

“YOU WERE PLANNED FOR GOD’S PLEASURE (PDL2)”

Romans 12:1,2 (Psalm 95, Revelation 4:1-11)

This morning I’d like to commend to you the benefits of Islam. In fact, not just the benefits – the necessity of it. If we are to become anything like the people God wants us to be, then Islam is the only way forward. You may be sitting there now thinking to yourself, “He didn’t say anything about this in the stuff about a vision for the church at the church meeting.” You may well be wondering if the URC’s Interfaith Department has been laying it on a bit thick in recent circulars or thinking, “I knew this would happen once the Southern Baptists pulled out of the Baptist World Alliance.”

Let me allay your fears. I’m not talking about Islam the religion, but Islam the word. Islam is an Arabic word which means “surrender”. The religion that bears its name is founded on the idea of surrender to Allah. Fundamental to Christianity is the idea of surrender to Jesus the Christ. And at the very heart of our faith, at the very heart of our worship, is this command from God to submit ourselves, to surrender ourselves wholly to him. It is what pleases God and is part of the reason he made us.

The two readings we’ve had already – from *Psalm 95* and *Revelation 4:1-11* – are about worship: worship on earth and worship in heaven. And both emphasise the thought that worship is directed towards the Creator (*Psalm 95:6,7; Revelation 4:11b*). Now listen to these words from Paul’s letter to the Christians in Rome, which is where I’d like us to focus our attention for a few moments now: *Romans 12:1,2*.

Paul writes here of “*your spiritual act of worship*” as something which is pleasing to God. The various translations get into a bit of a pickle about this word translated here as “*spiritual*”. In fact, the *New Living Translation* doesn’t even translate the phrase at all. Older versions have “*reasonable*” and other translators try different things. The Greek word is λογικην, from which we get our English word “logical”. But its root is a word which really means “core being”, the heart of things, and what Paul seems to be saying here is that this is an act of worship which involves our whole being as a complete and integral entity. In other words, as we shall see, this is not about worshipping God with just our spirits or just our minds or just our actions. Jesus made the same point in *Mark 12:30*, when he quoted from and expanded *Deuteronomy 6:4,5*. Paul is talking about worship which is effectively the surrender of our whole selves to God.

Because what does he say here this act of worship consists of? Our “*spiritual act of worship*” is to “*offer our bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God.*” That is an act of complete surrender to him – and that is what worship is all about. That is what pleases God – when his created beings offer themselves wholly to him in response to his “*mercy*”. This is what we were made for. And it’s what should absorb us, consciously and unconsciously, every moment of our lives.

The trouble is, we have all kinds of wrong ideas of what worship actually involves. From time to time, I have the privilege of going to preach in other churches and sometimes I’m asked to lead the whole service. On occasions, when I arrive the leader of the music group will say something along the lines of, “After you’ve done the first hymn and prayer, we’ll take over for a short time of worship before you come back and do the rest of the service” as if worship is actually a particular style of music. Indeed, for many people worship is music – the two are more or less synonymous, as you see when music groups are called “worship” groups.

Other people think that worship is the Sunday stuff, what you do when you go to church. At the moment I’m teaching a course (actually I think the college, trying to be educationally trendy, calls it “facilitating” the course) for lay preachers and others who are involved in Sunday services. When we were talking about worship and what it entailed, the ideas which came from the students were mainly to do with the various elements of a service and it was clear from the college’s material that that was what they were expecting. One elderly and very godly Jamaican lady spoke up, though, and pointed out that worship

didn't involve just prayers and songs and the offering and notices and preaching, but our entire lives. Worship is most certainly not just the Sunday stuff – nor even just the church stuff.

And worship is not just for our benefit. We don't worship just to push up our own spiritual stock. So many people talk about what they **get out of** worship – but we are called to give ourselves in worship, to **offer** our worship **to** God. This is not about experience, not about a kind of spiritual high, the Christian equivalent of glue-sniffing or alcohol which means we leave the service with a spring in our step and a song in our heart, which is the way it is so often portrayed, even in some of the songs we sing.

But it's always easy to say what something is **not**. What **is** worship? What is it that God desires from us? Well, to start with, it is about seeking God. *Jeremiah 29:13* (just a couple of sentences after *v11* which we mentioned last week) encourages God's people to put everything they have into seeking him. It is trying to rediscover that original relationship with God that has become so distorted and perverted by the sin which affects the life of each one of us. And that is not something we can confine to just a couple of hours a week. It must be part of all that we are and all that we do day by day. I think I've mentioned before the eighteenth century French monk, Brother Lawrence, who wrote the spiritual classic *The Practice of the Presence of God*, in which he encourages his readers to regard everything they do – even the washing up – as an act of worship, as a means of connecting more deeply with God.

Why do we do that, then? Well, it goes back to what we were saying last week about the purpose God has for our lives. He made us and therefore he knows what is best for us if we are to get the very best out of life now and for eternity. Worship involves acknowledging that fact and living in the light of it. If God made us, if God knows best what is good for us and we only really get to experience life to the full by acknowledging that, then we need to surrender ourselves totally to him: we need to become "*living sacrifices*".

Now that is an act of will (which is also bound up in that word *λογικην*). We are consciously, rationally surrendering our will to his. Now, that's not denying our own free will – after all, the decision to do it is ours. It's not some kind of acknowledgment of a deterministic plan for our lives. It is an attempt by us, because we love God, to ensure that our will is consonant with his. That's what Paul is saying in *v2* here. We no longer allow our thoughts and ideas to be moulded by the world around us, but ask God to renew our own thinking in line with his, so that we can "*test and approve*" God's will. That testing and approving would be impossible if we had no free will. C S Lewis (hardly an unthinking follower of Christ) puts it like this: "*The more we let God take us over, the more truly ourselves we become – because he made us ... It is when I turn to Christ, when I give up myself to his personality, that I first begin to have a real personality of my own.*"

And Paul tells us what God's will is like in *v2*. It is, first of all, "*good*". At the heart of this is that it will lead to spiritual and moral growth in the Christian. God wants the best for you, so what he sees as good is that which makes you more like Jesus, that draws you closer to him. Remember the plans God has for you? Look again at *Jeremiah 29:11*. God couldn't have a will for you that was anything but good, really, could he? Whatever he has for you will be for your benefit, although we cannot always see quite how that should be.

Secondly, it is "*pleasing*". That means pleasing to God, not necessarily to us. If God has plans for us then the thing which will give him most satisfaction is those plans coming to fruition. We cannot always see how things are working out in our lives. We cannot always see the end product because we are not fully aware of the plan's outcome. We don't have the ability that God does to see the big picture. So while we might be struggling with what's happening to us, God's good purposes for our lives are actually being worked out and often we can see that only with hindsight. But as we surrender to him, as we try to ensure that our will becomes more at one with his, so that becomes pleasing to God.

And God's will is, as you'd expect, "*perfect*". It is complete and whole. It cannot be improved on. There's always the temptation for us to want to improve on God's will, to tinker about with it so that it

conforms a little more closely to what we'd like, so that it fits in with whatever the fashion of the moment is. But really no-one, nothing can improve on what is already perfect. We need patience to see that. We need maturity. We need a pretty strong faith at times. But God knows. God can see what has happened, what is happening and what will happen, and he wants us to benefit from it all by allowing him to move us forward in his own way.

That means there will even be times when God seems distant to us. Our prayers, public and private, may appear not be answered. We may find that our reading of his word doesn't actually connect with us. We cannot make head nor tail of our circumstances. What on earth is happening to us? God may seem to be absent from our lives. And let's be honest about this – we have all had that experience at some time or other. But God is still there. He still loves us. He still cares. His plans are still being worked out. It is still worth trying to worship him. Easy to say from the pulpit, maybe, but less easy to accept when you're apparently up the proverbial creek without a paddle. Don't despair. We've all been there. Stick with it and that closeness you once felt to God will return, believe me.

God loves you – and he loves you constantly. You do matter to him. He does want you to get the best out of life now and in eternity. Believe it and surrender yourself to him in order that you can begin to see where he's wanting you to go. That surrender, that dogged insistence that God **is** right, is what worship's all about. At times we may want to express it in song, in prayer, in physical ways such as dancing or punching the air, but most of the time we can express it in lives that are lived hour by hour for God, bringing him pleasure and bring us a peace and a serenity that can come from no other source.

“THE PURPOSE DRIVEN LIFE”

2. You were planned for God’s pleasure

Read – Psalm 95, Revelation 4:1-11 and Romans 12:1,2

Psalm 95 and *Revelation 4:1-11* are both about worship – on earth and in heaven. Both emphasise the thought that worship is directed towards the Creator. Our creation by God and our worship of him are intimately connected.

In *Romans 12:1,2*, Paul writes that what is pleasing to God is our "*spiritual act of worship*" – worship with our whole being (implied by the word translated as "spiritual" or "reasonable": λογικην/logiken). It is the surrender of our whole selves to God.

Worship is not:

- music (or a particular style of music)
- "Sunday stuff" or even "church stuff"
- only for our benefit
- about experience

Worship is about seeking God (*Jeremiah 29:13*), trying to rediscover the relationship that God wants to have with us. As we saw last time, it is to do with God knowing what is best for us because he made us. We surrender ourselves to him (which does not involve denying our free will) and try to ensure that our will is in tune with his.

God’s will is:

- good – it helps us to grow and mature spiritually and morally
- pleasing – to God, not necessarily to us. He gets satisfaction from seeing us get the best
- perfect – it cannot be improved

Even when God seems distant, we need to keep worshipping. He knows what is best and is ensuring that it comes to pass in ways that we cannot always see at present. Worship is an insistent recognition of the fact that God is in control and he wants us to have the best.

QUESTIONS TO DISCUSS IN YOUR HOUSEGROUP

1. How is "*living your whole life for God’s pleasure*" different from the way most people understand "worship"?
2. How is a friendship with God similar to any other friendship, and how is it different?
3. Share something you learned from a time when God seemed distant.
4. Which is easier for you – public or private worship? In which do you usually feel closer to God?
5. When is it appropriate to express anger to God?
6. What fears surface when you think of surrendering your complete life to Christ?

SOME THINGS TO DO THIS WEEK

Day Eight

I was planned for God's pleasure.

Remember: "*The Lord takes pleasure in his people.*" (Psalm 149a)

What common task could I start doing as if I were doing it directly for Jesus?

Day Nine

God smiles when I trust him.

Remember: "*The Lord is pleased with those who worship him and trust his love.*" (Psalm 147:11)

Since God knows what is best, in what areas of my life do I need to trust him most?

Day Ten

The heart of worship is surrender.

Remember: "*Surrender your whole being to him to be used for righteous purposes.*" (Romans 6:13b)

What area of my life am I holding back from God?

Day Eleven

God wants to be my best friend.

Remember: "*Friendship with God is reserved for those who revere him.*" (Psalm 25:14a)

What can I do to remind myself to think about God and talk to him more often throughout the day?

Day Twelve

I'm as close to God as I choose to be.

Remember: "*Draw close to God and God will draw close to you.*" (James 4:8a)

What practical choices will I make today in order to grow closer to God?

Day Thirteen

God wants ALL of me.

Remember: "*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.*" (Mark 12:30)

Which is more pleasing to God right now – my public worship or my private worship? What will I do about this?

Day Fourteen

God is real, no matter how I feel

Remember: "*For God has said, 'I will never leave you; I will never abandon you.'*" (Hebrews 13:5)

How can I stay focussed on God's presence, especially when he feels distant?