

What is worship?

Hosea 6:1-6, Amos 5:21-24, John 4:19-24

As presented at the PCN Britain weekend at Glenfall, Cheltenham, June 2013-07-30

What are we doing here today? What are we here for? Many of our services begin with the words: "Let us worship God." So that's why we're here! Of course, we've come to worship God. We all think we know why we're here, even if nobody actually says, "Let us worship God." But what does that mean? Is it so obvious what we are about? What do we understand by 'worship'?

Perhaps worship for us is taking part in a service like this - with hymns, prayers, Bible readings, a sermon, possibly an anthem from the choir, maybe a meditation or a religious sketch. Worship might be maintaining a respectful concentration without being distracted by gurgling babies, noisy children or whispering adults. Maybe simply attending church constitutes doing the worship bit. Could worship be a purely private matter - to be done at a time and place only we know? Or perhaps we've never stopped to think exactly what we are doing when we say we are worshipping.

Oh yes, we affirm that worship is at the centre of our church life, and maybe we think that bottoms on pews (or chairs, if we're fortunate) signifies people at worship. What do we mean when we say, "It's nice to have you worshipping with us at our church."?

The human race has been engaged in something we call 'worship' since the dawn of consciousness. What or whom we have worshipped has varied down the ages, from location to location, and is closely connected with culture and traditions. When Paul was in Athens he came across an altar with the inscription: To an unknown god. He then proclaimed to the crowd that they were really worshipping the one and only God. Wherever human beings have lived, there has been a need to ascribe *worth* to a force: worthship, a power, a being, something *other* that is beyond the human race. We might call it a higher consciousness, the ground of our being, the source of our life, our life force, a super Being, the great Spirit, the holy One, or God.

But God is not a name. In the Old Testament the word LORD is often used - in place of the name that cannot be spoken. God's name was considered so holy that to utter it at all could and sometimes did mean death. The word 'Allah' is not a name either. It is really two words meaning 'the God', and is used by some Palestinian Christians as well as by Muslims. So where is our ascription of worth - our worship - being directed?

Jesus called God 'Father' and taught his followers to do likewise. This was a remarkable and daring feat, for pronouncing the sacred name of God in any form, even by accident, could lead to expulsion from the religious community. As I understand Jesus, he refused to be bound by tradition, and was even here paving the way for open, honest, radical thinking, and consequently open, honest behaviour. I don't think he was saying this was how it always had to be, i.e. that we should have to address God as father and act out the role of son or daughter. For some people, some of the time, it might be helpful to do this; for others it might be off-putting or offensive, or simply unhelpful. Since God

has no name as such, and so no definition, I think we may address God, or worship, in any way we wish - that is - if we put this into words at all.

Worship is something the reader of the Old Testament is exhorted to do again and again. The Psalms in particular seem to encourage praise, the giving of thanks, singing, blessing, fearing, calls in distress and need, and requests for mercy, deliverance and protection - not an exhaustive list, but one which contains most of the main elements of Christian (or perhaps any) worship as we know it from tradition. The Psalms were never written to be part of Christian worship, although many of them have played a major role in it: e.g. Psalm 23 is still widely requested at Christian funerals. (I have always thought of it as my school hymn, sung every year at the end of year concert.) On this basis, worship comprises using words spoken and/or sung, listening to words spoken and/or sung, and silent prayer / meditation based on the words of others - as individuals but in the company of others. Some or all of this will involve rituals, in the belief that these will enhance our ascribing of worth.

What is often forgotten (possibly conveniently) is that the Psalms also contain many pleas for revenge, and commands issued to God to commit acts of violence (for example: "Trample under foot those who lust after tribute." Ps 68:30). If we were to say we wouldn't consider this kind of thing to be part of our worship, what about references to sacrifice, having our sins washed away by the blood of the Lamb, and 'And can it be that I should gain an interest in the Saviour's blood?' The ancient rituals concerning sacrifice - a major part of worship - have not been entirely abolished. What effect do such concepts in our hymns, sermons, prayers and liturgies have on our worship? More significantly, what effect does this kind of language have on visitors to our churches, and those who want to know what Christianity is all about?

The Old Testament prophet Hosea seems to have been of the opinion that worship was concerned far more with love and the knowledge of God, than with sacrifices and burnt offerings. It was easy to offer sacrifices. It was far harder to show sacrificial love to God and one's fellow human beings. The prophet Amos goes even further, seeing the people's liturgy and singing as downright hypocritical, given that there was little evidence of seeking after justice and righteousness in their lives. According to these two prophets, worship has much more to do with a person's character, how he or she lives and loves, than with adhering to prescribed rituals.

The author of the gospel of John presents us with Jesus making the point that God is not limited to any particular place, be it a Samaritan or a Jewish temple, or even a mountain. And so God may be worshipped, whatever that means, anywhere. Also placed on the lips of Jesus is a saying that in my mind captures the lifestyle of Jesus with regard to God: 'God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and in truth.' Call God Father, if that is helpful; call God Spirit or Allah, use no words at all if that is helpful; God is spirit - just know that God is.

At best, words can only ever be pointers to truths that lie behind them. However, it is with ideas and words that we communicate with each other, so we need them to talk about worship. When we actually engage in worship formally, words can assist or hinder:

words which leave our spirits space to roam and respond to the challenges of life and living in an interconnected world will, I think, allow us to worship; words which force us into unhelpful ways of thinking about our faith will undoubtedly make it difficult or impossible for us to worship.

Jesus always directed people's worship towards God, and if you will pardon the expression, I think at times that he must be spinning in his grave when people who profess to be Christians are constantly extolling him and going into raptures. Worship for some such consists of repeating Jesus' name again and again, thus giving him an elevated status which I feel fairly sure he would roundly disown. It simply doesn't fit with the humility in which I believe he lived his life on earth.

Jesus' earthly life was characterised by love, compassion, acceptance and inclusiveness, the challenging of whatever makes life less worth living for others, restoring dignity, and encouraging the will to live and be oneself. People always came before rules and traditions. Although we are told that Jesus went to the synagogue regularly, it was his life that demonstrated his ascribing of worth to God.

Like Amos and Hosea, I believe true worship involves righteous living, loving others, and wanting to treat them justly. Jesus' life found its fulfilment in worshipping, ascribing worth to, God - through loving, serving, and accepting others. His whole being was in tune with the God who is Spirit. As Bishop Jack Spong has said, we worship when we live fully, love wastefully, are all that we can be, and when we make it possible for others to do the same. It would be hard, perhaps impossible, to improve on that.

If we accept that this is what worship is, it follows that our church services of worship, with all that they contain, must be occasions when we are affirmed in that being and doing, when we are challenged and encouraged to go out and make the world a better place for all people, and when we can be free to let our spirits acknowledge the worth of God, however we understand that. Our worship must be our life and mission, just as it was with Jesus.

Sandra Griffiths

At the conference Sandra used readings from two anthologies

No Empty Phrases An anthology based on The Lord's Prayer
Flowing Streams An Anthology of Anthologies

She also recommends: *Liturgy of Life* An anthology based on patterns of Christian Worship

All the above are published by NCEC, all compiled by Donald Hilton