

Worship – Is it worth it?

What is worship?

That's what we asked Gary (our minister) and he replied by saying:

'Webster's Dictionary says: *'Worship is to honour with extravagant love and extreme submission.'* So worship is not prayers and hymns interspersed with a sermon and the collection. It's not Café worship either. It is not something that is done for you or to you. ***It's something you enter into with heart, mind, body and soul.***' (my emphasis).

Why worship?

Looking at different churches and cultures over time we can identify several models of why people worship:

- **Service to God** – a duty to express gratitude for what God has done in the world and in our life.
- **A mirror of heaven** – an attempt to duplicate the eternal heavenly worship.
- **Affirmation** – an oasis of peace and refreshment which affirms, inspires and supports believers in living their faith in daily life.
- **Communion** – forming and sustaining our relationship with God and with each other through Christ.
- **Proclamation** – announcing the Good News of God in Christ and making our public affirmation and witness.
- **An arena of transcendence** – encountering God's transforming power, with a sense of reverence, awe and expectation.

Each one of us will have a different mix of some of these models to explain why we worship. What are yours?

The Bible overflows with verses about people worshipping together and includes prayers, songs and poetry used in worship by the Jews and the early Christian church. It sets out the practical benefits of worshipping God and also the dangers of worshipping the wrong things. For example, the Ten Commandments forbid the making and worshipping of idols, showing that the danger of not worshipping God is that we end up worshipping other things.

When we worship God it enables us to see everything else in the light of his love and generosity rather than focus on ourselves and the things we want – wealth, power, sex etc. This is what Gary said:

'We worship God because He is God. Our extravagant love and extreme submission to the Holy One flows out of the reality that God loved us first.'

How do you worship?

From the Bible and the experience of the wider church across history we see common elements in worship like singing, prayer, the reading of the Scriptures, and the sharing of bread and wine. A basic pattern or menu has evolved:

1. Starter – Gathering together in the presence of God.
2. Main course – Reading of and engagement with Scripture.
3. Dessert – Responding to the word in prayer, sacramental acts (Baptism, Holy Communion), acts of dedication.
4. Coffee – Sending people out to serve God.

The content of each course has changed over time. Major changes were made by the Protestant Reformers of the sixteenth century who placed Scripture and preaching at the heart of worship rather than the sacrament of Holy Communion. They led worship in ordinary language rather than in Latin and they emphasised that all Christians have access to God through prayer and so encouraged lay participation in worship.

John Wesley loved the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer* but he revised this for different situations. Wesley initially resisted some changes to worship, such as allowing lay people to preach or having services outdoors, but changed his mind when he saw how God blessed the church through local preachers and through ministering in the open air. *The Methodist Worship Book* provides creative freedom in worship to respond to rapidly changing cultural conditions.

What about our worship?

At St Andrew's our Sunday morning worship has the four basic 'courses'. Our usual style of worship is quite 'middle of the road' – more traditional than some churches but more informal and flexible than others. We are blessed to have a building which is very adaptable for different styles of worship for different situations.

When people gave their views on the monthly Café worship services which began on a trial basis in 2016, the majority were positive (eg. more welcoming, involving, relaxed, sharing, warm, informal) and enjoyed the opportunity to meet different people and to talk and share about faith. Some folk were critical, feeling that they had not been to a proper service and that it diminished the sincerity of worship. Of course, the positive views about Café worship suggest negative views of our more traditional worship.

One lesson we can learn from this is that we are all different, and 'you can't please all the people all of the time'. But perhaps the key question is whether God is pleased with our worship – Café style, traditional or other. Is it something we enter into with heart, mind, body and soul? Is it a gracious encounter between God and the Church?

What about us?

So what does all this mean for how we worship together Sunday by Sunday? Let me pose three questions we should ask ourselves and suggest how we might go about answering them:

Firstly, do we come with the right attitude? Jesus told a Samaritan woman, '*God is spirit, and his worshippers must worship in spirit and truth*'. We should come to encounter God in our singing, our prayers, the readings, the preaching, the sacraments and in the lives of the people we meet.

Secondly, are we ready to respond to how the Holy Spirit is leading us? Jesus' message was one of change – '*Repent!*' – but the religious leaders of his day wanted to keep things the same. We need to be open to having our understanding broadened, our preferences questioned, and to seek the gift of discerning what is right for God's church today.

Thirdly, do we look to the needs of others and how they might enrich our worship? Jesus' criticism of the religious leaders was often because their actions resulted in other people being excluded from worship due to their gender, race, disabilities, occupation etc. We are a welcoming church and that should mean offering loving acceptance and encouragement to those with different outlooks on worship and different gifts to ours.

A final few words from Gary:

'True worship is a matter of the heart expressed through a lifestyle of holiness. I invite you to make worship a non-negotiable priority in your life.'

So, is worship worth it? Yes!

Note: The word worship comes from an old English word *weorthscipe* meaning 'worthiness' or ascribing worth to something/someone.

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