

## Sermon - personal worship

Based on: Isaiah 1.1, 10–20; Psalm 50.1–8, 23–24; Hebrews 11.1–3, 8–16; Luke 12.32–40

### Worship is the context for enacting our MAP

- Last month my sermons were focussed on our parish's Mission Action Plan, and the context for those planned actions.
- I described the pathway of stepping stones that we need to establish, which could enable unbelievers to journey from being strangers to becoming the next generation of parishioners.
- I mentioned how Jesus calls us to learn from him - as disciples, and then sends us to continue his mission - as an apostolic community.
- And I reminded everyone of that mission, which can be helpfully understood in terms of five defining marks, or characteristics - and which can always bear repeating:
  1. *Telling* the Good News;
  2. *Teaching* that Good News;
  3. being the Good News through *tending* to those in need;
  4. being the Good News through *transforming* situations of injustice and violence; and
  5. being the Good News through actively *treasuring* God's creation.
- In my second sermon I pointed out that there are two particular aspects of the life of the church that these marks of mission do not cover, namely management or administration, and worship.
- I described worship as the people of God gathering together to offer up praise and thanksgiving to God, and to maintain our alignment with God's purpose and desire.
- Regular and frequent participation in worship helps to make sure that we are right-wise with the divine centre, and helps us to fulfil the first and greatest commandment, which is to love God with all our heart, soul, strength and mind.
- I suggested that the marks of mission function within the *context* of our worship of God.

### What is worship?

- I described worship as something we do together, as a faith community, because I was focusing on our mission action plan - as a community.
- However, worship is an activity that we are called to engage in not only corporately, but also individually - and I will pick up on that aspect later on in the sermon.
- Worship is fundamentally an acknowledgement - to God - of God's worth, and the worth of God's way.
- Worship engages our heart, our soul, our strength (or body), and our mind.
- Sometimes only one of these at a time, at other times two, three or all four of these dimensions.
- And we engage in worship together, because this encourages us to engage in worship alone.
- Worshipping God is about being mindful of, and celebrating, our faith relationship with God.
- It acknowledges that our faith is not only about us relating to God, but also - and primarily - about God relating to us.
- Now church services are the most obvious, and sometimes the most accessible, way of worshipping God.
- Our ancient liturgies, even though celebrated in more contemporary ways and language, have stood the test of time as effective patterns for enacting worship:
  - a. offering praise,
  - b. being nourished by God's word,
  - c. offering intercessions,
  - d. being reconciled again with God and each other,
  - e. giving thanks for Jesus showing God's way sacrificial love,

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- f. making our communion with the living God, and
- g. being sent out once again in the power of the Spirit to resume Christ's mission.
- The problem with established patterns of corporate worship - whether they are Eucharist services or another form of liturgy - is that they can become depersonalised, or impersonal.
- We can end up saying words by rote, because they might be the same words we say over and over again, and simply because those in the pews around us are also saying them.
- We can end up participating because doing so can be comfortable - the comfort of being in a familiar place, the comfort of familiar words and patterns of movement, and the comfort of being amidst familiar people.

### Isaiah and rote worship

- This is what the situation was in Judah, and in Jerusalem, when Isaiah began his great work (66 chapters) of bringing God's word to his people.
- The ancient practises of offering up the sacrifice of animals, of participating in solemn assemblies and appointed festivals, of stretching out hands and reciting prayers in the courtyards of the temple (*cf Isaiah 1.13-15*), had lost their substantive meaning and relevance, and had become merely a source of comfort to those who could afford the time and the expense of such ceremonies.
- These religious rites which should have grown the believers' faith relationship with God, had become a transactional means of placating God.
- If they had been able to be honest about their attitudes, it could simply have been stated like this - and I'm using my imagination here:
- "Listen God, here's the deal: we'll make these offerings and say these set words according to the instructions, and you can just keep blessing us with the good life."
- Well, God speaks through Isaiah and rejects this attitude.
- He effectively says: Your offerings and prayers are worse than meaningless - they are offensive to me - because they are not guiding your attitude towards those suffering from injustice, towards the oppressed, those in need, those without a voice.
- But if you acknowledge this and reconcile yourself with me, then you will be blessed. (*cf Isaiah 1.16-19*)

### Personal faith

- This depersonalisation of our corporate worship can and does happen easily, at any time, in any faith community.
- The answer is not to give up on our communal worship, not to think that we can be Christians and followers of the way of Jesus by forgoing participation in church services.
- Rather, the answer is to balance corporate worship with personal worship.
- Our personal worship is a vital part of our personal faith.
- Faith is not fundamentally a belief in the existence of God, but about our engagement with God.
- Faith is not something we practise on Sunday mornings, but about how we live our lives.
- The writer of the letter to the Hebrews describes the example of Abraham's life.
- Abraham's faith informed his awareness of God calling him to travel to another land, and informed his attitude to act on that calling.
- His faith gave him hope in the fulfilment of God's promise to establish a chosen people through him, even though he and his wife Sarah had not produced any children after many years of marriage. (*cf Hebrews 11.8-12*)

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- And the letter goes on to describe that all of Abraham and Sarah's successors in the faith lived out that faith in their lives - always holding out for a better world that was in alignment and right wise with God - which is a description of the Kingdom of God that Jesus refers to. (cf. *Hebrews 11.13-16*)

### Personal worship

- I want to share with you some recent aspects of my own personal worship of God.
- This last week I've had the blessing of being able to participate in a spiritual retreat, at Santa Casa, in Queenscliff.
- In institutional terms it might be described as part of my professional development, to have at least one retreat annually, over a few days.
- In terms of following the way of Jesus, spiritual retreats were something that the Gospels implied Jesus did regularly for himself, and he would also take his disciples on a directed retreat on occasion - and so I go on retreats, not for reasons of professional development, but because I'm a disciple of Jesus.
- Last week's retreat was for clergy, and was directed, which meant that I met with a spiritual advisor each day, and shared my retreat journey with him.
- Each day all twelve of us on the retreat would gather for morning prayer, for the Eucharist, and for compline - the liturgy for the end of the day.
- Apart from these services, we were otherwise in silence, even at meal times.
- It was the opportunity to sit with God, and to engage in personal worship.
- 'Sitting with Gods came in a variety of forms: walking along the beach, watching the clouds and waves and passing ships, walking in the coastal moonah woodland above the beach towards Point Lonsdale along the well-named Lovers Lane - I was very mindful of walking with the Divine Lover through that green and quiet space.
- Santa Casa also has two labyrinths - one of the Cretan design, the other of the Chartres design - and I walked these daily to connect with God.
- One of the revelations I had concerned photographs that I regularly take for myself - photographs of natural scenes, of leaves and fungi, of architecture, and also of loved ones.
- Particular photographs that are not just snaps of pretty flowers and social occasions, but are carefully composed within the frame - if I can't get the composition right, I usually don't take the photo.
- I came to understand, as confirmed by my retreat director, that each of these pictures is, for me, a prayer - a celebration of the God who makes himself known through his creation, through humankind's good endeavours, and through our relationships.
- My director encouraged me to engage in the ancient practise of *lectio divina* - divine reading - with these pictures.
- Each one is an opportunity for me to sit in God's presence - God who is both transcendent and beyond our comprehension, and also imminent, present with us and in each breath we take.

### Balance doing with being, communal with personal

- I share this with you simply as an example of how you too might already be worshipping God in ways other than through daily prayer and bible readings.
- Perhaps in moments such as when washing the dishes and you notice the catchlights in the iridescent soap bubbles, or when watching a bee buzz from flower to flower, or when somebody looks up and smiles at you.
- Of course, when we are doing the work of mission - participating in the telling, teaching, tending, transforming and treasuring - we can celebrate God in that, too.

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- But equally important to our faith relationship with God is to offer up worship - both with others in church, and also personally in our own faith expression.
- When we are alert to the presence of God in our daily living, then our Lord finds us and serves us, just as Jesus describes in his parable.
- When we prioritise our faith relationship with God, and enact his sacrificial love, then our heavenly Father does indeed have the good pleasure of blessing us with his kingdom.
- As the Psalmist has written in today's psalm:  
*'He honours me who brings sacrifice of thanksgiving:  
and to him who keeps to my way  
I will show the salvation of God.'* (Psalm 50.24)
- Go and do likewise, and be blessed.