

Morning Sermons – 9th October 2005

Reading: Psalm 95

Objectives: Value 1 – God-centred worship that engages the whole person

- I want you to think about your best friend. Imagine you wanted to invite them to an event that they will really enjoy, perhaps organise a party for them. What kind of event might that be? Maybe they don't like surprises so you actually involve them in the planning. Maybe they like big parties so you'll send out lots of invitations. Maybe they have a particular interest so you plan to take them to mud wrestling, a play, an ornamental garden, a cricket match, a shopping trip...
 - The aim is that they enjoy themselves and to ensure that happens you have to know what they like and what they are like. Your desire is to please them. In all your planning and involvement you will get pleasure and especially when you see their reaction, but your pleasure is not the primary objective. The moment you lose your focus on their pleasure you slip into pleasing yourself. How many of us have had a present from someone who clearly thought you'd like the latest gadget that they fancied for themselves!
 - Worship is celebrating and exalting God. If we only begin to work on one concept after this sermon I want it to be the realisation that Christian Worship is primarily all about giving God pleasure. That our first question should always be, 'what did God get out of that?' I confess that this Values sermon has caused me more loss of sleep than any other. I've seen it coming like a freight train in the distance and known I can't jump out of the way. Above all our values this is the one where we need to get our whys right because we can waste more energy on unhelpful whats and hows than any other aspect of church life.
- To some extent that's to be expected. If worship is at the core of what we are about then it's the place Satan loves to cause most mischief. We have so many opinions and models and preferences for him to tweak. Having said that, I don't think that worship in our Church is bad! All churches tussle with worship and there is also much to celebrate here; we have much to be grateful for in the qualities of those who lead worship in our church and the quality of many of our services. But let me say again; Worship is celebrating and exalting God and Christian Worship is primarily all about giving God pleasure.
 - The writer to the Hebrews says: *Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our "God is a consuming fire"* [Heb.12:28-9]. From Cain and Abel onwards the Bible has stories of those whose worship was not acceptable. It is primarily from understanding God through the Word, the Bible, that we can discern what pleases him – how to set up the event that will give him pleasure. But he has also provided us with the essential means to do that. Let me make three quick points about the means into worship God provides for us.
1. Firstly we are able to enter God's presence to worship him only through what Jesus did in dying on the cross. The writer to the Hebrews makes it clear that, just as the physical curtain in the temple was torn at Jesus death, so we now have spiritual access to the holiest place through Jesus; *we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body* [Heb.10:.19]

2. That reference to Jesus as priest indicates that he also has an active role in our worship. *We .. have .. a high priest who.. serves in the sanctuary, the true tabernacle set up by the Lord, not by man* [Heb.8:1-2]. The Greek word here for 'serves' is 'leitourgos', from which we get our word 'liturgy'. So you could say that in Christian worship, Jesus is our worship leader! Jesus has an active part in our worship; we know, for example that he intercedes for us and understands our weaknesses from a human point of view.
3. And that brings in the role of the Holy Spirit for we know that he also has a role in making the spiritual connection between us and God [Rom.8:26]. By the Spirit we are both comforted and convicted. The Holy Spirit also equips us with gifts so that we can richly enter the presence of God in a manner that is 2-way. Jesus put it like this, *a time... has now come when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshippers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshippers must worship in spirit and in truth.* [Jn.4:23-4]
 - But if we think this only applies in a Church service or that worship is only about what we do in church on a Sunday, then we are completely wrong! *I urge you, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God — this is your spiritual act of worship* [Rom.12:1]. Worship involves all of us.
 - Worship involves all of us as in the whole person - mind, body & spirit. Genesis tells us we were made for relationship with God and Revelation shows us that our destiny & fulfilment in heaven is in worship.

When Jesus was asked to summarise God's blueprint for life he said it was firstly to *Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength* [Mk.12:30]. For heart read will, for soul read spirit, for mind read abilities, and for strength read physique.

I don't know about you, but that sounds pretty all embracing. There is no part of me that cannot be used to worship God. In the marriage service, at the exchange of rings, bride and groom say to each other, "all that I am I give to you". That's not a bad summary of what Jesus is saying. But what is the context of this worship that involves my whole person?

- Worship involves all of us as in all of life - that is the full context for worship. Worship is not something we keep in a box or do in a building that is separate from the rest of life. We should fight against a modern desire to privatise faith and create a sacred / secular division. Worship - honouring and pleasing God - is a 24/7 affair.

I quoted earlier from Hebrews 12 about acceptable worship. The writer goes on to speak about loving one another, caring for strangers, compassion for prisoners, fidelity in marriage, sexual morality, not loving money, trusting God, supporting leaders, keeping to true teachings, serving Jesus even if it means disgrace, living in hope... and then he goes right back to worship again by saying; *Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise — the fruit of lips that confess his name. And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased* [Heb.13:15-16].

As far as God is concerned, unless all of life is worship, then a worship service has no meaning, and you'll find the same sentiments in Isaiah ch1:10-17& ch58.

- So that brings us full circle. Worship involves all of us as in meeting all together in a corporate act. There is real value in meeting together. The writer to the Hebrews says; *Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another — and all the more as you see the Day approaching.* [Heb.10:25]. Being a disciple of Jesus means being part of a body of believers who worship together. It is intended to be a place of encouragement.

The Bible is full of acts of corporate worship with a variety of liturgies, both planned and unplanned. But whatever style or content the focus remains to please God. Its where the individual call of *Praise the Lord, O my soul*, meets the corporate call of *Come let us*.

Traditionally we'd call this worship act 'A Service' but we need to be careful because the word 'service' has taken on several meanings. 'Service', as in corporate worship, means the service of our lives being offered to God. It's not a service as in doing God a favour, nor is it a service like getting the car serviced.

We read Psalm 95 earlier. It begins with mutual encouragement – *Come, let us sing, let us come*. It passes through mutual reminder – *the Lord is a great God*. It arrives at a place of mutual worship – *come, let us bow down*. And it ends with the challenge to respond to God's presence – *do not harden your hearts*.

- Which brings me finally to the effects of worship. I'd like to suggest three effects that apply wherever and however we are worshipping...

- i. True worship makes the person of God visible. Jesus lived the perfect worship-filled life and he said; *anyone who has seen me has seen the Father* [Jn.14:9]. As we believe in Jesus and worship him as Lord of our lives, Jesus is perceived through us. The Blind man whom Jesus healed knelt before him and worshipped him. Those around saw and were challenged to believe or reject what was made visible to them.

If our lives are focused upon pleasing Jesus then by our actions and attitudes we, too, are making God visible. The Bible uses examples of here senses to make that point. St Paul described us as being the fragrance of Christ [2Cor.15-6]. People may find that fragrant or unpleasant. Jesus said we are like salt that flavours our world with his taste and we are like lights that shine his light; *let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven* [Matt.5:16].

Like compasses that track magnetic North or men who turn to watch as a good-looking woman walks into a bar, our focus on Jesus intrigues others to look in that direction, too, and the style of our lives makes his character known. But only Jesus fully made God visible. As individuals we can, at best only give glimpses. That's one reason we come together as the body of Christ in an act of public worship.

Gathered to worship, we are like iron filings each responding to the magnet and together revealing the lines of force, to make the invisible God visible. 1Cor.14:24-5 says, *if an unbeliever ..comes in while everybody is prophesying, .. the secrets of his heart will be laid bare. So he will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, "God is really among you!"*.

To do this our gathered worship must be corporate – that is ‘body-like’. We may be individuals all responding to God and bringing personal worship, but we are not independent. School Assemblies are described as ‘Collective Worship’ - that is a group of people worshipping whatever they each fancy but just doing it all at the same time and place. Our worship should be such that God sees a single picture & hears a unified sound.

- ii. True worship magnifies the presence of God. God is present everywhere at all times, but when we live worship in our lives or all together its like a magnifying glass focusing the sun’s rays into a burning fire. There is a deeper intensity of God, a powerful presence of his Spirit. Like the smoke that filled the temple or the pillar of fire that led the Children of Israel.

So in worship we should expect the gifts of the Spirit to be magnified and active [1Cor.14:26-40]. Gifts such as prophecy, healing, pictures, prayer... even preaching! But also the enhancement of those God-given gifts we offer such as music, dance, poetry, and imagination.

Being in the presence of God is a place of wonderful fulfilling Joy for us [Ps.16:11, but also a place where we may tremble at the sound of God’s voice [Ps.2:11]. True Joy and true Fear cannot be manufactured by human art; to plan & lead worship is an awesome responsibility.

- iii. True worship invokes the purposes of God and, as Psalm 95 reminds us, we need to be ready and open to respond, and not hard-hearted. God may have a hard word to speak, a challenge to be heeded or a conviction that can’t be avoided. As we read just now, someone who doesn’t know Jesus may be converted through worship. Someone who knows Jesus may be taken into a deeper relationship. The impact of God’s purpose may bypass the mind and touch the emotions.

In worship, God may also reveal a special task for someone as when Paul & Barnabus were set apart for mission from within the Antioch church [Acts 13:1-3]. God may empower someone for an event or task they will be facing in the coming week. The key lies, as Psalm 95 puts it, in not hardening your heart to God’s purpose but being willing and responsive. For worship makes us vulnerable to God as we wholeheartedly desire to bring him honour and pleasure.

- o That’s enough for now but it’s not the whole story. I hope that I’ve begun to stimulate conversations that lead through a common mind to wholehearted worshipful lives and healthy corporate worship. Worship that gives God pleasure. Varied worship taking full advantage of the means God supplies, involving all of us in imaginative ways, and stimulating the exciting effects that God desires. I’ve put a few suggestions for future questions onto the handout.
- o To round off, here is a comment from the Westminster Catechism (1642-1647), and the primary Bible verse upon which it is based: *Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever. ... whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God* [1Cor.10:31].