

So having just one sermon series, we're now starting on another – but this time a bit shorter, just five weeks.

The inspiration for this series comes from *Inspiring Music in Worship*, produced by the Royal School of Church Music. Ian gave me a copy a while ago, as something that might interest me. By a coincidence, Penny then also came across it from a different angle, and thought it would be a good thing for us as a parish to look at – it offers something to all of the three churches, but perhaps in different ways. It's designed with small groups in mind, but Penny has adapted it to a set of readings over five weeks, and where we take the ideas from the book in our sermons is up to us. Our home groups may also like to look at it themselves at some point.

Certainly thinking about music in worship is something that should really connect with us here at St Peter's.

The first week asks the question: 'what does it mean to be a worshipping person'? When I began to try to think my way into the subject, I soon realised I'm really not sure where to start with the idea of worship.

Years ago, I remember a conversation with a Buddhist friend – someone who really supported me through my journey towards ordination, as it happens – and she said that the thing about Christianity she really couldn't 'get' was the idea of worship. It just wasn't a dynamic that

fitted her idea of faith – and she was someone who had thought a lot about faith in different ways over the years.

I don't think I gave her any particularly good answer, except maybe that we worship because it's a natural response in us because of who we are and who God is.

But I probably wouldn't use the word 'worship' myself very often anyway, and I've been trying to work out why. I think it's probably because for me worship is a very highly charged word. It makes me think of the point at the end of the gospels, after the resurrection and the ascension, when suddenly the language changes dramatically, and the disciples *worship* Jesus – something that should culturally have been impossible for them, worship belongs only to God, so something had changed, something that made them recognise Jesus unequivocally as God. For me, I think, worship is a very particular kind of deep and awed response to God. I would probably only use worship in my own life to describe very significant moments of a different kind of consciousness. Those moments when we are most focused on the God side of Jesus, maybe, rather than the ones where we are walking beside him as someone who shares our humanity.

But of course in everyday speech amongst Christians, the word 'worship' is used a lot, particularly to describe what we do together in church services, and that is in

practical terms what this sermon series is aimed at, and even more specifically, at the role of music in worship.

It's important to realise that to talk about worship raises very deep questions, but at the same time what we're talking about is very tangible – and audible.

To help us start to become more aware of what our own ideas are about worship, and where they come from and why, the book invites us to think about our own 'personal worship history'. I haven't been able to print out copies of this for you, which I'd hoped to do, but the idea isn't a difficult one, and you can either do it in your heads or, if it helps, jot down notes on a piece of paper. The exercise simply involves thinking about where you've worshipped at different times in your life, and what different experiences of liturgy and music you've had. If you've worshipped in the same place most or all of your life, there is still the question of how things there might have changed over time, and how that might have influenced you. What would also be useful would be if you got the chance to talk to some other members of the congregation about some of this, to get a sense of the different directions different people are coming from, their different expectations and their reasons for seeing worship in different ways.

Before I finish, I want to touch briefly upon today's readings, and some of the directions they might point us in with regard to worship.

We started with the reading about David dancing – worshipping God – before the ark of the covenant. You might remember the Richard Gere film about King David, which showed this in one of the scenes. Of a film that wasn't generally well received anyway, this scene was particularly not well received – and that's entirely appropriate: what David did wasn't well received at the time either, by his wife. She brought to the scene a lot of her own personal history, which of course included the history between her father Saul and David, and that made her contemptuous of David's act of worship. What this reading immediately reminds us is that how people worship God has always been controversial. We should hope that we can do better than David's wife. By thinking about what shapes our responses to other people's worship, we can start to free ourselves from what is negative about that, and learn to understand and value each other's worship of God. We *can* do better.

Then we have the second reading, the psalm. Let us sing to the Lord. For millennia, people have used music to worship God. The very fact that music and worship have belonged together so long gives us a very good reason for this sermon series. Why is there such a strong connection between music and worship? What does music do for us? How does it help us worship? Why does it help us worship? What different kinds of music help different people worship? At St Peter's music is a

core part of most of our services, but not all. How can we best celebrate this part of our tradition, and how can we put it to best use, to help all of us worship? Our tradition gives us every reason to embrace music but also to learn more about its role and learn from each other what role it has in our lives, individually and corporately.

And then we have our third reading, which doesn't in fact come from the set readings from any of the weeks of the music booklet, and I haven't seen whether it appears in the booklet otherwise. I haven't had a chance to ask Penny why she chose it particularly, but I think I can guess. We have Mary spontaneously offering this most precious gift to Jesus, pouring on his feet the precious perfume. This has to be one of the purest expressions of Christian worship properly directed we have anywhere in the Bible. We can see the depth of Mary's loving response to her Lord, not counting the cost. That to me sums up what worship might be in our lives. Offering the best we have to God, spontaneously and lovingly. Music can be a part of that. We pray 'everything we have is yours, and of your own do we give you'. Music is a precious gift God has given us that plays a very important role in our lives in all sorts of ways, and to offer that back in worship can contribute deeply to our relationship with God.

And when that happens, it certainly can be the kind of highly-charged moment I was talking about earlier. I end this sermon today with a passage that *is* in the booklet, words from a hymn you may well recognise, and which express the ideal of music in worship:

‘When in our music God is glorified, and adoration leaves no room for pride, it is as though the whole creation cried: Alleluia’.

Amen.