

What is worship? – Part 2



Continuing from my article last month, I'd like now to consider the specifics of corporate worship. There are 2 principles that I believe should inform what we do. The first is that our worship is in step with our mission principles and the second is that it is characterised by the presence of God.

Worship informed by mission

Like any mission activity our act of worship must be accessible, relevant and understandable to those who participate. Worship is not our primary evangelistic tool but people new to the faith should feel included and able to relate to what is going on. This presents an immediate dilemma with Holy Communion. Holy Communion is perhaps the one liturgical act that Jesus commanded us to do yet I know from the experience of myself and others that it can be very difficult for those who are new to the faith. We therefore need regular non-communion acts of worship whilst maintaining our commitment to 'do this in remembrance of Jesus'. To facilitate this we now incorporate an act of Holy Communion to our pre-service prayer times on the days when we hold a non-communion service.

There can also be problems of accessibility with some of our other features of worship, particularly liturgy. Many of us are familiar with the tried and tested words that hold together traditional Anglican services. But for others those words are difficult and even meaningless. Phrases such as 'grant us so to put away the leaven of malice and wickedness' from a recent collect, have little meaning in today's culture.

Liturgy is helpful in giving shape to a service and it also helps to take out preferential bias. Liturgy helps us keep a sound theological basis to our worship but it exists to serve us rather we serve it. We cannot let ourselves be bound to specific word forms that no longer serve our missionary needs. To

hold on to them or any other feature or style of worship places us in danger of worshipping the worship rather than God.

Presence of God

Christianity is a relational faith; one in which our lives are fashioned not by external rules and regulations but by our relationship with God. Corporate worship is about the people of God communicating and meeting with God alongside one another. In other words it is about different expressions of corporate prayer. True prayer is relational and therefore demands us to come into God's presence. It is true that God is everywhere all the time but there are times when the sense of God's presence is more acute. This is what we're looking for in prayer and it is worship that often seems to bring it about. There is debate over whether God comes to us or we are taken to where he is but His presence gives our worship power and relevance.

So what are the particular areas of prayer that we enact together? Praise and thanksgiving is, as I alluded to last time, a response of the heart for what God has done. This response of the heart is enlarged through mission, for it is in mission that we see God at work most powerfully. Taking this attitude of praise, thanks and love of God into our worship seems to be the key to facilitating our meeting with Him. Music is important in this respect. It involves us in a way that words alone cannot do. At one level it works in that we remember words much easier through a song or a hymn than we do through ordinary prose. But there is a deeper level as well. Music captures our feelings and emotions. Go to a rock concert, musical theatre or even a football match and you'll see and experience music engage feeling and emotion. This should also be true in Church but in this context we so often seem afraid to show any sense of feeling. Music gives us the opportunity to express how we feel about God as well as what we think about Him. We have to be careful that we don't confuse the emotion of the music with the presence of God but so often we arrive in His presence as a result of expressing our feelings for Him. For this reason I'm encouraging our use of music in blocks of two or more hymns/songs at a given time. I'm aware that repetition and the number of songs used can be overdone but we do need time to come to the place where are able to meet with God in more than just a conceptual way.

The genuine place of praise and worship leads us to God in an attitude of humility. If worship is to be more than an unproductive religious ritual it has to take us to a place where we understand our need to be changed in some way by our encounter with God. Acts of confession are important in this respect and in prayer ministry we humble ourselves before God and others through being open about our need for Him. We also must be aware that God often meets our need through others with whom we worship. In one another's company are we able to be real and vulnerable? That is humility.

Finally I want to think about intercession. Part of our worship has to be given over to pray for the needs of the world around us. But have our traditions led us away from true intercession? Intercession is meant to be about being in the gap between God and the world and somehow linking the two up. It is about bringing the kingdom of God to bear on the kingdoms of the world. In intercession we are seeking God's way for the world and by being in that place we are somehow having an effect in the spiritual realm to make things happen. In intercession we are engaging with God's heart for the world rather than asking what we consider to be good through human understanding alone. We are fortunate in St. Thomas' to have gifted people who lead our intercessions and we need to be able to participate with them in seeking to enable the kingdom of God.

Putting everything together worship is a focal point of meeting with one another and with God. Unity is therefore vital. In worship we are perhaps proclaiming that we are one in purpose, in pursuit of God.

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