**Lent 1 – worship**

Today is the first Sunday of Lent.

Lent is a time of repentance and a time of reflection to prepare our hearts and minds for Good Friday and Easter. These 40 days are set aside to praise and worship the Lord: to read the Bible more, and to pray more often. Christians who observe Lent anticipate deeper intimacy with the Lord as we build up to the Easter events.

There are various traditional themes used in churches for Lent, but I want to use this time of Lent to focus on a core response to God that we as followers of Jesus have: That core response is Worship.

So, to kick off, let us ask ourselves what worship is.

Is worship the second bracket of songs in a Sunday worship service, the first being praise – praise AND worship? Is there a difference between the two? And is that what worship is – the quieter songs after the bouncy praise songs?

What about the other components of a Sunday worship service? Are they worship? What about the notices, the sermon, the tithes and offering, communion, testimony? Are they not worship?

Is it just praising God in the assembly of saints?

This is a big topic, so I am doing to do a series on worship during these 5 Sundays leading up to Holy Week – Easter.

In this series, I want to identify what worship is, to examine the idea of our attitude of worship, consider the idea of heart worship, to examine how we worship on Sundays and how we worship in the other 166 hours of the week, and I want to see how Jesus worshipped.

Why has this focus come about?

The leadership confirmed the theme of worship at their Retreat in January with this byline: “Worship in humility and righteousness” after we heard the words “Here I am to worship” and “Holy Spirit focused” and “Heart not head” and “God glorified” and “singing truth about God” and they listened to 2 prophecies from people in our congregation on the topic.

I will come to those prophesies in the next few weeks.

It is apparent from the words received and the prophecies that God is interested in our development in worship both individually and corporately.

Who remembers the songs *Power of your Love*, *Have faith in God*, *This Kingdom* and many others that came out of Hillsong in the 1990s?

The Australian Geoff Bullock wrote them.

Our Baptist churches sang his worship songs. Interestingly he became disillusioned with what he saw that worship was becoming- a performance – and left the ministry.

He later said in an interview: “If you want to have a Christian arts group and do performances - seek excellence. But if you want to talk about worship, then you've got to come back to brokenness and the good news and the bad news. The news about God is better than we could have ever dreamed, and the news about man is worse than we ever allow ourselves to realise. The only thing we have is grace, and grace is available for us all. When we understand that, then worship is our response. The good news is too good to be true. It's like winning the lottery when you didn't even buy a ticket. Our worship is a response to that."[[1]](#footnote-1)

So, what is worship?

Webster’s Dictionary describes worship as having the meaning of reverence, honour, respect, homage, devotion, adoration, veneration. Worshipping has to do with acts of homage, adoration, and religious service.

Were you expecting that definition? Through my Christian life I picked up that worship was singing. Song like “Here I am to worship, here I am to bow down” reinforced that belief.

Is worship just Sunday morning or whole of life and if it is that wider definition, how do we do it? We will come to that wider view in coming weeks but today we are focusing on Sunday worship.

Let’s start with what we think we know and wonder where it might have come from.

William Temple (1881-1944) wrote that worship is to quicken the conscience by the Holiness of God, to feed the mind with the truth of God, to purge the imagination by the beauty of God, to open up the heart to the love of God, to devote the will to the purpose of God.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Psalm 100:4 *Enter His gates with thanksgiving and His courts with praise. Give thanks to Him, bless His name.*

Which sounds an awful like we need to sing.

In the mid-90s, Geoff Bullock points out, worship is not a spectator sport. True worship invites participants, not spectators. Worship is not learning about God; it is encountering God.[[3]](#footnote-3)

It is not a concert where we sit and listen to others, but it invites us to participate, to open our hearts and express our love of God.

Psalm 95:2 Let *us come into his presence with thanksgiving; let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise!*

Again, cementing the thought that worship is singing.

We sing songs to God, not just about God. We sing to the one we love; we sing out of a grateful heart to the one for whom all praise is due.

If we sing about God, that is engaging our intellect, but if we sing to God, that is a heart response.

Colossians 3:16 *Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God.*

Paul Nixon suggests that worship is a coming together to experience God, in the hope that the experience will transform our lives in some way [[4]](#footnote-4)

Psalm 71:22-23 *I will indeed praise you with the harp; I will praise your faithfulness, my God. On my harp I will play hymns* ***to you,*** *the Holy One of Israel. I will shout for joy as I play* ***for you****; with my whole being I will sing because you have saved me.*

The Psalmist recognises that worship is from our whole being.

Francois Fenelon (who died in 1715) asked an important question: “Just to read the bible, attend church, and avoid big sins-is this passionate, wholehearted love of God?” [[5]](#footnote-5)

Those things are good but are they enough? He asks.

Following the same theme, the song writer Matt Redman in 1999 published a hit song called Heart of Worship in response to what he saw as a fault of shallowness in the contemporary worship of the time:

I'll bring You more than a song.

For a song in itself

Is not what You have required.

You search much deeper within

Through the way things appear

You're looking into my heart.

I'm coming back to the heart of worship.

And it's all about You, it's all about You, Jesus

I'm sorry, Lord, for the thing I've made it.

When it's all about You, it's all about You, Jesus

Is worship just singing songs? No, it is not, but clearly from Scripture singing and playing instruments is worship but there is more.

Let’s look at a bit of history to gain some perspective.

Our denomination Baptists are known as having a focus on the Word, which has its advantages but also its shortfalls.

At the heart of Baptist worship is a deep reverence for the Bible as the inspired Word of God. Baptists believe that worship should be grounded in biblical principles and practices. This emphasis on biblical authority influences the structure and content of Baptist worship services, with a focus on preaching, teaching, and scriptural exposition. The sermon holds a central position in Baptist worship, providing an opportunity for the congregation to engage with the Word of God.[[6]](#footnote-6)

One early writer exclaimed “Let us therefore be a church which insists upon solid preaching and sound doctrine, while rejecting the chaff which itching ears want to hear.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

Hymn singing was almost unknown in Baptist church services up to the end of the seventeenth century. Psalms were sung in the Anglican Church, but most Dissenting churches (that is us) had given up this practice in their efforts to rid themselves of all that was attached to Anglicanism. Baptist churches who continued the Anglican practice were looked upon by other ‘purer’ churches as if they had opened the doors to the devil and all his works. Anti-singing Baptists, who were taken by surprise in a meeting where psalms were sung, would immediately put their hats on to indicate that as this was not a display of true worship, they need not doff their caps.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Were these early Baptist churches worshipping churches? Without a doubt they were, but singing was not part of their worship focus.

Thankfully, we have become less radical and now include the singing of psalms in our worship and even (to our forebears’ horror) songs that are not psalms.

But is singing all it is?

John 4:23 NIV A *time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks.*

This passage tells us to worship in truth, which means to worship God as he is revealed in the Bible.

The passage tells us to worship in spirit. Made in God’s image, we are a spirit that resides in a body, and God designed our spirit to communicate with him. Worship is our spirit responding to God’s spirit.[[9]](#footnote-9)

And Jesus tells us in this passage that that is the type of worshipper God wants.

Psalm 96:8 Ascribe *to the Lord the glory due his name; bring an offering and come into his courts!*

2 Samuel 6:14–15 (NRSV) *David danced before the LORD with all his might... 15 So David and all the house of Israel brought up the ark of the LORD with shouting, and with the sound of the trumpet.*

The style of worship and the actions of worship in the corporate Sunday services differ from person to person, but there is one thing that is constant:

God as revealed in Christ is the singular focus of worship. Worship is not to entertain those present, nor to offer religious education. Evangelism is not the focus of worship. Neither is worship a self-help session for those attending. Worship is the experience of God’s people entering His presence for **His** benefit[[10]](#footnote-10).

Let me repeat that: Worship is the experience of God’s people entering His presence for His benefit.

We started the year by looking at who God is, that he is an awesome God, that he is an indescribable God. That laid the foundation in order that we c an approach him with awe and wonder in our worship.

Psalm 95:1-3 *O come, let us sing unto the Lord: let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation. Let us come before his presence with thanksgiving and make a joyful noise unto him with psalms. For the Lord is a great God, and a great King above all gods.*

Can we honestly say at the end of a service “I have been in the presence of Jesus; I have met Jesus, and I have been transformed?”

Is it possible that we could be like Moses who after being in the presence of the Lord on Mt Sinai had a glow of reflected glory shining on his face?

Can we honestly sing, “I surrender all” and mean it?

Rick Warren in his book *The Purpose Driven Life* asserts that the heart of worship is surrender,[[11]](#footnote-11) quoting Romans 6:13 *offer yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer every part of yourself to him as an instrument of righteousness.*

R A Torrey (an evangelist who died in 1928) tells us that some fail because we shrink back from this entire surrender. We wish to serve Jesus with half the heart, and part of ourselves and part of our possessions.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Can we honestly sing and ask God to “examine my heart” and mean it?

Can we honestly sing, “create in me a clean heart” and mean it?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote that a disciple is called out and must forsake his old life in order that he may exist in the strictest sense of the word. The old life is left behind and completely surrendered.”[[13]](#footnote-13) His heart is cleaned out and a new clean heart is created!

These are big asks and not easy to quickly affirm after our Sunday and we are back in our worldly pursuits.

To worship, do we need to raise our hands, fall on our knees, dance, or weep? No. Not unless you want to. Those are outward manifestations of our worship and personality.

God looks at the heart, people look at the outside.

Let there be the inward sorrow of heart, and not the mere outward manifestation of it by “rending the garment” said the prophet, Joel. [[14]](#footnote-14)

God requires more than just outward manifestations of worship but is interested in our heart.

Micah 6:6-8 *“With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”*

The prophet is saying that all the trappings of outward worship mean nothing if there is not a heart relationship with God.

And again, through the prophet Amos (5:21ff), God says outward expressions of worship are not enough, there must be a heart change.

*23 Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps.*

For those of you who know these passages, you will see that I have not completed them because that would be encroaching on a later topic in this series.

Psalms 51:15-17 *Open my lips, Lord, and my mouth will declare your praise. You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise.*

This echoes the thoughts of Geoff Bullock that I read earlier.

Psalm 69:30-31 *I will praise God with a song; I will proclaim his greatness by giving him thanks. This will please the Lord more than offering him cattle, more than sacrificing a full-grown bull.*

Today we have started to address what we commonly refer to as worship – corporate worship in a church setting.

Next time I want to look at our heart attitude from where in us worship arises. And I will talk about the prophecies received from our church members for our church.

This is an exciting year with its focus on our response to God. God lovingly invites us to worship him.

1. https://www.christiantoday.com.au/news/geoff-bullock-no-longer-the-golden-boy.html [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Warren Wiersbe *50 People Every Christian Should Know* 64 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Milfred Minatrea *Shaped by God’s Heart* 67 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Paul Nixon *Fling Open the Doors* 179 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Francis Chan *Crazy Love: overwhelmed by a relentless God* 19 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. https://www.gateway-baptist.org/baptist-worship-exploring-traditions-music-and-liturgy/#:~:text=In%20many%20Baptist%20churches%2C%20congregational%20singing%20holds%20a,prayer%2C%20corporate%20confession%2C%20and%20the%20sharing%20of%20testimonies. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. https://baptistbiblehour.org/read/devotionals/preach-the-word [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. https://www.baptists.net/history/2023/02/the-history-of-singing-hymns/ [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Rick Warren *The Purpose Driven Life* 101 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Minatrea 67 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Rick Warren *The Purpose Driven Life* 77 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. R A Torrey *How to Succeed in the Christian Life* 15 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Dietrich Bonhoeffer *The Cost of Discipleship* 58 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible (Vol. 1, p. 666). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)