Spiritual Disciplines 6. Worship.

Today is Palm Sunday, and the beginning of our journey through Holy week towards Easter. As we remember how the crowds bowed down to Jesus and acknowledged him as king, it is appropriate that today we look at the subject of worship – no 6 in our series on the spiritual disciplines.

What did we look at last week? (submission). Those of you who were here will remember that we began last week by noting that submission is a much misunderstood discipline, because so often it is linked with oppression. True submission in its biblical sense, contrary to common understanding, is *not* giving way to someone more powerful than us. It is gladly laying aside our personal wants and agendas for the benefit and welfare of the other person. It is dying to ourselves out of love for others, as Jesus denied himself and died on the cross for us. If you missed last week’s sermon and you’re interested, it’s on the website.

Today, as we consider worship, we need to be aware that this is yet another discipline that is so often misunderstood.

If you were to take a survey, and ask people to define worship for you, the most common answer you’d get would be that worship is what we do on Sundays – singing hymns, praying and listening to a sermon, and as Anglicans, we’d also say that celebrating Holy Communion is an important part of worship.

Let me begin by saying that what we do on Sundays *may lead to worship* but is not worship in itself. 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 seeks our worship, it is He who seeks and draws and persuades. Worship is our human response to God’s initiative.

Let me read a paragraph from Richard Foster’s book:

“Worship is our response to the overtures of love from the heart of the Father. Its 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.”

Having said all this, the form of our corporate worship is not irrelevant – it’s just secondary. There is no set form of corporate worship which is better than another. A liturgical Anglican or Catholic liturgy is no better or worse that a free-form charismatic-type approach to corporate worship. The form of our worship is the wineskin, if you like, which embodies our experience of worship. We are free in Christ to use whatever form enhances our worship, and that is often a cultural thing. We often find we are most comfortable with what is most familiar.

Let’s look for a moment at worship itself, rather than how we express it:

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**

I mentioned earlier that worship needs to be an integral part of the fabric of our relationship with God. It’s not just a Sunday thing. 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. The *first* commandment, said Jesus – that is the most critical, the most important, the most fundamental commandment – is “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength.” That is, we are to love God with every fibre of our being.

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 standing on the edge of the Grand Canyon. 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.

A monk in the 14th century, whom we know as Brother Lawrence, wrote a little book called ‘Practising the Presence of God’. He discovered that it was possible to intentionally bring God to the forefront of his mind in the day to day busyness of life. Lawrence worked in the monastery kitchen, and so he would think about God – just bring him to mind – while he was preparing the meals and cleaning up. He’d think of God as he worked in the herb garden, as he walked in the grounds. Whenever his mind wasn’t engaged in full concentration on something else, he would intentionally turn his thoughts to God. He found a new awareness of the reality and presence of God which transformed his life! He discovered that worship came as naturally as breathing.

While we may not always be able to apply the same discipline that brother Lawrence did (I’ve missed many expressway exits because of this!) we can at least determine to be more thankful each day, and to give God praise in all circumstances. Even this will heighten our awareness of his presence with us, and move our hearts to worship.

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.”

Throughout the Scriptures, we see the importance of corporate worship in the life of the people of God. In the Old Testament, worship was the focal point of Israel’s life together. Through the ministry of the Levites, as they led Israel through its sacrifices, festivals and celebrations, the Israelites encountered God. In the New Testament, we are incredibly blessed to know God’s Spirit within us, and so that encounter is there always, but it still expresses itself in worship, and as God’s people, we are called to worship him as his body.

1. **Worship transforms us**

You’ve heard of the vicious circle, haven’t you? For instance when alcohol abuse leads to violence, which leads to alcohol abuse, which leads to violence….? But there is also a ‘blessed circle.’ That’s where an encounter with God leads to worship, which leads to an encounter with God, which leads to worship….which helps us experience in reality Paul’s promise that we are “being transformed from one degree of glory to another.”

I have a friend called 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 (a school friend) 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.

As we enter into Holy Week, may we do so with a renewed desire to engage with God in the everyday. Then as we are drawn to worship him in our day to day walk with Jesus we will find our worship together becomes deeper and richer.

I look forward to our Easter celebrations with renewed anticipation this year! I hope you will too.

Let’s pray.