

GOOD NEWS ABOUT WORSHIP

Definition: worship – “worthship”- acknowledging that God is worthy to receive honour and loyalty.

Once upon a time, long ago, there were three missionaries in Japan. Each of them was used by God to plant a Christian church. To this day you can still identify which of the three groups Christians come from, because each has its own distinctive style of worship and prayer. One group prays very quietly with deep reverence. The Whisperers. Another group exhibits great enthusiasm and pray loudly and fervently as if to make themselves heard in the heavens – the Ranters. The third group takes a moderate volume, not too loud not too soft but with peculiar hissing interjections. They are the Whistlers. Why? The first missionary had a very quiet voice. The second a very loud voice – an American probably – and the third one had false teeth that did not fit. The disciples had simply adopted the worship style of their pastor.

Most of us learn about worship by imitating others, and we do pick up some cultural idiosyncrasies along the way. By culture I don't mean ethnicity, I mean the ways we make sense of life in order to make decision about how to act. Organisations have a culture, so do schools and restaurants. Eastview has a culture that says it's okay to arrive ten minutes late. The majority Kiwi Culture is based on individuation, where personal choices and preferences take priority, as compared with, say, a Pacific culture where privacy and individual choice are subject to the needs and values of the community. Worship is influenced by culture, but not defined by it. It is defined by the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ.

We are focusing on the gospel this term, looking at it from various viewpoints in order to build our confidence in it as “real good news”. Because we seem to have forgotten the meaning of the Greek word *evangelion* – which for Christians does not signify a genre of anime (computer animation). In the Greek-speaking Roman-ruled culture of Jesus' day it was a royal proclamation that carried huge meaning – a military victory, a new emperor, or a royal birth. In the first century everyone in Palestine was familiar with an *evangelion*, a royal announcement from the emperor or his authorities, sharing good news that would have a long term effect. That promised radical change. An *evangelion* was a political message, a message about who is king and what that means for the inhabitants of the region. In English, gospel. Good News. The catchphrase that for two millennia Christians have used for a very different royal announcement - the still reverberating change that took place with the coming of Jesus the Christ - a new kind of king.

There are 1000 ways of explaining what this means. Why it is news and how it is good. We hope to look at a few over the next six weeks. But Paul puts it quite simply in Galatians 2: 20 - *I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.* This is not good advice or even good ethics. It's good news. He took the fall. But as Dave said last week, perhaps we have become so familiar with this notion that we've lost sight of how radical this news was and is. We need to wake up and rediscover the story of Jesus – his birth, life, death, resurrection and his saving and transforming power. It was an announcement of a whole new world. A new regime where God lifts us up, dusts us off and starts us over again. This story of grace, mercy, forgiveness and changed lives needs to be at the heart of everything we say and do. A river of love that we can all be caught up in here and now.

I believe that worship that emanates from this good news will transform us – and challenge the culture we live in. It will form in us a deep conviction that faith is an intelligible explanation of reality, and that Jesus is alive and able to make a difference in our human experience. There are many tacks one could take in teaching about worship, but today I want to look closely at how the gospel defines and constrains worship, and how culture can sometimes undermine the kind of worship God seeks. For that we are going to turn to the Bible, to a story that may well be familiar to many, but from which we are going to distil some key truths about worship that apply, both then and now.

It's actually a story about worship wars. Do you know what I mean by that? Over the years I have been embroiled in many worship wars, between ministers and musicians, between organists and guitarists, between drums and cymbals, between classical and folk, monks and hippies, teens and parents, those who won't sing anything older than twenty years and those who won't sing anything written more recently, and those who want to sing and those who won't. Theologian and musician Marva Dawn

wonders if the binary nature of our technological culture makes us prefer either/or debates when what is needed is a genuine and gracious conversation where both /and is possible. Where there is a genuine spirit of generosity, community flourishes. At Eastview we are working on building that kind of collaborative culture.

Let's listen to this story from the gospel of John, its well-known but listen for evidence of a clash of worship cultures and then I'll unpack it.

Extracts from Reading John 4: 7 -26:

Samaritan Woman: "How come you, a Jewish man, are asking me, a Samaritan woman, for a drink of water?" (You see, Jewish people try not to have much to do with Samaritans.)

Jesus: *"If you only knew the free gift of God, and who it is who is talking to you, asking 'Would you please give me a drink of water?' you would have asked him, and he would have given you - Living Water."*

....."Every single person who is drinking this well-water will get thirsty, again; but whoever once drinks the water that I give will never ever thirst again. In fact, the water I will give that person will become in that person a Fountain of Water gushing up into deep, lasting Life."

Woman: "Sir, I have the feeling that you are a prophet. You know our ancestors worshipped here on (Gerizim). But you people are saying that Jerusalem is the place where people absolutely have to worship."

Jesus: *"Trust me madam, an hour is coming when neither here on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you people be worshipping the Father. You people, I'm sorry to say, worship something you don't really understand, because real salvation comes through the Jewish people. However, an hour is coming – indeed it is happening right now – when the true worshippers will be worshipping the Father by means of Spirit and Truth. You see, the Father too is actively seeking exactly such people (true worshippers) to be the people worshipping him. The great God is Spirit and the people who worship him absolutely have to worship him by means of Spirit and Truth."*

Woman: "A Messiah is coming who ...will explain everything to us."

Jesus: *"I am he, I, the one talking with you."*

What kind of worshippers is the Father seeking? The Hebrew Bible gives us some clues. It contains many pages of detailed instructions for worship rituals going back to Moses day. But within a few centuries they had either been ignored or become so rigid and superficial that their spiritual function had almost disappeared. Old Testament prophets like Isaiah and Amos described the temple worship as 'abominable' and 'rejected by God. After the exile the Jewish Rabbinic movement attempted to change that but brought in a legalistic and hypocritical culture. With the coming of the gospel, and the way of Christ, the deep spiritual meaning of worship practices like prayer, music, scripture, repentance, Passover and baptism were restored and renewed. What had earlier had physical and material meaning was recovered in the spiritual dimension as the Risen Jesus came to indwell his people, individually and in community. That's what this good news story is about.

Here's the background – for 700 years the Jews and Samaritans had developed different worship cultures; they are still estranged today. The separation had an political dimension because the Samaritans were seen to be mixed ethnicity, while the Jews treasured their racial purity. But there were spiritual difference as well. The Samaritans followed different scriptures, a smaller bible with no prophets or psalms That meant their expectation for God's future were necessarily incomplete, with little thought of a Messiah. This is what Jesus meant when he said to the woman "you Samaritans know very little about the one you worship". But if Samaritan worship was inadequate, Jewish worship was too burdensome. In this conversation with the woman of Samaria Jesus explains that God is not found in altars or buildings – not the temple in Jerusalem, not the shrine at Gerizim. Where the people of God come together indoors or open air, church or shack, majestic cathedral or dingy catacomb. God promises his presence - where two or three are gathered. (Matt 18:20)

And what is true of buildings is also true of our worship style or culture. No outward form is of itself right or wrong - silent meditation, monastic chants, orthodox pageantry, ancient hymns, happy clappy choruses, Parachute, Hillsong or indie. These forms are only helpful or unhelpful, and that will vary from place to place and time to time. The Bible warns us over and over again about placing too much stress on the externals of religion. We all have different backgrounds and temperament and need to give each other permission - and opportunity – to lean in to these differences. And look to the Holy Spirit

of the risen Christ to lift us out of our self-centredness. The Father, says Jesus, seeks authentic worship, worship in spirit and truth. What might he mean?

Traditionally these words have been written in lower case and interpreted to mean inwardly authentic worship without outward ceremony. And a few times I have preached I've contrasted spirit and truth as 'subjective' and 'objective' components of worship. But this year I've been reading a theologian called Dale Bruner, whose translation we are using today. He says the message is more biblically nuanced than that, and much more about community than individual salvation. Bear with me while I draw out his explanation:

Jesus is introducing the woman to two realities. A free gift that she just needs to ask for, and a personal encounter with the Messiah, the one she is meeting in person by the well.

"If you only knew the free gift of God, and who it is who is talking to you..."

Later he describes these two interconnected realities of the good news as Spirit and Truth, upper case, twin features of the DNA of authentic worship.

1. Let's take the encounter first. *The one who is talking to you* is Jesus. Not a great idea or even a great teacher, but a Saviour, and a Friend. Samaritans have never had the whole Truth, because their Bible was too small. But the Jewish law was too big, with hundreds of extra rules and details that made obedience an impossible burden. Now Jesus has come, *the word became a human being and settled into the neighbourhood* (John 1: 14). That's good news! This new historical reality brings about a radical new kind of religion, a new revelation, a new truth. Bruner says this is not truth, lower case, a sort of philosophical idea, but The Truth, *alethea*, the same word John uses in John 14 when he describes the Way the Truth and the Life. Jesus introduces himself to her with his first I am, with many more to come. *"I am he"*. The Samaritan woman with a sad story has discovered Truth in a person.
2. The free gift is Living Water – not a reward for good behaviour, but a truly free present, unearned and undeserved. One that is there for the asking, not a prize at the end of a spiritual marathon. It's a priceless gift because its price has already been paid. And it results in its drinkers becoming fountains of life for others. *"Whoever drinks the water that I give will never ever thirst again....that water ...will become in that person a Fountain of Water gushing up into deep, lasting Life."* The woman does ask, and then she does in fact gush up and spill over, as she shares the good news of Jesus with her neighbours that very day. Bruner says this gift is not spirit, lower case, but The Spirit, *pneuma*, the word John always uses for the Holy Spirit. Notice this is not a subsequent experience or second blessing, it is part of the deal from the start. God is always ready to slake our spiritual thirst; that's why Paul calls us to keep on being filled with the Spirit (Eph 5: 18).
3. But notice there's a third reality in this encounter, one it's easy to miss. Jesus says that all this worship is initiated by the great God, the Father, the one who seeks worshippers who are filled with his Spirit and his Truth. The Father - this is the *Abba* Jesus spoke about every day, the one he taught us about in parables, and addressed in his pattern prayer. *Abba* is an astonishing word that was never used in the Hebrew religion but found 160 times in the gospels. The transcendent loving approachable father who longs for a relationship with worshippers who seek to honour him. Hebrews 12: 28 says *"Do you see how thankful we must be? Not only thankful, but brimming with worship, deeply reverent before God. For God is not an indifferent bystander. He's a cleansing fire."* He is great, terrifyingly great – yet he invites us to call him *Abba* – Daddy.

Have you noticed that here we are being introduced to what later worshipers will call the Trinity? *Jesus has proclaimed peace to (Gentiles and Jews) for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father* (Eph 2: 18)

The woman and every worshiper to follow, is learning that it is not mountains or temples or organs or guitars that make worship authentic, it is the presence of the Christ-revealing Holy Spirit, the truthful Son who calls us to follow him, and the seeking Father who makes worship possible in the first place. The conversation by the well contains profound and spiritual truths about worship and mission. God

has lifted us up, dusted us off and started us over again. This is good news for the woman, and good news for us. It's the DNA of Christian faith. DNA present in every act of worship whatever its style or culture.

What does the three-stranded DNA mean for us as worshippers?

First that God is both the initiator and recipient of our worship. He is the audience – that what Kierkegaard's illustration in the bulletin is about. We come with a sense of awe and wonder, not taking God's majesty for granted, but with assurance of a welcome and grace. What an astounding privilege. To come to God as sons and daughters alongside Jesus himself, and call the Creator of the universe Father. Adopted into his family, and granted freedom and responsibility of heirs of the kingdom. Praise God for the privilege of being Abba worshippers. The assurance of our place in the family of God underlies all our worship, all our prayer and confession, all our thanksgiving and offerings. *Nothing in life or death can ever separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our lord.* (Romans 8: 28)

Second that worship is intended to form us in to the likeness of Christ. *And the Lord—who is the Spirit—makes us more and more like him as we are changed into his glorious image.* (2 Cor 3:18) It is character building, that what being a follower of Jesus means. Although we can't overlook the formative power of the songs we sing, our main worship resource for this will be teaching, and preaching, learning from the narratives of Scripture what a truly Christian lifestyle looks like, so that we respond with the grace of Christ even in our unthinking moments. Worship both reveals and forms our identity, and shared worship nurtures in us a specific kind of character. That's why we must be continually alert to the creeping consumerism that makes us the audience – or even worse the spectators. Our heart prayer to Christ the Truth at the centre of our worship should be *"I want my life to be the evidence of you."*(song)

Thirdly that worship is continually building community and sponsoring mission. Our individualistic culture works against this, worship together with our church family is just one option along with myriad competing weekend possibilities, in a society that enshrines choice, autonomy and subjectivism. But the Holy Spirit's gifts are best exercised in community, and real intimacy can be found here at the foot of the cross. But because we don't share real hurts, own up to doubts, ask for help and support, we often look for false intimacy in the words of the songs, and go home feeling just as empty as when we came. And mission, well that's in the too hard basket. One writer says instead of debating doctrine or morality, we should just do it. Practice loving a difficult person. Give away some money. Say I'm sorry. Tell someone you appreciate them. Encourage a friend. Bless an enemy. Gush up and spill over. Worship God and love people. That's what Jesus said were the most important things. That's why he came. That's why he stays. That's why we worship.

Question? Which one of these three has struck a chord with you?

Let me finish with a story

In 1996, singer Matt Redman was leading a music group in Soul Survivor, a growing church with a lively youth ministry in Watford. UK. Good music had always been a major part of the service, and people often came forward to "do business with God." But that autumn, they realised they had lost their focus, they were rating the music by how often a song was sung and how well it was mixed. "We were giving the worship marks out of ten, says Matt Redman "Not that song again", "I can't hear the bass", "I like the way she sings"... Their pastor Mike realised they had lost the spark, and were just going through the motions, singing with hearts far from God. "We had made the band the performers of worship and ourselves the audience. We had forgotten that we are all performing together, for God is the audience. So for a season, music was banned from Soul Survivor and thousands of youth learned the hard way that worship is a sacrifice. When the band was eventually invited back, Matt Redman offered a new song that spoke of his renewed vision and focus. "I'm sorry Lord for the thing I've made it, cos It's all about you Jesus."

Prayer: