

Sermon Given by

Simon Scott

At the Evening Service on 8<sup>th</sup> August 2010

### Psalm 15 - "True Worship"

---

Regulars here will know that we often run a course at All Saints called Christianity Explored. It's a great course because it gives people who are looking into the Christian faith the opportunity to ask any questions they may have in an unthreatening group setting.

There is a moment in the first session when members of the group are asked the following: 'If you could ask God one question and you knew he would answer, what would you ask him?'

It's a very helpful exercise in giving people the opportunity to express what their concerns are. But I don't think I have yet heard someone come up with the question King David addresses to God in the first verse of our Psalm:

***<sup>1</sup> LORD, who may dwell in your sanctuary?  
Who may live on your holy hill?***

But I want to suggest that no question can be more important than this one – no question we can ever ask anyone outranks this one: who can be a permanent house guest with the God of heaven and earth.

And it makes no sense to ask the question to anyone else than to God himself. Lots of people might have their theories about the matter but God's view, surely, is the decisive one.

I am reminded of what John Wesley once said: 'I am a creature of a day. I want to know one thing – the way to heaven'. That was to him the no 1 question which needed to be answered.

He went on to say this: God himself has condescended to teach the way: he has written it down in a book. Oh give me that book at any price. Give me the book of God...

Well it is to the Book of God and specifically to the rest of Psalm 15 that we turn for an answer tonight. And I want to encourage you not to settle for popular opinion, but for what the Bible actually says. Don't even ask yourself what the Christian consensus says in answer to this question.

It is quite striking the way David phrases his question. <sup>1</sup> ***LORD, who may dwell in your sanctuary?***

***Who may live on your holy hill?***

Because in his day the sanctuary – the tabernacle or tent of meeting which had been carried around a number of different places since it was first made had at last got a permanent home – the holy hill in Jerusalem. The temple was yet to be built – that would have to wait for David's son, Solomon. But the sanctuary was there – on the hill in the middle of the City of David.

David is not asking who can physically go up to Jerusalem – all sorts of people had access to the tabernacle. This is asking a more profound question: who amongst all the Israelites who throng the city and present themselves at the tabernacle with its priests and its sacrifices and its festivals – who out of that whole crowd of people are the people who really are God's friends – who aren't just nodding acquaintances but permanent guests, at home with Almighty God.

The 39 Articles of the Church of England are its official doctrinal statement and they acknowledge that 'in the visible church of God, the evil be ever mingled with the good'. The wheat and the weeds grow alongside each other. So we dare not assume that the standards of professing Christians will necessarily help us get the answer to this the ultimate question of all questions.

We must address it to God and look to no-one else for an answer: <sup>1</sup> ***LORD, who may dwell in your sanctuary?***

***Who may live on your holy hill?***

I want to suggest that we do that right now as we pray for his teaching and his help.

<sup>1</sup> ***LORD, who may dwell in your sanctuary?***

***Who may live on your holy hill?***

*We pray tonight Lord for you to make your will and your ways known to us; help us to silence all the other voices that clamour for our attention and express their opinions. And by your Spirit enable us to hear what you say and live in obedience to it...*

*We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.*

So then who **may** dwell in God's presence as his guest?

Two vital introductory points to start with: first: this Psalm is about dwelling with God not gaining admittance to God's presence. It isn't a checklist saying: do this and God will accept you into his inner circle of friends.

It is instead the kind of behaviour appropriate for those who are staying with God as his friend.

The second introductory point is this: that the qualities which appear here are moral not ritual. This is very striking, when you consider that there were many, many rituals involved in day to day life in the Jerusalem sanctuary. And the details clearly did matter. God had said what was required for the right use of the tabernacle – in one sense they were moral requirements: when God says something it is always a moral issue that we take what he says seriously. What I mean is rather that the qualities listed here are not about the right way to conduct sacrifices or make your tithes; they are character qualities. Ritual purity without godliness of character is a sham.

That is a repeated emphasis of the Bible in the Old and New Testaments: Maybe you won't have spotted it but on the step at the communion rail there are three short Bible texts: I am the true vine; all thy works praise thee and then one other: **worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness. Psalm 96:9** – not simply in the ritual observances of the temple, but in the godliness of your character particularly in your behaviour towards others day by day.

Well, let's look at the detail of the next four verses. I'll read them out again...

**<sup>2</sup> He whose walk is blameless  
and who does what is righteous,  
who speaks the truth from his heart**

- <sup>3</sup> ***and has no slander on his tongue,  
who does his neighbour no wrong  
and casts no slur on his fellowman,***
- <sup>4</sup> ***who despises a vile man (abhorrence of character – not person)  
but honours those who fear the LORD,  
who keeps his oath  
even when it hurts,***
- <sup>5</sup> ***who lends his money without usury  
and does not accept a bribe against the innocent.***

There are ten qualities listed there but I want to divide them for simplicity's sake into four.

Here is the first:

### **1) His general conduct**

In verse one his walk is described as blameless and he is righteous. Of course, blameless does not mean sinless. Job is described as blameless but he was not sinless – similarly Zechariah, John the Baptist was blameless, walking in all the commandments – but he wasn't perfect – remember how he was rebuked by the angel and struck dumb.

To be blameless is to have integrity, to be the same on the inside as we are on the outside, and not to be like the Roman God, Janus – who had two faces. It is to be consistent: to be the same in public as we are in private; the same amongst Christians as we are in the workplace or the rugby club.

It's striking how often the idea of blamelessness is paired in the Bible with walking. Because it is about the direction of our life rather than our achievement.

This person is consistently God's person; they go through life without having to look over their shoulder; they don't have to worry about people pointing the finger of blame at them, for the simple reason that there is no glaring weakness or inconsistency for people to point the finger at.

Let's move on and consider a second area:

## 2) His speech

This person ***‘speaks the truth from his heart’, ‘has no slander on his tongue’, ‘does his neighbour no wrong and casts no slur on his fellowman’.***

You can see the note of consistency carried on there, because to speak the truth from the heart means that there is no mismatch between the words that come out of the mouth and the heart inside.

Even in what seems to be a general comment on neighbourliness in the middle of that short section, by reverting straight away to sins of speech, the implication is that the no 1 way we harm our neighbour will often be by the way we speak about him or her.

In essence this is a call not to gossip: we need to run a check when we are about to say something as to whether what we plan to say might in any particular be termed gossip – how will it affect the way those who hear us view the person we are speaking about? Would we be willing to see what we are saying written down in print and sign it as our own comments; would we be happy for everyone we mention to see it? If not, don’t say it!

When other people are gossiping, it will be our part to do what we can not to promote that gossip. Instead of sucking up the gossip like a vacuum cleaner, perhaps we could ask ‘Are you sure?’ ‘Have you checked this out?’ ‘Can we talk about something else?’

People might be a bit shocked if we are that blunt, but over time there is great advantage in being known as someone who won’t receive gossip or pass it on.

Let’s move on to a third aspect of the godly person’s character:

## 3) His loyalty

This comes in verse 4: He is someone

***‘who despises a vile man  
but honours those who fear the LORD,  
who keeps his oath  
even when it hurts’***

Perhaps you think that despising a vile man sounds Pharisaical – but it is the flipside of honouring those who fear the Lord.

We ought to be those who praise godly believers, out of our loyalty for their Lord and ours. I wonder if we are able to recognise godly qualities in other Christians and to single them out for positive comment, letting other people know that we prize such qualities highly, because we love the Lord.

The flip side of it will be that we are not seduced by the celebrities who are fawned on by our world but who are basically ungodly, or worthless. This has nothing to do with hating the person so much as an accurate assessment of their warped character, rather than envying them their position.

Christians may not be top of the tree and regularly featured in Hello magazine – but we'd rather spend time in their company than anyone else's. It is a question of loyalty.

And that loyalty has a very specific application here. We ought to be those who keep their oaths even when it hurts.

I had a friend who if ever I was trying to get out of a previous commitment with him, – or an appointment used to say in short-hand – 'Psalm 15?'

Well interestingly, there is a section in Proverbs 6 where if I have made a rash promise I can ask the person I have promised to be let off the fulfilment of the promise. They might hold me to it, but it is OK to ask. And in 1 Corinthians 1 and 2, Paul distinguishes between fulfilling an undertaking to the letter and fulfilling the spirit of it. He makes the point that because we are not omniscient if events turn out differently from how we anticipated, responsible second thoughts are sometimes OK.

But the point being made here is that just because it is difficult for me or causes me some hurt, that is not sufficient reason to ditch a promise.

Perhaps the most obvious application for many of us will be to marriage. With those we love the most there is inevitably the greatest scope for pain in the relationship. But just because the faithfulness of the wedding day promises proves costly doesn't give anyone a let-out clause. A promise is a promise and demands loyalty.

The final area concerns two areas of godliness in the use of money.

#### 4) His financial dealings

In verse 5 the godly person is someone <sup>5</sup> ***who lends his money without usury and does not accept a bribe against the innocent.***

In the Old Testament there is no blanket condemnation of interest – but what is forbidden is the unscrupulous exploitation of someone who is in desperate financial circumstances.

So someone is in trouble and I have money I can lend them and I take advantage of their desperate plight by making them pay over the odds for the loan. No – I am to be generous.

It's been interesting to me to read in recent days about the economic situation leading some churches to take this sort of teaching seriously and to encourage those in financial need to make their needs known discreetly – so that others in the fellowship can be generous in meeting those needs.

Perhaps something for us to think about at All Saints, although I am always encouraged how much generosity is shown by members of the church behind the scene.

The other form of exploitation mentioned is in the context of the law courts where a witness or a judge for a sum of money keeps silent when what they could say would lead to an innocent person being acquitted – they are paid to keep their mouth shut; or they take money for some false testimony which leads to an innocent person being condemned.

That seems remote to us, with a court system where corruption is thankfully but it isn't hard to think of situations where we are tempted to massage the truth for the sake of financial gain. It is not the way of God's friends.

Well we have looked at the description of those who are God's permanent houseguests; what they have in common is that they are characteristics which come from God himself: they are not something we can ever take credit for: they are his character making its way into our own characters... Since he is a God of truth and faithfulness, if we are living in God's presence increasingly we will assume God's character.

I wonder if you have ever read Nathanael Hawthorne's story The Great Stone Face.

In a mountainous region of America, overlooking the valley below, nature had playfully thrown together some enormous rocks in such a way that, seen from a certain distance in a certain light, they bore the exact likeness of a human face. And there was a legend in the village below that one day a great leader would arise in their midst who would perfectly resemble the Great Stone Face.

There was a small boy called Ernest who heard this story from his mother: it fired his imagination and day after day, when work was over he would go and sit and gaze with admiring devotion at the Great Stone Face. He would tell it his secrets and it seemed as if the Great Stone Face understood and smiled back at him with affection.

The years went by and still the prophecy went unfulfilled, despite many false hopes. Ernest was quite an old man now, and one day he got to his feet as usual to speak to the people in the Market Square. Behind him, the sun was setting and suddenly the mists parted and there above him appeared the Great Stone Face. The likeness was so striking that a shout of recognition went up: Ernest was the leader: with all the many hours he'd spent in the presence of the Great Stone Face, it had gradually transferred its likeness to him.

That is how these qualities can be ours. These are qualities that God creates in us not qualities that he finds in us....

If you find yourself despairing that you can ever be like this, then communion is the place to start. Because it reminds us that we all need forgiveness for our sins; that was why Jesus Christ died. And once we are forgiven a relationship with God is possible that can over time transform us to be like him.

– and not surprisingly the outcome of that lifestyle is where the Psalm ends in verse 4: ***'He who does these things will never be shaken'***.

---

Audio versions of the sermons can be freely downloaded from the All Saints Little Shelford website, <http://www.allsaintslittleshelford.org>. These are available in two formats, mp3 and wma.

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)