**Psalm 96 “PHOSPORESCENT WORSHIP!**

A number of folk from the parish had the privilege of attending the Bishop’s convention yesterday at the Cathedral. It was definitely worth the drive – even though we left at 5.30 in the morning! The keynote speaker was excellent. He spoke about witness and mission – definitely not as boring as it sounds. There were over 350 people there, with a very professional group of musicians leading the worship – one of whom was Bishop Stuart’s son. If you’ve ever worshipped with a large group of enthusiastic Christians, you’ll know how moving it can be.

John Dickson, in his second session, spoke about the power of gathered worship as a tool to bring others to faith in Christ.

Some of you will have heard of the Vineyard churches. I read a story of someone who had visited a Vineyard church in his travels. About the service, he said this: “the time of singing in the service became so intense that the pastor, before delivering his sermon, gave a call for people to come forward and receive Christ. The response was overwhelming, because at this moment worship had become witness. The sheer abandon of the people, and the high note of praise, became convicting. The presence and power of God were in their midst, and non-believers had to respond to such a manifestation of glory.”

That may sound hard to believe for us formal Anglicans. But God can touch people through Anglican worship as well! John told the story of a young woman in his parish who came from a family of atheists. Her parents were ardent atheists, and she had been brought up to be the best of them! But in her circle of friends was someone who invited her to the baptism of their baby.

After the service, the young woman came up to John and commented how she noticed a real ‘spiritual’ feeling in the service, and she was entranced. John commented that he was surprised – because he thought it was just a staid Anglican service…..the usual order with readings, hymns, creed, the baptism, and so on – and yet the young woman asked if she could come again the following week. Once again, after the service she commented on the sense of ‘spirituality’ she experienced.

John then showed a picture on the screen of a glowing young woman, flanked by two beaming friends. The picture was taken at the young woman’s baptism some time later! God can be evident in our worship, even in a formal Anglican service.

If you have a Bible handy, turn with me to Psalm 96.

If we were to read the previous psalm (Ps. 95), we’d find that there, worship is directed to God, coming from the heart of His people, Israel. (It’s the song we sang before the Gospel) Psalm 95 is regularly said in the Morning Prayer service, and is called the Venite. It begins like this:

Come, let us sing for joy to the LORD; let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation. Let us come before him with thanksgiving and extol him with music and song. For the LORD is the great God, the great King above all gods. In his hand are the depths of the earth, and the mountain peaks belong to him. The sea is his, for he made it, and his hands formed the dry land. Come, let us bow down in worship, let us kneel before the LORD our Maker; ….and so it continues

However, when we get to Psalm 96, there is another emphasis. In this Psalm, worship is not merely for the sake of God and His people; it is also for the sake of the nations. Thus in v1, we read that a *new* song is sung to the Lord as His salvation and glory are declared "among the nations" (Psa\_96:3). – that means to all the nations that surround Israel, the non-Jews.

You may remember last week, we looked at the prophecy of Isaiah where God announced he was doing a ‘*new thing’ –* he was going to send a new servant, a Messiah – his son, to do what all previous servants had failed to do. He would be the perfect servant, obedient to death, who would bring salvation not only to the Jews, but to everyone.

So in Ps 96:7, we read that it is now the “families of nations” who come to worship God, and recognise that he reigns supreme.

So how do we ensure that our worship as a gathered community is the type of worship that not only honours God, but reveals him to unbelievers?

To answer that, we first need to look at what *true* worship is.

Worship isn’t defined by a liturgy, or program or awe inspiring architecture. Worship is our heart response to a *living encounter* with the living God – and it’s not something that just happens on Sundays. Worship needs to permeate our day to day relationship with God. Without this connection with God, without this ongoing encounter with him, what we do as a gathering of God’s people on Sundays is not worship. It is just a club meeting.

Worship – true worship – is something that God himself initiates. Because our Father desires our worship, it is He who seeks and draws and persuades. Worship is our human response to God’s initiative.

Some of you will remember Richard Foster’s book “A Celebration of Discipline.” Speaking about worship, Foster says this:

“Worship is our response to the overtures of love from the heart of the Father. (and if you’ve been here the last two weeks, you’ll remember that we have focused on the Father’s unconditional love for us) . Foster continues, “(Worship’s) central reality is found ‘in spirit and truth’. It is kindled within us only when the Spirit of God touches the human spirit. Forms and rituals do not produce worship, nor does the disuse of forms and rituals. We can use all the right techniques and methods, we can have the best possible liturgy but we have not worshipped the Lord until Spirit touches spirit. The words of the chorus, “set my spirit free that I may worship Thee’ reveals the basis of worship. Until God touches and frees our spirit, we cannot enter this realm. Singing, praying and praising may all lead to worship, but worship is more than any of them. Our spirit must be ignited by the divine fire.”

*It is our ongoing encounter with God,* that will make our worship spark with God’s fire, where it will touch an unbeliever who may be among us. John Dickson, called this “phosorescent worship” – worship that literally glows with the presence of God.

There are some things to bear in mind about worship which may help to give us more of a handle on it.

1. **Worship begins in complete surrender to God**

Paul reminds us in Romans 12:1 “Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship.” Worship begins in our acknowledgement of the Lordship of Christ; it begins with total surrender of every part of our lives to him.

There can be no encounter or experience of God, without first laying aside everything of ourselves, and kneeling before his throne as a willing servant, completely surrendered to him.

1. **Worship is a discipline.**

There will always be ‘rainbow’ moments for us. What do I mean by that? These are the moments when we by chance look in a particular direction and are suddenly blown away by the beauty and awe-inspiring nature of something. Like a rainbow. Or watching a glorious sunset. Or seeing a new-born grandchild. These moments are gifts from God and take our breath away – and for the Christian, we inevitably experience a moment of pure awe, and we give thanks to God. But we can’t just relegate worship to these ‘rainbow moments’ in our lives. Part of loving God with every fibre of our being, means worshipping him first, before we serve him. To worship is to acknowledge who he is, to adore him, to praise him, to thank him, to bow before him. And from there, we serve him.

This practice does not come naturally, as we are self-centred before we are God-centred. And so we need to discipline ourselves to actively ‘come into God’s presence’. We do that through our devotional practices, by reading the Scriptures, by prayer and meditation, but we can also cultivate a moment-by-moment awareness of God’s presence.

1. **Worship is a shared experience**

As we cultivate and enhance our personal experience of worship, then when we gather together as God’s people, corporate worship takes on a whole new meaning. If we light a single candle in a dark room, it gives light to the area around it, but light a host of candles in a dark room, and the light fills the furthest corners! So it is with corporate worship. Our spirit-to spirit encounter with God can be magnified and enhanced in the presence of God’s people. Jesus said, “When 2 or 3 are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of them.”

I may have told you about my friend Warwick, who for as long as I’ve known him, has been a musician and worship leader in his church. I still remember visiting his wife Alison one afternoon, when he came in from a music practice. He was on another plane, and as he floated past us, be breathed, “I am so *hooked* on worship”! For him, worship was truly an encounter with God, which sent him back panting for more, which led to more worship, which led to deeper encounters. He is still one of the most on fire Christians I know.

If our worship is to be “phosphorescent”, as John Dickson described it, it needs to begin in our own hearts; in the depth of our commitment to Jesus, and in our commitment to his people, as we gather together to honour and praise him.

As we move into 2014, may it be with such a renewed passion for Jesus, that as we worship together, people who don’t know Jesus cannot help but be drawn to him.

Let’s pray.