praise may be the sound-track of their lives?
- What might a church that takes this vocation as its most essential ministry look like?
- In a culture of over-indulgence how do we encourage gratitude?
- How will we live this today?

Additional Resources

Psalm 71 (for example) puts words into our mouths which form us into those who live to see others come along side us to praise. For the psalmist the vocation of praise is to see praise inspired in others – particularly ‘generations to come’.

In addition this challenges every generation not to place itself at the centre of God’s purposes, but to be present for the sake of others. There is a growing conviction in the UK that this means that young people are best placed in the midst of multi-generational communities of faith, with those to receive from and give to. Of course this is the particular insight of experts such as John H Westerhoff set out in his seminal book ‘Will Our Children Have Faith’ [ISBN: 9780819228000].

See the work of the following practitioners

Concrete – a platform ‘Connecting, Thinking and Amplifying’ working with young people.
<https://concreteonline.org>

The Work of the People – exquisitely made film and liturgical resources for worship
www.theworkofthepeople.com

ⁱ David Ford [do anonymise here and elsewhere if appropriate for submission to readers, but include in eventual publication.]

ⁱⁱ Denise Levertov, 'To Live in the Mercy of God' in *The Collected Poems of Denise Levertov*, Edited and annotated by Paul A. Lacey and Anne Dewey with an Introduction by Eavan Boland (New York: New Directions Books 2013) p.975.

ⁱⁱⁱ Chris Russell.

^{iv} Peterson, *Christ plays in 10, 000 places* p. 307