

Worship Series week 4 St John's 30th September 2018

1 Chronicles 16:7-13, 23-25, 28-34, 36; Hebrews 10:19-25;
John 4:19-24

How would you do next Sunday differently if you knew that Jesus was the guest preacher? A moment to think about that, both from a personal point of view, and from the perspective of what our church service should look like.

This is one of the questions from week 4 in this booklet 'Inspiring Music in Worship', which our small groups at St John's have been studying, and which form the basis for the sermon series we are following.

We are being encouraged to think theologically and creatively about our worship, specifically our Sunday Worship, and especially the role that music plays in our worship. Within St John's, and across the parish, we are a diverse bunch of people, with diverse tastes and preferences – so how do we worship together in a way that unites and inspires us rather than leaves us feeling irritated, disgruntled or rather flat?

John Pritchard in his book 'Being a priest today', describes a typical Sunday congregation as follows:

"Here in church on a Sunday morning is a middle-aged woman looking for worship which is both structured and beautiful to help her cope with a life that is anything but. Here is an engaged couple who have never been to church before and haven't a clue what to do. Here is an English Teacher who loves the cadences and poetry of the Book of Common Prayer. At the back is a family struggling with lively children, drawn to church through the school, but not sure what they are looking for. Near the front there is a couple in their fifties who have just been to a New Wine Christian Festival and want the enthusiasm quotient moved up several gears. There's also an elderly woman who's been bereaved recently, and a man who is registered blind with his guide dog (whose worshipping needs are unclear) This is the glorious motley people of God, but how on earth does the priest meet their needs in worship without turning worship into either entertainment or therapy?"

He goes on:

"Worship is a profoundly simple movement of the heart offered in highly complex situations. It's therefore even more necessary to be clear that worship is directed first and foremost, towards God. Fundamentally worship is for

God, to God and of God. It is offering all of ourselves to all God has revealed himself to be, but it's about the Lord of heaven and earth before it is about us."

In our Old Testament reading this morning, (1 Chronicles 16:7-13, 23-25, 28-34, 36) I think David has it exactly right. This is an act of public worship, led by a skilled worship leader, and it's all about God. The whole thrust of this passage is an encouragement to God's people to lift their eyes to focus on the character and deeds of God:

"O Give thanks to the Lord, call on his name, make known his deeds among the people. Sing to him, sing praises to him, tell of his wonderful works, Glory in his holy name!Remember the wonderful works he has done, his miracles and the judgments he uttered, O offspring of his servant Israel, tell of his salvation...Declare his glory! The Lord is king! Let the sea roar! Let the fields exult! Give thanks to the Lord for he is good! His steadfast love endures forever!"

Worship begins with us looking upward. Thanksgiving, praise, proclamation, adoration and prayer all play their part in drawing us into God's presence. We are joining with the angels in bearing witness to God's greatness, and when we join in wholeheartedly we find ourselves being

lifted up. It's often as we worship that we catch a glimpse of God's majesty, hear his voice, see something in a new way. Our eyes are taken off ourselves, and our own concerns, and focussed onto God, who is greater, stronger, and higher than any other. We get our lives back in perspective:

John Pritchard again:

"Worship is the means by which we interrupt our preoccupation with ourselves and attend to God. We're endlessly absorbed and fascinated by ourselves, our image and appeal. Worship is the great corrective to all this. It puts us back into a healthy relationship with ourselves, and with life, the universe and everything."

Having said that, there IS something in it for us. Because as we worship, we can **expect** to encounter God, to hear his voice, to sense his presence, to receive from him something that will make a difference to the way we live our lives tomorrow and the next day. He is the Living God. He doesn't stand aloof from us. As we worship, he responds.

What is it that you need from him this morning? What would you say to Jesus if he were sitting next to you?

Who might you have brought to church with you this morning if you knew he was going to be here? Who would you ask him to visit? What would you ask him to do for YOU?

Our reading from Hebrews reminds us that we can come into God's presence confidently, not because we are good enough, but because Jesus died to make it possible. His death on the cross removed the barrier that separates sinful people from a holy God – that's why the curtain in the temple was ripped in two from top to bottom when Jesus died, a symbolic declaration that sin had been dealt with and our forgiveness paid for. That's why we can approach God, and his throne of grace, confidently and expectantly, even boldly. Not because of who we are, but because of who HE is and what he has done for us.

We don't need to worship from a distance. We can 'draw near with faith'.

But how do we do it in practice?

How do we worship? How do we hold together unity with diversity? Traditional and modern? Old and Young?

The woman in our gospel story challenged Jesus with what was a hot potato of her day – the Jews believed the

only place to worship was at the temple in Jerusalem, and the Samaritans had built their own temple at Mount Gerizim. The Jews scoffed at the Samaritans. Who was right?

Jesus' response?

You're missing the point. The place isn't the be all and end all. What matters is whether or not you are worshipping in 'spirit and in truth'. What does that mean? I think it means worshipping with both our heart and our head. Is our worship coming from the heart? Is our own spirit responding to the Spirit of God at work within us, revealing God to us, bringing new life, making us more Christ-like? Are we allowing the Spirit to move among us corporately, in our music, in our liturgy, breathing his life into it, and into us? Are we open to him doing something new among us?

And is our worship thoughtful? Based on truth? Jesus said, 'I am the truth'. Do we really know the One we are worshipping? Not just know about him, but know him personally. His challenge to the woman at the well was that she didn't really know the one she was worshipping – but then he revealed himself to her. In response to her comment that "When the Messiah comes he will explain

all this to us,” Jesus responds, “I am he – I am the Messiah – the one you are speaking to.” And she went away changed – excited, wanting to tell others, wanting them to come and meet Jesus, too.

Do we leave church on Sundays like that?

John Pritchard again:

“We can’t truly encounter the living God and then go back to peeling the potatoes and cutting the lawn as if nothing has happened.”

How would we do Sundays differently if Jesus were here?

The truth is, he is here.

As we lift our hearts and minds to worship him, and come with expectant, open hearts and minds, he will meet with us, and we will go away changed.

Some final words from John Pritchard:

“Worship is the lightning conductor through which God’s life strikes the earth. It exposes us to exhilarating encounters with both Scripture and sacrament.... God is both beautiful and terrifying, almighty love and a consuming fire. Our worship should be about nothing less.”

Let’s pray.