

A spirit of worship

Readings: Genesis 4:1 – 13, Luke 21:1 – 4

Sometimes people say “I can’t do that happy-clappy stuff.” Others say “Those rigid written prayers are meaningless. People just say them by rote.”

Do you ever get frustrated when other people worship in very different ways to you? Or perhaps you say “Viva la difference!” and you rejoice in variety.

If we are honest, most of us do get frustrated when worship is different to the way we prefer. After all God inhabits our praises doesn’t he? What those other people do is just weird!

I’m being deliberately provocative to help us think.

I occasionally follow a blogger Micah recommended. His name is Benjamin L Corey. Recently he has been posting about Spiritual Burnout. Several people’s responses say the Church doesn’t help and actually, often hinders their relationship with God.

I understand those comments and experience it myself sometimes.

We all worship in different ways and it is impossible for church services to facilitate all of those ways. As a worship leader there are so many aspects to consider:

- the theme for the day,
- the style of service,
- what is happening in the world,
- the words, pitch and range of notes for songs, a mix of upbeat and slower songs,
- not too many old and not too many new songs,
- the various elements of a service eg Communion, prayers, confession,
- then the people who will be there – young and old, introvert and extrovert etc etc

Who would a worship leader be? It is a very difficult task.

Let’s pause for a moment and ask ourselves “What is worship?”

Worship is many things. Essentially though, worship is an expression of our love for God. It is both a command and a delight.

Worship is also a natural human thing to do; it’s instinctive for us. As Cain and Abel grew up they wanted to worship. So they brought gifts. They both chose this way to worship God. And they brought gifts that they had.

Abel was a shepherd so he brought a lamb. Cain was a crop farmer so he brought some of his crops. Both were good and healthy occupations. It seems perfectly normal to bring the fruit of their labours and yet God rejected Cain’s offering and accepted Abel’s.

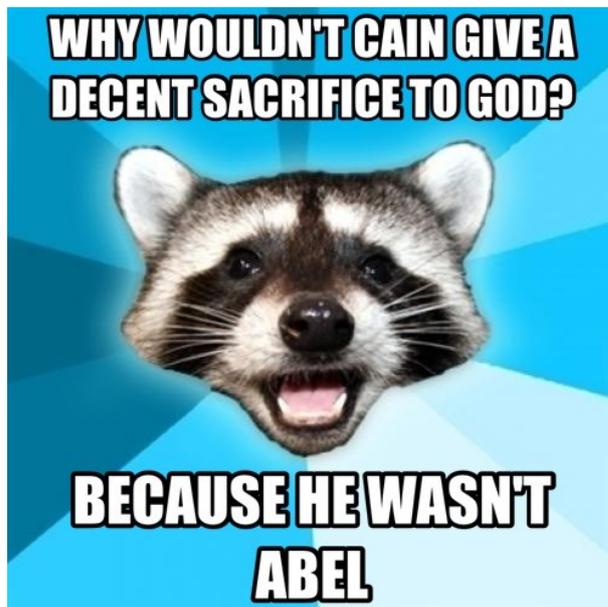
Why is this?

There are four main views:

1. God's gets to choose and no reason need be given.
2. God could only accept a blood sacrifice.
3. Abel brought his best while Cain brought a poor quality offering.
4. God's rejection was because of Cain's attitude rather than his actual offering.

There is an argument¹ for each; however, there is no denying that attitude or motive is really important.

Jesus calls Abel righteous (Mat 23:35) and likens his murder to subsequent killings of prophets and teachers. The book of Hebrews reports that 'although Abel is long dead, he still speaks to us by his example of faith.' (Heb 11:4)



Cain didn't have the same heart attitude that Abel did.

Cain's response is telling indeed. When his gift was not accepted he "became angry and he looked dejected". At that point Cain had a choice. What was he to do about God's rejection of his gift?

He could have gone back to God and said "How can I better worship you?" Instead he did what many of us do. He got grumpy. "I've done my best and it's not good enough. How can you accept that weirdo and reject me? Well beep. beep beep!"

At that point Cain was in grave spiritual danger. If Cain really wanted to worship God he could have tried to find a way that his offering would be acceptable as well as Abel's.

Instead the sin that crouched at the door grabbed him by the throat and mastered him with disastrous consequences.

¹ For a simple summary see https://www.blueletterbible.org/faq/don_stewart/don_stewart_714.cfm

And it all came about because of something in his attitude towards God and towards worship.

At some stage we will all be frustrated in worship. I think these guys get to the heart of the issue:

It is inevitable that we should feel a sense of frustration in worship, irrespective of the style or degree of intensity to which we are accustomed. Human response to the divine disclosure is always inadequate and contains limited perceptions, mixed motives, and partial and conditional commitment.²

We often have a self-centred way of looking at worship. I didn't get anything out of it today. Funnily enough worship isn't about us at all. Catherine Corin, shared a story in July 2013:

During a worship time at our area conference ..., [husband] Chris was standing beside Steve Richardson (US base Director for our company; son of Don Richardson, author). Chris was thinking, "Wow, I am standing here next to Steve Richardson, worshipping God. Wow!" God very quickly said to Chris "Who is Steve Richardson? You are supposed to be here to think about ME!" Chris felt convicted. He even shared that story at the wrap-up time at the conference and Steve was rather amused.

Worship, whether it is Sunday, or whenever we gather together, is focused on God. Perhaps it is obvious but we praise God together. Corporate worship requires lots of compromise. Some aspects will not be our preference and we may even dislike them immensely.

It is so important that Sunday worship is not our only worship. We need to worship God in solitary ways as well as communal ways. We need to get outside sometimes in God's creation. We need to read, pray, sing, in complete freedom, the way we want to and we need to do that often.

If our own relationship with God is strong and healthy we can cope a lot better with communal worship and all its short-comings.

In our middle-sized church we have no professional musicians. The musicians, choir, singers, leaders etc do our best but we are human beings. We offer our gifts and our gifts are often small and incomplete. Everything depends on our attitude in offering those gifts.

The widow in the story from Luke is often praised for her generosity in worship, deservedly so. She offered her gift at great personal cost. She gave all she had and demonstrates that worship includes financial giving.

Her story also illustrates the failure of others to be worshipping as they should.

² Gibbs, Eddie and Coffey, Ian, Church Next (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2001)157, 158

A vital part of synagogue worship was almsgiving in order to support people like this widow. What she gave was equivalent to around 2/132ths of a day labourer's wage.³ She should never have had so little. That coin should not have been the last one she had.

The worship of others in her synagogue should have included caring for her and the poor, much more effectively.

Paul picks up on this when he gives instructions that everyone should get some food at Communion:

For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk. What! Do you not have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? ... In this matter I do not commend you!

1 Corinthians 11:21 - 22

From what we can gather from Cain and Abel and the Widow, our attitude to worship is key. We can never enter worship if our way is the only way or if we participate only to receive.

The philosopher Voltaire said "God prefers bad verses recited with a pure heart, to the finest verses possible chanted by the wicked."

The apostle John wrote in 4:24

God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.

Whatever else that verse means, it requires great humility as our worship centres on the Living God and honours our fellow-worshippers.

Reflection questions

What does genuine worship look like for you?

What risks do you take when worshipping?

How much can you embrace others' ways of worshipping?

What gifts do you offer to our Lord and each other in worship?

³ Schwank quoted by Joel Green in The Gospel of Luke (Eerdmans, 1997) 728