

What is worship? – Part 1



Following our decision to move from two morning services to one I've been thinking a lot about worship. To clarify terms, I'm not talking about worship in the wider sense which is the giving of our whole lives to God. I'm concentrating here on the corporate act of worship that we might call our service. I'm reluctant to call it a service as that suggests something which is provided by some and consumed by others. I am convinced that all who gather for an act of worship will participate in it. So what actually is this act of worship, what is its place in the life of the Church and what happens during these times of worship? I have expressed some of these thoughts in recent sermons but feel that a written version might also be helpful.

Over some years I've struggled to relate to the shape of Church that we've inherited: a shape which is heavily skewed towards the Sunday event. Church life, fellowship, discipleship and mission tends to revolve around worship. Most people outside of Church think of Church as a Sunday activity rather than a community.

In Churches today mission and evangelism initiatives including fresh expressions of Church often begin at the place of worship. The thinking being, what sort of service will attract new people? The problem is that worship is often a far point to get to for people who've never been Christians. I wonder then, how things might be if we go the other way round and let mission inform worship. In other words we do mission and see what effect it has on worship. We recognise that worship can give us spiritual strength for our mission but what about the possibility that what God does for us in mission inspires and feeds our worship

There is something of a Biblical precedent in looking at it this way round. Many of the Psalms are images of the corporate acts of worship and praise of the community in response to the acts of God in everyday life. The same principle

applies in the gospels. When Jesus taught, healed and performed miracles, those involved invariably broke into spontaneous worship. What I'm thinking here is that worship is a response of the heart rather than something that we try to produce. The way into worship is not I suggest through anything that we create but through encounter with the very presence of God. I'm beginning to believe that, in our time His presence will be experienced most acutely in the mission field.

I'm not suggesting is that worship is unnecessary or irrelevant. Good worship is powerful. It preceded the events of Pentecost and facilitated the miraculous release of Peter and, subsequently, Paul and Silas from prison. There does though need to be a greater balance to the life of our Churches. How much of the time we spend together is given to mission in contrast to that which we give to worship and its preparation? We need to also remember that Jesus did most of his discipleship and teaching in a context of mission rather than in a context of worship.

Our vision for St. Thomas's is to see lives transformed through faith in Jesus. Such transformation can only be achieved in the power of God. When we and those outside the Church see that power at work I believe that worship will follow quite naturally. In the meantime where does our present act of worship fit into this vision and what sort of ingredients should it involve? I'll consider these questions in Tom Tom next month.

Steve