

Sermon: Worship – Worthy or Worthwhile

I think it's fair to say that, consciously or unconsciously we often ask ourselves after a church service, 'Was it worthwhile?' In other words, 'Was that a good use of an hour or two from my Sunday morning, or could I have spent it more profitably elsewhere?' The problem with this view is that worship shouldn't be about what I got or didn't get out of it. Instead of asking, 'Was it worthwhile?' I should ask, 'Was it worthy?' In other words, did I offer worship to God that was worthy of Him as the one who is my Creator and Redeemer, my Father and my Friend? Someone has said that to worship is to remember who owns the house. We could even turn the whole thing around and say, 'I wonder if God felt it was worthwhile for him to be in our church today in terms of what we offered to Him in our worship?'

The word 'worship' comes from the word 'worthy'. Worship in earlier English was 'worthship'. So worship is about recognising God's worth; recognising that God is indeed worthy of our worship. Last week we heard the words of Rev 4 where the citizens of heaven call out, 'You are worthy our Lord and God, to receive glory and honour and power, for you created all things and by Your will they were created and have their being.' As creator of all things God is indeed worthy of worship.

In churches – not this one of course, but in many other – people have tended to adopt the image of the theatre. So, this up-front section is like the stage with the different actors doing their thing. Down there is the audience in their pews or chairs and they watch and listen and give a nod of approval or a frown of disapproval depending on the quality of the performance up here. There is even a prompter. The prompter is the Holy Spirit and the performers and the audience all hope the prompter is going to guide things so as to produce a good performance.

But in reality, it's very different. The audience is who? It is God. The performers are who? The congregation – you, all of us. The prompter is the up-front leader, helping and guiding us to offer worship that is worthy – worthy of the Lord. Of the Lamb on the throne.

It goes without saying that the focus of our worship is Jesus – the Lamb, the King on the throne. But sometimes we lose sight of that. A service of worship can become more about the people around us and the fellowship that we share when we gather. Many have talked much recently about how good it would be when we are back together in church. Is that just because we want to see the other people, or is it because worship at its best is worship together?

Anne Ortlund in her book, 'Up with worship' makes this rather telling comparison. She says, 'Imagine that a special party has been arranged for you. You arrive at the party, but people pay little attention to you, even though you can hear some of them talking about. They seem more concerned about interacting with one another. You begin to believe that the party was arranged, not really with you in mind, but rather as an opportunity for the people to meet each other.' Anne Ortlund says that may be how God feels sometimes. We have this gathering to celebrate God on a Sunday, but even though we may talk about Him, our focus is on each other rather than on Him. Of course, fellowship is important, but our primary focus for this time needs to be on Jesus.

What are some things that can help us make our worship time more worthy of our great God and wonderful Saviour? Ps 84, like many of the Psalms, gives us some guidelines. The Psalmist says, speaking of the temple in Jerusalem, 'How lovely is Your dwelling place, O Lord Almighty! My soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the Lord; my heart and flesh cry out for the living God'.

Those are strong words, even passionate words. They express such a deep longing and eagerness to worship. We should be eager to play our part to ensure that our church's worship is worthy – a worthy offering to God. Eagerness involves getting to church on time, or even better, ahead of time so that we have time to settle into our worship rather than charge into God's presence at the last moment. Eagerness also means not allowing other things to get in the way – whether it's a late lie-in or some other Sunday morning attraction. Of course, we mustn't be legalistic about this and there will be times when there is a valid reason for not

being in worship. But on the other hand, we shouldn't lose sight of the importance of this appointment with the Lord. The Psalmist says, 'Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere'.

Linked to eagerness is expectancy. Do we come expectant? Sometimes our only expectation and hope is that the service won't go on too long. Or do I have an expectancy that as I worship, I will meet with God; the expectancy that God will use this time to do something in me and the other worshipers? The Psalmist says in v5, 'Blessed are those who have set their hearts on pilgrimage.' We are on a journey. One of the first names for the early church was, 'The people of the Way'. We shouldn't be thinking as we come to worship, 'Here we go again – same thing week after week.' There should be an expectation, 'Lord what are you going to do today.'

The Psalmist says of those going up to worship in Jerusalem, 'As they pass through the valley of Baca, they make it a place of springs.' The valley of Baca was a dry and desolate place. But these worshipers bring freshness and life into it. Through our connection with God in worship, there is new life that comes about – healing, cleansing, renewal, refreshment. Is that part of our expectation as we worship.

This psalm speaks of the temple in Jerusalem as the focus of worship. The Jews believed that was where God was present in His fullness – in the Holy of Holies. We know that God isn't limited to a building – this building or any other building. The temple is no longer 'out there somewhere'. You and I are now the temples of God. Paul says to the Corinthians, 'Do you know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have received from God?' Angela spoke about it, being a worshiper, a Daniel.

Some may think, 'This is all a bit much, a bit extreme for me. After all, I show my devotion to God by giving my offering, helping with the youth, providing some food for the poor. Does it have to be this very personal, expressive stuff?

What would you say of a wife who says of her husband, 'I love my husband – I cook for him, I wash his clothes, I keep the house clean'. If that's the extent of her love, I think we would say that's not a very healthy relationship. What about words that say, 'I love you' or other expression such as a hug and a kiss'? One of the words used for worship in the Bible means 'to kiss the hand'. Worship is a chance to say to the Lord, 'I love you; I am yours; you mean everything to me'.

In past months we acknowledged the NHS and other agencies in a very practical, tangible ways – with pictures, with gathering outside our homes; with banging pots and clapping hands. Surely, we should acknowledge our God in no less a practical way.

In the words of Ps 84, 'My soul yearns... my heart and flesh cry out for the living God.' Amen