

PSALM 96  
WORSHIP (CORE TASK NUMBER 1)

It was a great and glorious day: the procession had formed up from early in the morning; there was a new choir chosen specially for the day; there was a band, a new group of musicians who were going to play as part of the procession. The King is there and all the local dignitaries because this is a special day and they are to be part of something quite new and unique, the religious leaders are there, and the army commanders. There is a new place to be opened; a huge tent in the middle of the city and the whole city is gathered to celebrate this new beginning; the streets are lined with crowds of people. At the rear of the procession is the whole reason for them being there: the ark of the covenant, the symbol of God's presence is being carried into the city of Jerusalem and then to the new place of worship and King David rejoices and celebrates this new beginning and as they place the ark in the tent, in the city, they declare "The Lord is King!" (You can read the story in 1 Chronicles 16)

In the account of that great and glorious day, Psalm 96 forms part of the worship. The people rejoice and celebrate the fact that the Lord is King and the words of Psalm 96 give us some idea as to what that means and why God is worthy of worship. The whole focus of this special day was this declaration to the world that the Lord is King, not only of Israel, but of the whole of creation and all nations are invited to declare His glory. This is a special day in the life of the nation and at the heart of it is the fact that God is king and is to be worshipped and praised. So much so that there is a theory that each and every year this procession was repeated as an annual celebration of the fact that God is King and as part of that procession, perhaps Psalm 96 and others were read and sung all over again.

In 2001, as a congregation, we identified 5 Core Tasks of our Church, 5 tasks or themes that are at the heart of what Church is all about, 5 priorities that are at the heart of Church life. These are Worship, Mission, Prayer, Nurture and Service and from time to time it is good to remind ourselves of these core tasks. It is a few years since we last did that and there are people new to the congregation who were not part of that process or who have never heard of these 5 Core Tasks. So, over next few weeks, we are going to consider these 5 Core Tasks again to remind ourselves what is important and significant about Church and why!

Worship – something in which we participate on Sundays! We attend Church services. So what is worship all about? Why do we do it? What does worship involve? There is a great variety of places where Christians worship, from farm kitchens to great cathedrals, from outdoor places to modern state-of-the-art buildings full of the latest technology. There are two aspects to worship, wherever it is held and whoever is taking part: first of all, there is a horizontal aspect of worship – it is something we do together; it is a group activity (we can worship on our own as part of our prayer, but generally worship brings people together in a group!); and secondly, there is a vertical aspect of worship – the focus of our worship is on God; worship is something we offer to God through Jesus. If ever we lose the vertical aspect, then worship is empty of its greatest and deepest meaning and becomes just another social gathering; it is this vertical aspect that changes worship from just another social gathering to a real and living encounter with God Himself.

Psalm 96 does two things: first, it tells us what worship is, what we do when we come here on a Sunday morning; secondly, it tells us why we worship God at all.

*"Sing to..."* (v1-3) Who was the first person to write a hymn or song to praise God? Moses? It was an Inspired move because the people of God ever since have used

music and song to express the deepest and most powerful things. When we sing, we celebrate God; we take the words of the hymns and songs and use them to celebrate and rejoice in our God and in Jesus His Son. Our singing is addressed to God! *"Ascribe to..."* (vv7-9) We acknowledge God's qualities and bring honour and glory to Him; we acknowledge His strength, His holiness, His power, His love and faithfulness. Everything we do in this hour together on a Sunday is done to praise God and say 'thank you' to God for the ways in which He has blessed us: the songs that we sing are the most obvious way of doing that and we try to blend the best of traditional hymns with new songs to reflect all of the ages and stages of life that are here each Sunday; we honour God by our prayers; we honour God by listening to the Bible because by listening to God's word and by living out His word in day to day life, we also honour God; that too is part of our worship. Worship is singing God's praises and giving Him honour and glory.

The beauty of our worship is that this is something in which we all participate. I hope you are not here to watch me perform as I conduct this service; it is not meant to be a performance of any kind, but an act of worship in which we all take part. So we sing hymns, thinking about the words we sing and using these words to praise God for His excellent goodness. So we listen carefully to the words of the prayers and use the times of silence to make up our own and then we say 'Amen' – Amen is the people's word, that adds our voice to that of the person leading prayer, agreeing, taking the leader's words and using them to bring our prayers to God. We listen for God's word so that we can go and live it out in our lives. So worship is something in which we all take part, sometimes in a better frame of mind than others, but it belongs to us all. It is our offering to God.

The second thing that Psalm 96 tells us is why we worship God. Our culture has its own cathedrals to its icons: the great football stadia where the stars ply their trade, or the TV studios where the celebrities are greeted by their adoring public. Why do we worship God? *"For great..."* (vv4-6) *"Say among..."* (v10) There are lots of reasons here for worship: God is great; He is the Creator of everything; here is His entourage, four qualities that are spoken of in almost personal terms – splendour, majesty, strength and glory – these are qualities that belong to God in abundance, qualities that go with Him wherever He goes; the Lord is King! There are lots of reasons why the Psalmist encourages people to worship God and ascribe glory and strength to the Lord, because these are His qualities; our worship is a response to God.

We can even add to that list, for we have another even greater reason for worship and that is centred on Jesus Christ: God has given us His Son, has loved world so much that He has given us Jesus and Jesus has lived and loved, has died on cross and is raised and is our Saviour and Lord in a new way. In Jesus we see God's love demonstrated in the most powerful way and we see His goodness and because of Jesus that love and goodness of God will never fade, but will last forever. Because of Jesus we have the forgiveness for our sins, we have hope and peace, we have a sense of being loved and accepted; we are the children of God and have the hope of heaven. These are the gifts of God's grace for us; having these gifts we are reminded over and over again of the way in which God has loved us. We add these to His glory and majesty and strength!

It is not my job to whip you up into a frenzy of excitement in worship to improve the quality of what we do. My job is simply to say to you 'Here is your God' and have you respond. Our worship is a response to God, to who God is and to what God is like and to what God has done. The inspiration behind our worship, if I can put it that way, is God Himself; seeing what God is like, understanding what God has done 'how can I keep from singing?' It should be impossible! How can we consider such a

great God as this, who has done great things for us and remain unmoved? The Lord is a great King – we owe Him a debt of worship; that has not changed; it is as true now as when Psalm 96 was sung on the day of the great procession; God is worthy of our worship.

Worship should be EPIC (this comes from Leonard Sweet):

Experiential – there should be a genuine experience of and encounter with God in worship.

Participative – worship is something in which we all take part and none are spectators.

Image based – lots of people think best in pictures and images nowadays and that helps them to worship God.

Connected – what we do here on Sunday needs to connect with every other part of life.

I try to make worship epic in these four ways; this is not the place for light entertainment or shallow preaching, but the place to be inspired by a living encounter with the living God. It is a place to have our minds stretched, our hearts inspired, our faith nurtured and renewed. That's what epic worship should do for all of us.

This is what we do Sunday by Sunday, when we meet together in this place for what we call worship. We meet together; we sing God's praises, we ascribe glory and strength to Lord. It is something huge and wonderful, this thing called worship. But it is even bigger than that in three ways that I only have time to mention:

- It involves all of life, that doing God's will in our day to day life is also an act of worship; reflect on Romans 12, verse 1, to see what that means; living life in God's way is another way of praising God and ascribing glory to Him.
- Worship is something that the whole of creation does – the Psalmist paints the picture of the heavens rejoicing, the sea resounding, the fields being jubilant, the trees singing for joy because God is King! I wish I knew more of what that means, that all creation recognises God is King and worships Him.
- All nations, the whole earth, all peoples are invited to join in. This is not something for us to keep to ourselves, but is for the whole world to experience. That's what makes this a new song – it is to be sung in all the earth and by all the peoples as they too come to see that the Lord is King and worthy of worship.

This is what we do when we worship: we praise God for all that He is; we respond to His goodness and grace, His power and majesty; we sing His praises, we ascribe glory and strength to God. This is huge! It is far bigger than just attending services! Catch a flavour of this; it's what we do; it's what Church is for; we celebrate God, we rejoice in Him.