

Psalm 96
Worship – a Core Task

Sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord, all the earth.

2 Sing to the Lord, praise his name; proclaim his salvation day after day.

3 Declare his glory among the nations, his marvellous deeds among all peoples.

4 For great is the Lord and most worthy of praise; he is to be feared above all gods.

5 For all the gods of the nations are idols, but the Lord made the heavens.

6 Splendour and majesty are before him; strength and glory are in his sanctuary.

7 Ascribe to the Lord, all you families of nations, ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.

8 Ascribe to the Lord the glory due to his name; bring an offering and come into his courts.

9 Worship the Lord in the splendour of his holiness; tremble before him, all the earth.

10 Say among the nations, "The Lord reigns."

The world is firmly established, it cannot be moved; he will judge the peoples with equity.

11 Let the heavens rejoice, let the earth be glad; let the sea resound, and all that is in it.

12 Let the fields be jubilant, and everything in them;

Then all the trees of the forest will sing for joy.

13 they will sing before the Lord, for he comes, he comes to judge the earth.

He will judge the world in righteousness and the peoples in his truth.

Some 20 years ago, as part of setting out what kind of church we wanted to be, we identified 5 Core Tasks of the church, 5 elements of Church life that are essential, that we just could not do without. We have visited these Core Tasks from time to time, but they have lain hidden for the last few years. It is time to dust them off and remind ourselves of these core tasks, one a week for the next 5 weeks. These 5 Core tasks are worship, prayer, nurture, mission, and service. Today, what is worship all about? What do we do with what we call worship? What happens when the minister says, "Let us worship God"?

If you had been brought up in Scotland a while ago, you would have learned the catechism, a system of questions and answers designed to help people learn Christian faith. The first question in the Shorter Catechism says (pardon the language!): "*What is the chief end of man?*" And the answer is: "*Man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.*" Human beings are made for worship; there is part of us that is designed to connect with God in worship; worship resonates with our spirit when we let it. The Church is the people who worship, not the place where we go for services; the first core task of the church is to worship God. Psalm 96 helps us understand what that means.

Psalm 96 is a great call to worship. It is an invitation to worship God; it is an invitation to people everywhere to recognise the worth of the Lord and come to worship Him. It tells us what we do in worship, and it tells us why we should worship God. First of all, there is a list of words inviting us to worship: "*sing, proclaim, declare, ascribe, say*" – these words all describe

something that we do in worship; this is what worship is. We sing – well, we all understand that worship is about singing! – we proclaim and declare something, we ascribe worth and value to God, we say something important about God. This is what we do when we say “let us worship God.” Worship is about all of these actions. The psalm has another list: “*salvation, glory, splendour, majesty, strength, holiness, reign, judge*” – these are the qualities and attributes of God that make Him worthy of worship. In almost every place where the Bible encourages us to worship God, it also gives us a reason why we should. God saves, He is full of glory, splendour, majesty, strength and holiness; God reigns as King; God will come to judge the world. We are to sing about these qualities and attributes of God; we are to proclaim and declare “*this is what God is like!*”; we are to ascribe these qualities to God; we are to say “*God is King!*” Psalm 96 has all of this; it calls us to worship God and gives us lots and lots of reasons why that is such a good thing to do.

We can bring this up-to-date. There is another list in the New Testament, in Paul’s letter to the Colossians, a list of the qualities and attributes of Jesus that make Him worthy of worship. He is the “*image of God, first-born, creator, centre of creation, before everything, head of the church, supreme, God’s fullness, reconciler, crucified.*” All of these are true of Jesus and make Him worthy of our worship. The Church is the people who worship. Being a people who worship is all about a focus on God; we are saying something about Jesus; we are acknowledging some quality that God has and saying “thank you”; we are telling the world “this is what our God is like; this is what our God has done!” Being a people who worship is not, first and foremost, about making us feel good, or feel better; singing does make us feel better, but that’s not why we worship. We worship to sing about God, to proclaim and declare His glory and splendour, His strength and power; we worship to say to the world “our God reigns!” Worship is centred on Jesus; worship is our response to all that Jesus has done for us.

We’ve had a good few conversations of late about the mechanics of worship. Being on Zoom has changed the way we worship; some things are not so easy on Zoom; some things are different when we’re in a church building. You have your own preferences; you have your favourite hymns or Bible passages. But the essence of worship is not to be found in these mechanics. The essence of worship is to be found in the spirit and attitude with which we come. At our best, we come to worship in the spirit and attitude that looks to say “thank you” to God for all that He has done for us; at our best, we come to worship in the spirit and attitude that looks to glorify and honour God for all that He is, that Jesus is Saviour and Lord. Worship is a habit for many of us, but hopefully a good and meaningful habit, that allows us to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.

Worship is not just about what we do in this service on a Sunday. Here’s some words from Romans chapter 12: “*So here’s what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him... Readily recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it.*” This, too, is part of worship. Someone has described it as “acts of adoration as well as doing the chores!” The

way in which we go about our everyday business is part of our worship; we can wash the dishes as an act of service to God and so worship Him. When we recognise what God wants from us and put that into practice, then our everyday, ordinary life lived in Jesus' way becomes part of our worship to God. By the kind of people we are, and by the way that we live our lives, and by our deeds of love and kindness, we can also give honour and glory to God who has saved us and loved us.

This is all about the way we think. The Church is the people who worship. In a moment or two we're going to sing our next hymn. The hymn is a classic hymn of the church: *"When I survey the wondrous cross"*; it is a hymn all about Jesus' death on the cross, what He did and why He did it. When we have rehearsed both what Jesus did and the love with which He came to the cross as the place to save us, then the hymn invites us to respond:

*"Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were an offering far too small,
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all."*

That last line is worship at its best and highest, an offering of *"my soul, my life, my all"* to God for what He has done for us in Jesus, in this case on the cross. We worship because God has first loved us. Worship is a response to Jesus.

I suppose the picture that I'm painting is the ideal. But we all know that, at times, the reality is quite different. We come to church services, at times out of duty rather than full of inspired thoughts; we plod our way through chores without a sense of "doing this for Jesus". God knows us; He knows the inspired thoughts of our hearts and He knows the struggles we face to keep hold of these inspired thoughts. He knows how hard it is even to do simple good deeds at times. He delights when there is even a brief glimpse of an inspired heart; He delights when our hearts are glad and thankful even for a minute.

Here is worship to aspire after, the ideal: to come to worship with our hearts and minds focused on Jesus; with our hearts are full of thankfulness. We sing of God's glory; we tell the world that Jesus is the Saviour; we declare that He is glorious, a great King; we ascribe to Him all the qualities we admire; personally, we say that this Jesus is our Saviour, that He is Lord of our lives. The Church is the people who worship. This is a core task of our faith; this is what we were made for, to hear something important about God and to respond, with love, with thanks, with worship.