

## Lift up your heads you gates

**Series:** Christmas 2024

**Texts:** Psalm 24; Philippians 4.4-7; John 1.19-28

**Date:** 29 December, 2024

**Location:** St George's Battery Point

*Lift up your heads, O you gates;  
lift them up, you ancient doors,  
that the King of glory may come in.*

*Who is this King of glory?  
The LORD strong and mighty,  
the LORD mighty in battle.*

**2** *Lift up your heads, O you gates;  
lift them up, you ancient doors,  
that the King of glory may come in.*

**10** *Who is he, this King of glory?  
The LORD Almighty—  
he is the King of glory.*

This morning as we finish this season of Christmas and look forward to 2025 I want to meditate on these verses from Psalm 24. They have of course been immortalised in Handel's Messiah. Having been held at a subdued tone note by the single tenor, with these verses the choir springs back to life with triumphant joy with the high and low sections calling and responding to each other. We'll look at the Psalm itself, then Handel's reading of these verses and finally what that means for us.

### Psalm 24.

The psalm is divided into 3 sections.

Verses 1-2 introduces the Lord as the God of creation.

The earth and all that is in belong to God. That includes all who live in it - even you and me.

Why? Because God made the world. The picture used here is one drawn from the context of Canaanite mythology. The sea and the waters were personified gods of chaos and Baal the Canaanite god brought order to the world by subduing them. But this mythology is subverted in the psalm. The sea and the waters are de-personified. Now they are simply elements of Yahweh's creation which he rules over and orders.

Having introduced God as the Creator, ruler and owner of creation, verses 3-6 ask how we may approach him. The picture is of the mountain city Jerusalem with God's temple, the symbolic place of his presence in the centre. Who can go up and stand in that holy place? The Psalm asks. Who can approach God?

The answer comes in the shape of the twin moral and spiritual obligations that runs throughout Scripture:

*He who has clean hands and a pure heart,  
who does not lift up his soul to an idol  
or swear by what is false.*

There is always a vertical and a horizontal dimension to our lives. How are you responding to God and how are you responding to your neighbour? The two are always inextricably linked. Notice how there is an internal and an external dimension to how we move towards others. It's not just our actions, our intentions - the heart - is also important. And notice too how the alternatives to the true and living God are seen. They are false and untrue. So why run after them?

The one who approaches God and neighbour rightly - those who seek God's face - God will bless and vindicate them.

The perspective shifts back to God in verses 7-10. In verses 3-6 the picture was of the worshipper going up to the temple. Now in verses 7-10 the picture is of God himself coming to the temple and the gates being thrown open to welcome him in. God is depicted as a warrior king, returning to his palace from battle triumphant. The God who we approach is not only the Creator of all things, he is the one who fights for and defends his people.

The commentators think this section of the Psalm may have been used when King David brought the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem for the first time with the gatekeepers of the city asking "Who is the king of glory?" And those in the procession answering, "The Lord strong and mighty."

### **Handel's Messiah**

It's a magnificent image and the language lifts our souls, but I've always been a bit puzzled by this bit of the psalm and what it might mean for us. I think Handel's Messiah opens for us a helpful line of interpretation. Part II of the Messiah covers Jesus' passion, death, resurrection and ascension, the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost and the preaching of the gospel and the reign of Christ. Handel, (or at least Charles Jennens who wrote the libretto), choses this piece of Scripture to convey the ascension of Christ. This imagines the gates as gates of the true temple - heaven, the place where God dwells. Handel brilliantly has the choir sing these words, and he splits them in two for a call and response. We can imagine the angels accompanying Christ on his ascension calling to those at the gates of heaven - *Lift up your heads you gates, be lifted up you ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in!*

His music captures the mood of triumphant joy of the heavenly host welcoming the return of the King.

In choosing these verses Handel draws our attention to the astonishing reality that the crucified Messiah is none other than God come in the flesh. Who is the king of glory? *The Lord Almighty - he is the king of glory*. The king of glory is God, the Creator, to whom belongs the earth and everything in it. But wonderfully, incredibly, mercifully, the creator has become one of us to bless us, to vindicate us, to save us. This is what Christmas is all about, the *incarnation*, God coming in the man Jesus of Nazareth.

And with these verses Handel gives us the true picture of reality. Christ really has conquered death and sin. He really is now seated at the Father's right hand reigning on high. He really will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead. He is the king of glory. As we begin to look to 2025 and make our plans for the year, the question for me and for you is will you open the gate of your heart for him to come in? Then these words may sound a note of triumphant joy for you - *lift up your heads, you gates ... that the king of glory may come in*. He is the king of glory - will you let him rule your life? He's made your body to be his temple, your heart his throne. Like the wise men, will you offer him the gifts of your hands, your tongue, your time, your finances, your relationships, your intellect?

He is the king of glory. Look to him to be your strength and refuge in times of turmoil.

He is the king of glory. Look to him to be your shield and defender in times of trouble.

He is the king of glory. Look to him to be your Rock and Redeemer in times of sorrow.

He is the king of glory. Look to him to be your hope and your very great reward as the shadows lengthen and the body slows.

*Lift up your heads, O you gates;  
lift them up, you ancient doors,  
that the King of glory may come in.*

10 *Who is he, this King of glory?  
The LORD Almighty—  
he is the King of glory*