

Think for a moment about your experiences of going into a church for the first time. That might be this church – or it might be another church that you attended at some point in your life. Was it a good experience, or a bad one? What made it one or the other? Did you go back?

In our small groups last week we were encouraged to think about our ‘worship history’. For me, my earliest memories of church attendance are of the church adjacent to the C of E primary school that I attended. My memories of that are that it was cold, gloomy, uncomfortable, smelt of damp, and had no meaning for me. I remember once being on a rota to help with the flowers, and being told off for not having brought anything decent to use in the arrangement.

In contrast, I remember going to church for the first time for years as a student, with friends who had invited me along. The contrast was staggering. I remember to this day walking in and being astonished that the church was full, people were smiling, and there was a buzz and vitality about the worship. It was warm. It was alive. It felt like a good place to be.

This week, week 3 of our sermon series on worship, we are thinking about how our Sunday worship can be **missional**.

Helen Brent, author of the booklet we are using in our small groups observes:

“The content of our worship will either draw people in or put them off.” She goes on, “Inspiring worship should contain profound ‘So this is God!’ moments which may be converting and transforming both individually and corporately.”

Is that our experience here at St John’s? Are there moments in our services when we think, ‘Wow. God is really here!’

(Interestingly when I looked in the visitors book at St Margaret’s several people recently have just written ‘Wow’ – that says to me there is something of God’s presence here even when the church is empty.)

What are the ingredients needed in our Sunday worship for people to encounter the Living God and to go away from church saying, “Surely God was there this morning!”

What do our Bible passages say on this theme?

The reading from 2 Chronicles 6 is part of Solomon's prayer at the dedication of the Temple. The temple had taken seven years to build. It was built in accordance with God's instructions and for his glory, and in our reading Solomon's prayer specifically includes foreigners, those who were not part of God's people. He asked God to answer their prayers too, as a sign of his power and authority, so that they too would come to know the Living God.

Are **we** praying that God will answer the prayers of those who visit us, perhaps for baptisms, in order that they may come to know him?

At my previous church in Whitley, a couple who brought their son for baptism, Mel and Gareth, said after the service, "It felt as though a duvet was wrapped around us as we walked in." They just knew God was present, and they both gave their lives to Jesus during the service. Gareth was overwhelmed with the sense of his sins being forgiven. I know this is a true story, because they are now good friends. They are my dogwalkers! God met with them on a Sunday morning in church, and their lives were transformed.

What about the second reading, from Acts 2? The day of Pentecost, when the Spirit came and filled all the believers, enabling them to speak in different tongues, and to speak boldly and fearlessly for God to perplexed onlookers. Some of the crowd laughed and scoffed, thinking they were all drunk – and there will be many times for us as Christians when people will laugh and scoff at us – but that day three thousand people came to faith.

It's the work of the Spirit to draw people to faith, but it's our role to allow him to move in our own lives and in our church. The church won't grow without him, no matter what we do.

Are we open to the Holy Spirit moving within us and among us? We need to let him have his way among us, even if that's sometimes a little scary.

What about our gospel passage (Luke 24: 13-16, 28-32)

This is one of my favourite passages in the whole Bible – two disconsolate disciples heading away from Jerusalem after the crucifixion, probably fearing for their lives, all their hopes and dreams in tatters, and Jesus comes up and simply walks along with them.

He engages them in conversation, asks them what they are discussing, what's on their hearts. And he then gently rebukes them for being slow of heart to believe. And as he opens the Scriptures to them, their hearts BURN within them.

I can still remember the night when as a student, I heard Roger Forster preach on Luke 15, the parable of the prodigal son. I was hanging on every word, and as he spoke of the Father's reckless love for his wayward son my heart **yearned** to receive that love. Back in my college bedroom I got on my knees and asked Jesus to come into my heart. And my life changed direction.

Do our hearts burn within us as the Scriptures are opened every Sunday morning. Do we expect to hear God's voice to us, as individuals, and as his church? Are we praying that visitors would hear him speak to them?

Back to the gospel reading, and notice that it's as Jesus breaks the bread, probably in exactly the same way that he did at the Last Supper, possibly with nail marks visible in his hands, that the disciples' eyes were opened. Light dawns. Hope rises. Hearts are changed. They leave that place heading in a different direction.

Does this happen when we break bread on a Sunday morning? Could it? We may all have slightly different ideas about what does or doesn't happen to the bread and wine in a communion service, but most of us would agree that God is somehow present in a special way as we receive bread and wine.

Is communion just for believers? Or could it be missional? I have often thought it's NOT very missional as unbelievers who don't receive can feel excluded. But when I was on placement at Prospect Park Hospital, Rachel Wadey, the Mental Health Chaplain told me that she had come to faith in Brazil, after simply watching believers receive communion. She said as they came back to their seats their faces were radiant. She could tell God was present.

Prayer, Spirit, word, sacrament, all ingredients of inspiring worship - And where does music fit into all of this?

Helen Brent writes: "When the beauty of the liturgy is matched with appropriate music, worship can soar, transporting the soul and acting as a window through which to glimpse the divine, maybe for the first time."

She then asks “But what music is appropriate to nurture the faith of the congregation and to proclaim the Christian story to unbelievers?”

And that’s a key question for us to be thinking about – how can we make sure our music draws people to God rather than puts them off? At a wedding or a baptism service what’s the right music to choose? Perhaps that’s one for us to discuss over coffee.

Helen Brent writes:

“Worship can be a launch pad for mission. We hope to take the whole congregation, both regulars and visitors, on a journey which intentionally encourages them to engage with God and helps them to grow in their understanding and discipleship. Ideally this worship will inspire and energise regular worshippers whilst simultaneously welcoming strangers, offering a safe place for the searcher and a place of sanctuary for those in need or distress. Inspiring worship is really crucial to the mission of every local church.”

Let’s pray that our worship here becomes all that God longs for it become.

Let’s pray.