

Palm Sunday 2019 Worship – What is it?
Psalm 118:1-2, 19-19; Luke 19:28-10

Worship – what is it? I suspect that if I was to ask half a dozen different people what they thought worship was we might well come up with half a dozen different answers. That's partly because there is no one answer that will cover everything. Worship is multi-faceted and so there is no way we can cover it in a 20 minute sermon - but I will try to pick out some important points I would like us to think about.

We might start with a theological definition – something like “worship is attributing to God the worth that is his due.” Well, that's OK but to my mind it's a bit like saying NZ is a small island nation in the South Pacific. It's true but there is so much more to say. Not only that but, for those of us who live here, NZ is not a description in a book but a lived experience. That experience might be very different for a Southland dairy farmer than for an Auckland commuter and different again for us here in Richmond, and in the same way for us as Christians, worship is a lived experience we have in common but which we may express differently.

So, what is worship? I began with a short definition: “Worship is attributing to God the worth that is his due.” Another way of putting that is to say that worship is acknowledging who God is, recognising who we are, and responding appropriately.

In the NT there are five Greek words that are translated as worship but the most common is ‘proskuneo’ (προσκυνέω) which means to come forward and bow down before [God]. It is a posture that expresses our reverence and humility as we acknowledge the one who is our creator, the one to whom we owe our very existence. Our God is a loving and welcoming God but we should never presume on this and lapse into over-familiarity – so our worship should include an element of mystery and awe. Awesome is a word that is right at the heart of worship, but I wonder how often we make room for this in our regular Sunday services.

However, if it is the obligation to worship our creator that necessitates worship, it is the character of God that makes it our delight. Some of you will be familiar with the beginning of the Westminster Shorter Catechism which states that “The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.”

Or to put it another way, the goal or purpose of human life is to love, worship, glorify and enjoy God. I would love to think that was true of me, and perhaps in my better moments it is, but it is easy for short-term goals, meeting deadlines, addressing urgent issues and such like to crowd out God-concerns. In the culture we are living in God is irrelevant for many people and they shut him out. This makes it all the more important that we, as Christians, are intentional in ascribing worth to God by acknowledging him in every area of our lives.

John Frame says it this way: “Worship is not one segment of the Christian life among others. Worship is the entire Christian life, seen as an (priestly) offering to God. And when we meet together as a church, our time of worship is not merely a preliminary to something else; rather it is the whole point of our existence as the body of Christ.” And that is something that will continue to be true through all eternity for worship is **the** activity of heaven – the central feature of the heavenly life which will never end.

I want to turn now to our two Bible readings and see what we can learn from them about what worship is - and what it is not!

First of all let's look at Palm 118.

This is a hallel psalm –or praise psalm – from hallel-u-jah – praise Yahweh or praise God. It is one of the psalms that Jews traditionally sing at Passover – in fact it is the last psalm they sing. You may remember in Matthew's Gospel it says: When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives." (Matt 26:30). Psalm 118 would have been that hymn.

[Incidentally if you want to know more about the links between Passover and our Communion service you are very welcome to come to the Passover meal that John and I are arranging next Thursday evening.]

In Psalm 118 – the psalmist is giving thanks to God for who he is and what he has done for him. It begins with a call to worship.

"Give thanks to the Lord for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever."

John Goldingay, a noted Hebrew scholar translates 'Give thanks' as 'Confess' – in the sense of acknowledge, ascribe or bear witness to. As in the song "Ascribe greatness to our God the Rock." It is what we do when we say the Creed. We are not just saying a formula but telling one another – this is what the God we worship is like.

Incidentally it was one of the things that concerned me about the services that were held to remember those who died as a result of the Christchurch shootings. It is most definitely right to stand with the Muslim community and share in their grief but, as Christians, we cannot share in their call to prayer because it is actually a statement of their faith. I wonder how many people, Christians included, realised that. It includes the words:

Allahu Akbar! God is Great! God is Great! God is Great! God is Great!

I bear witness that there is no god except the One God (Allah).

I bear witness that Muhammad is the messenger of God.

Hurry to the prayer. Hurry to the prayer.

Hurry to salvation. Hurry to salvation.

God is Great! God is Great!

There is no god except the One God.

Of course, Muslims have every right to express their faith in this way but it stands in direct contrast to our own Creeds. They express our belief in a triune Creator God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; bear witness to the life, death, resurrection, ascension and victorious return of Christ; and celebrate the blessings Christ's death has won for us: the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body and the assurance of everlasting life.

Going back to Psalm 118, after the call to worship the psalmist praises and thanks God for the times he has saved and delivered the nation and himself as an individual. 'You have become my salvation,' he says, and he calls on his fellow Jews to join him in a festal procession up to the temple. Certainly we need to have a reverent attitude towards God but that doesn't stop us from celebrating and singing.

The Jews were good at that. There's lots of music and singing, even dancing, in the Psalms. "Make a joyful noise to the Lord," says the old translation of Psalm 100. We certainly did that in the little Methodist Chapel where I grew up. It was not very melodic or tuneful but it was joyful.

And of course that is what we see happening in the story Luke tells of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. It always reminds me of the ticker-tape parades we had when we won the Americas Cup or when the All Blacks became world champions. I think the atmosphere that day in Jerusalem must have been very similar. Lots of shouting and singing, a real party atmosphere – a victory parade!

And all the Jews gathered in Jerusalem for the Passover would have known their Scriptures, our OT. When they saw Jesus riding in to Jerusalem on a donkey they would have remembered the story of David arranging for young Solomon to ride on his mule into the city to be anointed as king. They would have known the prophecy in Zechariah (9:9) "See your king comes to you, righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey."

The sight of Jesus doing just that led them to see Jesus as their Messiah come to save them. 'Hosanna,' 'save us,' they shouted. They were ecstatic; the Pharisees were worried: 'Can't you keep them quiet; they're making too much noise. We don't want any trouble.' Jesus takes no action – "If the people keep quiet then the stones will cry out," he says.

But of course, not all is as it seems. We know the end of the story. We know that before the week is out those same people will be shouting out, "Crucify, crucify."

And that is a salutary lesson for us to learn as we think about worship. The crowd were fickle, caught up in the emotion of the moment. It's easy for us too to think we are worshipping when we are merely responding to a particularly moving or exuberant piece of music, or a rousing sermon. Not that our emotions shouldn't be involved, of course they should, but worship is more than that.

A few weeks ago I talked about repentance and said that it is not so much a feeling but more a changed life. In the same way, worship is more than a feeling, it is a fixed inner attitude of reverent thankfulness, and participating in worship should result in changed and transformed lives (2 Cor 3:18). William Temple said: "To worship is to quicken the conscience by the holiness of God, to feed the mind with the truth of God, to purge the imagination by the beauty of God, to open the heart to the love of God, to devote the will to the purpose of God."¹ Let's just check that we are not seeking an experience – chasing a "praise-induced ecstasy,"² instead of opening ourselves up to a life-challenging encounter with a holy God.

Going back to the Palm Sunday story, as we dig deeper we see more of the differences between Jesus' entry and a typical victory parade. Firstly, Jesus is riding a donkey – he is not a victorious Roman general on a war horse followed by

¹ Kendrick, "Worship," 175.

² Ibid., 32.

captured slaves and carts full of plunder. Jesus is not coming to take up the throne of Herod or the seat of Pilate but is coming to be raised up on a cross. He is the king who comes to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.

This is our God, The Servant King
He calls us now to follow Him
To bring our lives as a daily offering
Of worship to The Servant King

This link between worship and godly living is, I think, an important underpinning of all that we say about worship. It reminds us that worship is a lifestyle. We are warned about worship that has become meaningless ritual and is not accompanied by holy living (Isaiah 29:13; Mark 7:6), but in a positive sense we are called to glorify God by our good deeds (Matt 5:16), as a living sacrifice (Rom 12:1). This holistic view of worship provides a context in which our meeting together on Sundays becomes part of an integrated whole.

The English song writer and song leader Dave Bilbrough said “Often I have wondered what God might be thinking as we join together and sing “Come now is the time to worship” Why? Where have we been for the rest of the time, or does what we do in our “ordinary” life not count as worship.”

However, that still leaves the question of what we are doing when we come together to worship God. Worship itself should be interactive, not just among ourselves but, more importantly between us and God. We worship the Father in the Son through the Holy Spirit – all three persons of the Trinity are present and involved. Worship is not something God sits there (metaphorically speaking) and passively accepts, He is active in it. Our participation in worship is not so much singing along, reciting the liturgy together, or reading the lesson, but engaging with God, and what He is doing in and through us

One way of looking at our services, whether we are using the prayer Book or not, is to see worship as a dialogue initiated by God.

God calls us to worship – we respond with praise.

God seeks us in reconciliation – we respond with repentance and confession

God assures us of forgiveness.

God reveals himself in the Word – we listen and respond.

God reveals himself in the sacrament – we participate and are strengthened.

God has the final word in blessing and dismissal – we go out in Christ’s name.

I think this is what we aim to do each Sunday as we gather together.

But I can’t really speak about worship without saying something about music. Within our church services, music is part of our corporate act of worship, something we do together and are encouraged to do. Paul in Colossians says: “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, **teaching and admonishing one another** in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God” (Col. 3:16). There is a similar verse in Ephesians 5 “be filled with the Spirit, **addressing one another** in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart” (Eph. 5:18-19). St Augustine said: “the person who sings, prays twice.”

Music is powerful because we are combining three things - words, which we think about with our minds, music, which also involves our emotions and thirdly repetition so the songs stick in our memories. We remember more easily what we have sung. –many of the elderly people we visit in rest homes can remember and will join in with the old songs and hymns.

We may not feel like praising God, but as the rest of the congregation start to sing a song of praise, we are reminded of who God is and we can begin to let the words sink in and reset our spiritual focus.

But because music is the servant of our worship, we must always ensure that the words are true to God's Word, otherwise they cannot help us to put our worship into song. True worship is always true to God's revelation of Himself. Matt Redman said "The revelation of God is the fuel for the fire of our worship."

At heart, we sing because God is worthy of praise and adoration, and our songs often encapsulate our own thoughts in a way which we could never articulate, which of course is the power of poetry. The words of our hymns and songs can sum up our own longing to praise and worship our God, but also stimulate our worship. Pope Francis has said: Catholics [all Christians] should "embody and translate the Word of God in songs, sounds, and harmonies that make the hearts of our contemporaries throb..."

Would our worship of God make the heart of our contemporaries throb – what do you think?

However, Andy Crouch writes: "Ultimately, the most pressing questions in worship are not about liturgical or musical style, but matters of the heart."

The one main thing I took away from a study paper I did on worship was this: The key to authentic worship is the presence of authentic worshippers. Are we authentic worshippers?

I want to close with this thought.

When we sing together in church we are joining in with the continual song of praise and worship that is surrounding the throne of God **right now**.

Rev 5:12-13

"Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain,
To receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength
And honour and glory and praise!"

Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth
and on the sea, and all that is in them, saying:

'To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb
be praise and honour and glory and power,
for ever and ever!'

The four living creatures said, 'Amen,' and the elders fell down and worshipped.