

Psalm 133

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Preacher: Gethin Jones

[0:00] Well, please turn with me in your vitals to Psalm 133 that was read for us earlier.

! People would sing the Even-Song service in our chapel every Monday. If you're not familiar with that service, I certainly wasn't when I arrived. Part of the service is that you sing a psalm and you chant it so that it's one melody and you sing every verse on the same melody and one half of the choir would be on one side of the chapel and you'd sing one verse and then another half of the chapel would sing the other half of the other verse.

And every now and again, I think maybe two or three times in my three years, we stumbled across Psalm 133. And it would start off really well. Behold how good and sweet a thing it is, brethren, to dwell together in unity. And it's all very well until Aaron gets a load of oil spilt in his beard and you just see this really weird glazed look come across everyone's eyes.

Most of the people in the choir weren't believers and so most weeks it would just be quite a bored look. I'll just sing whatever this text is, but it's sort of normal psalm stuff.

But when we got to this, you'd just see everyone begin to give each other very strange looks. What on earth is going on? Beards and oil and mountains and nobody had any idea.

[1:46] It's clearly from verse 1 a psalm about unity between brothers. Behold how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity.

And I promised you I wasn't thinking about the EU in any way when I planned to preach on this. It just struck me. They'd say, oh, that's a similar link. But that's not what it's about.

So what does this psalm mean beyond the fact that it's good and pleasant when brothers dwell in unity? As always, and it might surprise you to learn, that even in the book of Psalms, it's important to look at the context.

If you look at the top of the psalm, it's part of the psalm in the original. You've got the inscription, a song of ascents of David. And if you look around the psalm, you'll see, at least on this page, except for the last one, everyone has at the top a song of ascents.

That's because this is one of 15 songs of ascents. It's a collection that goes together from Psalm 120 to Psalm 134. And it's about, surprise to Christ, ascents.

[3:01] That is, people would have to go on a journey up to Jerusalem for various religious feasts. They'd have quite a few every year. And if they could, people would go up to Jerusalem for the celebration.

And these were psalms that David wrote for his people for the ascent, for the journey up to Jerusalem, up Mount Zion. So, in 120, they meditate on their distress and their trouble.

Psalm 121, I lift my eyes up to the hills. So, they see the dangerous journey ahead of them. They see the hills, and they wonder, where is my help going to come from for this journey?

And, of course, the answer comes, my help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth. And the next one is the psalm that we sang earlier. I was glad when they said to me, let's go to the house of the Lord.

And so, they're off on their journey up the mountains to Zion. It's arranged. There are 15, and so there are five sets of three.

[4:08] So, they all go through one set of three, then the next. And so, if you can do maths, this one, 133, is the very middle of the final set.

In the final set of three, we have arrived in Jerusalem. This is where we celebrate the feast. So, in 131, it's sort of a preparation for worship psalm.

In 132, the celebrations start at the temple. And in 133, the celebrations continue. People have come from all corners of the nation.

And they're at the feast, together, singing this psalm. 133. But, what does it mean? Well, to understand what it means, there are three things that we need to say. Three things. The first thing that we need to see is that unity among brothers makes a difference. Unity among brothers makes a difference. It has a real impact.

[5:11] And let me show you three ways in which it makes a difference. First of all, it can be seen from the outside. It's noticeable. If you look at verse 2, David takes the people back in time about 1,000 years.

So, for us, it's about 3,000 years. Or 4,000 years for us, rather. And he takes us to Aaron's ordination service as the high priest.

And he describes the perfumed anointing oil running down his head, on his beard, on the cloak of his garment. Boys and girls, maybe you can imagine being at this ordination service.

You've gone to this service with your family, brothers and sisters, mommies and laddies. There's so many people there. And you can't see anything.

Because it's so busy and people are bustling and everyone's standing up and you can't see a thing. And so, you cry up to your dad, have they done it yet? Have they poured the oil on his head?

[6:14] Because that's how they're going to do it. That's how they're going to make him a high priest. And so, daddy picks you up and puts you on his shoulders. And he asks you, well, what do you see? Do you see any oil running down his head?

Is this the priest of God yet? Well, do you see any oil running down his head? That's how you know. You can see, this is the anointed one of God because there's oil running down him.

And so, are these the people of God? Are these his anointed ones? Well, are they living in unity? That's the question. But it's not just that David wants to use this as sort of a, this is like that, an unillogical comparison.

This is a poem. And so, there's a reason he's using this image. What unites them at that feast? What's the reason they've all come?

It's so that their high priest can offer sacrifices on their behalf. And beyond that, they are all a kingdom or a nation of priests.

[7:25] They all together represent God to the other nations. But they are there united by the one high priest who is there. They need to know that they have an anointed one who is uniting them.

So, on the one hand, it's a visible comparison. Unity is like that. So, he's the priest because he has oil on him. These people are united, are God's people because they are united.

The second thing we can see, so we've seen from the outside, but it can be felt from the inside as well. So, he doesn't just take us on a trip back in time.

He takes us on a trip up north as well in verse 3. He takes us on a trip to Mount Hermon. Zion was the main mountain in the south.

Hermon was the big mountain in the north. It's a very high mountain. It's got lots of streams on it.

[8:27] So, the dew on Hermon is really heavy. Lots of dew. Really rich, luscious grass. It's a mountain that's full of freshness and life.

David is trying to give us a sense of what unity among others feels like from the inside. It gives you that sense of life forevermore.

And just as with the image of the high priest, it's not just an easy, logical comparison. There's a reason he's using the image. So, because this is the northern mountain, but they're experiencing the benefits of the northern mountain in the southern mountain, they're all sharing in their benefits. Zion gets the benefit from what Hermon gets. So, the blessedness of unity among brothers is experienced as it is shared between brothers.

As everyone benefits together, enjoying divine blessing together. The third way it makes a difference is quite simply at the end of verse 3.

[9:40] It's where God's blessing is. So, if you look at that last verse, where has God's blessing of eternal life been commanded? It's where brothers dwell together in unity.

And especially at the feast. That is especially when the brothers have gathered together to worship God. It's at the gathering of God's people.

Eternal life is something to be enjoyed together. If you think eternal life can be enjoyed all on your own, you're mistaken. Eternal life is to be enjoyed together with other people.

And all of this is coming down from God. If you look throughout the psalm, you see running down, running down, falling. It's all the same word in the original.

It just means coming down. And so, the going up to meet with the Lord is all about the blessing that comes down to them. So, unity among brothers makes a difference.

[10:49] Second thing we need to see is that unity among brothers is a really awkward sermon topic. When we think about a sermon on unity, we begin to feel embarrassed.

First of all, it's because we can see it in our history. We are, you may have noticed, not in a Roman Catholic church. We're in a Protestant church. We are protesting.

We have broken off, sadly. And there are times when that needs to happen sometimes. Calvin, in commenting on this psalm, said that where there is heresy or where there is error, that we have no choice but to break fellowship.

Because what's happened is actually, they are broken off from us. Even though it's the same, they are still the institution. They're the ones that have departed from the truth. And actually, the division was the last thing that the reformers wanted.

They wanted to reform it from the inside. But once they saw, they have truly departed from the truth. Sadly, there was no choice. But there are some divisions as well that are truly unnecessary.

[12:01] That are truly sinful. I've seen churches in first hand. Churches divide over personality, personal ambition, and it is hideous.

But we should note that there is a difference between broken fellowship and different churches. You can have different churches that still have gospel fellowship.

They might disagree on some issues, but they are adamant that we are still brothers and sisters in Christ. And that's an okay thing. They've come to different conclusions from the Bible.

They're not all right. Some of them are going to be wrong, because you can't just decide what truth is. The Bible tells us what truth is. But some of them have just interpreted it differently, and yet we insist that they are still our brothers and sisters.

There is a difference between that and broken fellowship, where people just cause splits unnecessarily and sinfully. But division is something that's part of our history, and we have to face up to that.

[13:04] It's also a problem not just in our history, but also in our class. I've often heard the story of the Welshman dying, who was stuck on a desert island.

I've heard different versions of the story, even in different religious contexts. I've heard it as the New York Jewish man. But I've heard it as Dye the Welshman, who was stuck on a desert island, and he was all on his own.

And after several years, people finally found him and rescued him. And when they found him, they found that he had built three huts on the island.

And they asked him, what are these three buildings you've made for yourself? And he walked them through each one, and he walked by one. That one over there, that's the house I live in.

That one over there, that's the chapel I go to. That one over there, that's the chapel I don't go to. It's a problem in our hearts. There can be gospel churches that are full of our brothers and sisters, to which, if we're honest, we have a less than charitable attitude.

[14:15] We are less than loving towards them, as we should love them. Thirdly, it's not just a problem in our history and in our hearts.

It's a problem in our churches. It's not just division between churches, but there's division within some churches. There are churches where there are members who have not spoken to each other for 40 years, even though they've been worshipping in the same church for 40 years.

And you can see it as an idea. It's lovely, isn't it? And I could talk to you about someone who is on the other side of the planet, in some remote tribe, who speaks a completely different language, who has never heard of this country, and yet they believe the gospel.

And you think, yes, that is my brother and sister in Christ. That's so exciting that there is somebody that different from me who is my brother and sister in Christ. But what if I describe someone to you who maybe they're much richer or much poorer than you?

Maybe they're more socially awkward than you or maybe much more outgoing than you? Maybe, boys and girls, they get better marks in school than you do or much worse marks in school?

[15:33] Maybe somebody who voted differently from you in the referendum this week? Or generally votes differently from you? Someone who struggles with different sins than you do?

But it's still your brother and sister in Christ. And what if when I finish that description you started to realise, I know this person. Oh, it's that person.

It's that person in my church. I don't really like. It's not always so simple, is it? When it comes down to living with real people.

But they are your mother and sister in Christ. So when we read, for example, Jesus' high priestly prayer in John 17, we can get very embarrassed. For example, he prays in John 17, 21, One, that all who believe in Jesus might be one, just as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.

One commentator on this psalm writes, The most spectacularly unanswered prayer in world history, they claim, is Jesus' prayer in John 17, 20-23.

[16:52] That's this prayer for unity. Christian kinfolk live in breathtaking disharmony. This devastates their witness as it removes the goodness and the loveliness from them.

It removes their joy and surrenders their blessing. The psalm invites us to consider the loveliness of kinfolk living as one and to meditate on the images for this that it offers, to see if this inspires us to live as one.

Calvin's caveats, which I mentioned earlier about heresy and error, show how scandalous is the psalm's conviction and how unanswerable the prayer.

The most spectacularly unanswered prayer in world history. So are we a lost cause? Do we just wait it out until the new creation and just try and keep something together but knowing it will never really be one?

Do we just give an embarrassed shrug and try and avoid the question? Is this commentator right? I don't think so. The third thing we're going to see is that unity among brothers even now is not wishful thinking.

[18:17] So we've seen that unity makes a difference and that it's a pretty awkward sermon topic but even now unity among brothers is not wishful thinking. It is a reality to be enjoyed.

Let me give you three reasons for my saying that. It was real for David. He wrote this psalm and he wasn't lying.

And if you know anything about David's life you know it was riddled with disunity and strife. Even if you just know the David and Goliath story you'll know that when he arrived his brothers just made fun of him.

You just want ambition. All you want to do is look good. His family his brothers and later on his own children it was all a mess.

And his political life so many people usually his own sons trying to take over from him. His life had disunity and brokenness written all over it. His life didn't look much better than ours in fact it looked much worse.

[19:21] Yet that's the king that through the Holy Spirit wrote this psalm. Because he recognised that as he saw his people come up Mount Zion to Jerusalem probably people who had very different opinions on how he was running the country he saw that something bigger was happening.

He saw that the Lord was doing something much bigger much higher than what he could see. He could see the Lord gathering his people for the feast.

He saw true unity as all these brothers and sisters men, women, boys, girls coming along together. And he tasted that there's true beauty here.

There is rich goodness pleasant sweetness in this feast. This was real for David and it was real as well for Jesus.

David didn't just write it for people in his lifetime. He wrote it for generations to come. The temple wasn't even finished in his lifetime. He was hoping there would be a temple for people to come to and he wanted this to be for generations to come and he wrote it so that his greater son, Jesus,

could sing this as well.

[20:42] God the Son became one of these brothers. Jesus became part of the nation of priests and he would go up to the feasts with his brothers and sisters to sing this with them in fellowship.

Have you ever thought about that, about how he would come and he would sing these psalms with us? He is in a sense our great worship leader. And he did so even as he experienced great hostility. he knew that even when he was a baby the king wanted him dead. That's quite a lot to live with. And yet with all the opposition he faced he came to the feast and he sang this song.

As David's son as well knowing that he would be the eternal king he would establish this eternal kingdom he had even more reason to rejoice.

In a sense this is his eternal song as he looks on even today on his church gathering for worship each Lord's day.

[21:54] And he especially sees what his people will be one day. And he sings this song now he rejoices at what he sees. Week by week he sees people all over the world answering the call to worship coming to his feast coming to the Lord's supper and feasting together.

And it's why of course when Paul would speak later in 1 Corinthians 11 about the Lord's supper one of the themes he focuses on is unity. What do you need to sort out before you come to the table? Is there disunity between you and another brother? That's what you need to sort out. It's not have you lived a perfect life this week? It's is there disharmony? That's the issue. Because there's a key hinge point in history that this song is actually all about.

It's about the day of Pentecost. It's the day when the Spirit was poured out the Gospel was preached thousands were added to the Church. This last day waiting for his return began.

That is the day when Jesus having ascended the ultimate ascent as high priest as head of his church as head of the body he sat down at God's right hand and what happened?

[23:19] He was anointed with the Spirit and the Spirit ran down from the head of the church to the body of the church. That's us. Men, women, boys, girls from all nations all socio-economic levels throughout all of history received this blessing because Jesus ascended and the Spirit was poured out on him and ran down onto us.

That's what you see at Pentecost is the Spirit running down from the head to the body. That's how Peter is actually explaining what's going on in Acts 2. This anointing was the proof that Jesus was being anointed.

That he had finished his work, he had conquered. This is real for us in Jesus Christ. That's the real, that's the third thing you see.

It was real for Jesus and because of Jesus it's real for us. But we need to think about how that was possible. it's because the most spectacularly unanswered prayer in world history was not the High Priestly Prayer.

It was a prayer that he prayed later in that same night. It was the prayer, take this cup away from me. He prayed two prayers that night.

[24:45] One was, pour out the Spirit on my people to unite them. The second was, don't pour out your wrath on me, the wrath that my people deserve.

But he knew he couldn't have one without the other. He knew that unless the wrath came down on him, the blessing would not come down on his people. He knew that before he could ascend to heaven he had another ascent to Jerusalem and then up to Calvary and then up on the cross.

And so because he knew that he prayed not my will but your will. God the Son suffered the pouring out of the Father's wrath to win the prize of the pouring out of the Spirit on him and everyone who would trust in him.

so he calls us week by week to enjoy this, to gather for the feast, to worship Lord's day by Lord's day.

And so here's what this psalm means. Because of Jesus, and we're about to sing this psalm at the end of the service, so this is what you're going to be meaning when you sing it.

[26:09] Because of Jesus, unity among brothers is a real, present blessing through which we can experience, enjoy, and display the

knowledge of Jesus Christ.

Unity among brothers is a real present blessing through which we experience, enjoy, and display the knowledge of Christ. So the person you feel most different from at church, you are one with them.

Because Jesus' prayer has been answered. Because the Spirit has been poured out on us. So I have brothers and sisters who are decades older and decades younger, who have lighter skin or darker skin than me, Tory, Labour, Lib Dem, UKIP, Brexiteers, Remainers, Baptists and Pentecostals, people who are richer, poorer than me, because we all have the same baptism. We all eat bread and drink wine. We are all the body. We all have the same High Priest, Jesus. And how good it is, how pleasant it is, when brothers dwell together in unity.

It is like the precious oil on the head, running down on the beard of Aaron, running down on the collar of his robes. It is like the jewel of Hermon which falls on the mountains of Zion, for there the Lord has commanded the blessing, life forevermore.

[27:52] So if that's what it means, let's think about the adaptations I mentioned. We need to experience the knowledge of Christ in this unity. Let's pursue love, love one another.

that is Jesus' great new commandment. Do all that you can to ensure that if fellowship is broken, it's only because the other has walked away from the Lord.

Do all you can. You may not be able to restore each broken fellowship. There are people I know who are my brothers and sisters in Christ, who if I were to contact them, I know they wouldn't respond.

That's why it's told later in the Bible, do all you can to live at peace with others. So do all that you can to ensure that if it's broken, it's only because they walked away.

So to experience the knowledge of Christ in this unity, enjoy Christ himself in this unity. Remember, each time you come together, who it is who brings you together.

[29:01] We don't come alone, we don't come because we decided it's a good idea to come here. We come because Jesus called us. And finally, display Christ in this unity.

It's our love for one another, that it's through our love for one another, that the world will see that we belong to someone special.

We belong to Jesus. It's become painfully clear, hasn't it, this week, that we live in a world, and especially a society here, that is very divided.

It probably didn't become divided this week, it was probably already pretty divided, but this week we just know it. As I mentioned before, I'm living in America, and see all kinds of horrible divisions over politics.

Then I came here and saw divisions over different political questions, and I go to France, and I see all kinds of protests, and people breaking the windows even at the children's hospital, because it happened to be on the streets.

[30:03] We live actually in a very divided society. We think the church is divided. Have a look at the world and how divided the world is. So what an amazing opportunity we have to show the world something different.

We have an opportunity to show the world the glory of Jesus Christ. We have an opportunity to show that, yes, this other person voted very differently from me this week and disagrees with me vehemently on the reasons for why we vote one way or the other, but he's my brother in Christ and I love him, and that's more important.

Maybe you're not a Christian believer here tonight, and you realise that you're seeing just that. I hope you are seeing just that. I hope you're seeing just how good and pleasant it is for brothers to live together in unity under the rule of Jesus.

For this is where God has commanded the blessing of eternal life. And if you want that blessing, all you have to do is turn around, stop walking away from him, which is what you're doing, and trust him.

Tell him you want it. Tell him you want him. And as we do this, as we experience and enjoy and display the knowledge of Christ together as one, we can enjoy the certain hope that we have of that day when we will be, and we will fully know the blessing of unity and life forevermore, and the full

enjoying of God to all eternity, we'll know that that day is just one day closer for us pilgrims on the Ascent to Zion.

[31:58] Let's pray together.