

SERVICE OF WORSHIP

What is Worship?

Let us worship God, let us pray:

Heavenly Father, we come in the silence to worship you. Come and dwell with us now. Help us to find great joy in knowing that you are beside us. Give us calm minds and quiet hearts so that we may hear what you have to say to us. As we worship you now, fill us with hope and praise, through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen

HYMN

Be still, for the presence of the Lord, the Holy One, is here;
Come bow before him now with reverence and fear:
In him no sin is found- we stand on holy ground.
Be still, for the presence of the Lord, the Holy One, is here.

Be still, for the glory of the Lord is shining all around;
He burns with holy fire, with splendour he is crowned:
How awesome is the sight- our radiant King of light!
Be still, for the glory of the Lord is shining all around.

Be still, for the power of the Lord is moving in this place;
He comes to cleanse and heal, to minister his grace -
No work too hard for him. In faith receive from him.
Be still, for the power of the Lord is moving in this place.

SCRIPTURE READINGS

Matthew 28:18-20 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

18 And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

John 4:19-24 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

19 The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. 20 Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must

worship is in Jerusalem.” 21 Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. 22 You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. 23 But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. 24 God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.”

MESSAGE

We often hear about huge churches in the United States that contain gymnasiums, cafes and restaurants, and are sizeable enough to allow a congregation of several thousand people to worship on a Sunday. The preacher is up on a stage and the sanctuary is so large that a big screen is needed to see him or her properly.

Everything in America seems to be done on a BIG scale: big meals, big cars, big congregations. Big is admired and done best in America.

However, I’m not so sure that big is necessarily better when it comes to a church and a congregation. If we know of a church with a congregation of a thousand worshippers, do we presume that it is better spiritually than a church with a congregation of a hundred, or even a congregation of ten? Is it right to measure the quality (if that is even the right word to use) of a church by the size of the congregation?

I’m going to let you into a little secret: I think I preach better in front of a large congregation. When I preach before a good number of listeners, I always feel inspired and even, if you like, encouraged.

When I was a minister on the island of Anglesey most of the chapels I visited to conduct services were in rural areas and had small memberships and equally small congregations, sometimes comprising only three or four worshippers. I well remember once travelling many miles to take a service and only two people turned up, the organist and the chapel house tenant!

Before very small congregations I have sometimes found it difficult to find the inspiration to preach enthusiastically. However, I am very well aware

that I shouldn't feel like this because Jesus said that he is to be found wherever two or three gather in his name.

Therefore, I think we must address some questions this morning. What is the purpose of worship? Is it to give the worshippers a sense of being part of a dynamic fellowship in a successful church? Is a service of worship meant to be a platform for powerful and eloquent preaching? Or, is a service of worship meant to be about something else? Surely, it is meant to be about an encounter with God.

How many large congregation were there in the Early Church? The answer is, not many. There were mainly two or three, or four, or five converts, gathered together in someone's home. But Christ was there amongst them.

Once, whilst on Anglesey, I visited a small chapel to conduct a service in the depths of winter. Having being met at the front door by one of the elders I was led upstairs to a room where there was a roaring open fire, either side of it were two wooden benches and at the end the pulpit. The fire was warm, the welcome was warm, the fellowship was warm. I enjoyed, not preaching to them, but speaking with them. It felt very much like being part of the Early Church meeting in someone's home. *"For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am amongst them"* (Matthew 18:20).

From the very beginning, the Christian Church was about a people worshipping, rather than a place of worship. The first Christians normally worshipped in homes, halls, synagogues. Evangelism was conducted in these places and out in the open.

What, though, is the nature of worship? Well, at the heart of Christian worship is God himself. God reveals himself to us through his works in creation, through the Scriptures, through Jesus Christ and through the Holy Spirit. We then feel compelled to respond to this revelation of God. It was the Protestant reformer Martin Luther who once said *"to know God is to worship him"*. In saying this, he cleverly embraced these two aspects of worship.

Worship, therefore, is about coming half-way to meet God. It's about encountering the living God in all of his glory and mercy and being challenged and comforted by the greatness of his love.

We all like to be alone from time to time. We all like our own company to a greater or lesser extent. Having space and time to just think and be ourselves is a very good, healthy thing.

However, total isolation for an extended length of time without any social interaction can be damaging and negative. I would suggest that the same thing holds true when it comes to worship.

It is quite possible -indeed right and proper- to worship God in private, as we are doing at the moment. But though we are worshipping in private, we are still part of the Church- the body of Christ. In her book 'Worship', Evelyn Underhill writes the following: "*Christian worship is never a solitary undertaking....The worshipper, however lonely in appearance, comes before God as a member of a great family, part of the Communion of Saints, living and dead*".

When we say the Lord's Prayer, we begin with the words 'Our Father'. We pray on behalf of everyone.

If, however, we only ever worship in private and never in the company of others, then we miss out on something very important, because none of us can know the whole truth all the while. We need the insights of others, the wisdom and understanding of others to supplement or clarify what we know and understand.

Imagine a family of three living in a house when suddenly there is a power cut and the lights go out. If each member of the family is in a different room with a lit candle, then there will be a little bit of light in three rooms. However, if they come together in one room then that room would be quite well lit. This is the meaning and the importance of worship in church. We each bring with us our own little bits of illumination of faith, understanding and ability, which means that when we gather together there is a brightness to the glory of God.

At the moment, it goes without saying that there are very good reasons why we cannot worship together physically. However, I'm sure I speak for all of us when I say that we are missing meeting together in church and we long for the day when we can do so again.

When we worship, we focus our minds on God, in and through Jesus Christ who is the centre and the spirit of Christian worship. However, focusing our minds is not always easy. We have our cares and concerns, our faults and our distractions, which all make concentrating difficult. If, however, we are going to get the most from worship, we do need to be able to focus our minds on God through Christ. Therefore, the best advice I can give you is to "*cast your burden upon the Lord*" (Psalm 55:22). To give your cares and worries to God, at least during the times you worship, will enable you to focus your mind, your energy and your love on God, and receive his love in return.

It is a truism that we get out of worship what we put in. It was the Chinese philosopher Confucius who said: "*We should worship as though the Deity were present. If my mind is not engaged in my worship, it is as though I worshipped not*".

Christ tells us that he is present when two or three meet in his name. So let us focus our minds and our hearts and allow his love to touch us now. To the glory of God, Amen.

PRAYER

Father God, this is our worship- to turn away from the duties and the concerns of our day to day lives, to stand in the presence of what is real and in all humility to bow our heads before the presence of the Eternal.

Father, this is our worship- to come before you, to tell you of all we have done and achieved this past week, knowing that we are in the presence of the One who knows it all and understands it all.

Father, this is our worship- to unburden our minds and hearts, to share with you our frustrations and concerns, knowing and trusting that you are able to offer us help and peace.

Father, this is our worship- to tell you our deepest thoughts and feelings, to admit the wrong things we have said and done, knowing and believing that with you alone is true forgiveness, and you alone can show us who you are and what our lives are for.

Father, this is our worship- to give expression to our hopes and desires, knowing that in and through you is to be found true happiness and fulfilment.

Father, this our worship- not so much to speak, but rather to listen to you more, to reflect upon what you have to say to us and resolve to follow where you lead.

Father, this is our worship- to see Jesus our Lord, to be touched by him and to rise up and follow him.

Father, this is our worship- we offer it all to you, in the name of Christ our Lord, Amen.

“Our Father, who art in heaven.....”

HYMN

1 Great is thy faithfulness, O God my Father;
there is no shadow of turning with thee;
thou changest not, thy compassions, they fail not;
as thou hast been thou forever wilt be.

Refrain:

Great is thy faithfulness!

Great is thy faithfulness!

Morning by morning new mercies I see:

all I have needed thy hand hath provided--

Great is thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me!

2 Summer and winter and springtime and harvest,
sun, moon, and stars in their courses above
join with all nature in manifold witness
to thy great faithfulness, mercy, and love. [Refrain]

3 Pardon for sin and a peace that endureth,
thine own dear presence to cheer and to guide,
strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow,
blessings all mine, with ten thousand beside! [Refrain]

BLESSING

Father, may your benediction come on all of our living and loving, our thinking and our doing, to the glory of your holy name and our eternal peace. Amen
