

“UPWARDS IN WORSHIP”
Job 42:1-6; John 20:24-31

Let’s start with a couple of quotations this morning. Firstly, from Terry Pratchett’s first *Discworld* novel, some lines that I quoted at the Easter communion service (in case you’re wondering why they sound familiar):

“It was all very well going on about pure logic and how the universe was ruled by logic and the harmony of numbers, but the plain fact of the matter was that ... the gods had a habit of going round to atheists’ houses and smashing their windows.” (*The Colour of Magic* p80)

And then from the artist and academic, Calvin Seerveld, who teaches philosophical aesthetics (no, I don’t know, either) at the Institute for Christian Studies in Toronto. This is from his book *Rainbows For The Fallen World* and is about *Psalm 19*:

“Psalm 19 is enough to leave you limp. It makes vivid that all creation is a burning bush of the Lord God, revealing his just, merciful presence by the praise of countless creatures. It sings the glory of the law and ordinances by which Yahweh’s mouth rules all goings on in history with wisdom and compassion.” (*Rainbows For The Fallen World* p17)

Just try and keep some of those words in your mind (particularly “*smashing the windows*” and “*leaves you limp*”) as we look at the phrase we’re going to be thinking about this morning. As you’ll be aware if you have been both present and listening over the last couple of weeks, we’re working our way through the mission statement that we have here at Wade Street Church and thinking about what it says about us as a church and what its implications are for us as followers of Jesus Christ. This morning we are concentrating on “*Upwards in worship*”. As people whose lives are being changed by God, we look “*upwards in worship*”.

The first thing to say – almost by way of apology, I suppose – is that the nature of such statements is that we have recourse to a kind of shorthand both to try and express what we’re trying to say and to make that expression memorable. So “*upwards*”, although it fits very nicely, relies perhaps too much on a view of God that is kind of “out there”, or more pertinently, “up there”. We think of God’s throne as being in heaven, and of heaven as being somewhere beyond the clouds (or over the rainbow, if you prefer) – and that’s the way it’s represented in a lot of Christian art and poetry and music. But the Bible doesn’t really present it like that, and I don’t believe that God is “up there” – and I suspect most of you don’t think that either. But we do like to have some idea of where God is, so “upwards” is as good an adverb as any, despite the fact that we believe he is all around us, within us and beyond us, active in all kinds of ways in his universe, and generally “*immortal, invisible*” and so on.

Basically, then, the inclusion of this phrase in our mission statement is an acknowledgement that worship is integral to our lives as followers of Jesus. It comes first in our three phrases because it is so tremendously important, for without worship we lack the resources to do the other things that are part of our life together as God’s people. In fact, as the Catholic theologian Gerald Vann puts it, “*Worship is not part of the Christian life; it is the Christian life*”. All that we are, all that we have, all that we do is part of our response of worship to God for his love shown to us in creation and redemption.

So we could, this morning, perhaps spend some time pondering what we do in worship – how are we to offer worship to this amazing God, whose presence irradiates all of our world, whose creation bursts forth in colour and music in praise of the King of kings? We might find ourselves musing on the things we do as part of our time together here on a Sunday – the music, the prayers, the words and actions that are part of our sacrificial response to our Maker and Mediator. We might ponder how we are to offer the many activities of our daily lives as an offering of thanksgiving to our Lord and Saviour. But that might just end up with an almost mechanical blueprint of how to offer acceptable worship to God. We could find ourselves doing what Tom Wright in his latest book illustrates with the story of a man who has a wonderful vintage car which he takes into a garage to have a service and when he returns he finds the whole things taken apart and laid out on the floor – all neatly labelled and artistically arranged – with the

mechanic raving over the amazing original parts that are in it and congratulating the owner on such a wonderful machine. It's just totally undriveable now. If we spend too long taking worship apart and considering how we do it, it might be interesting for some, but we'd lose out on the awe of it all. So we won't look at the how, but the why. Why do we "*look upwards in worship*"?

You see, as human beings we seem to have an instinct for worship. It's kind of hard-wired into us. The scientist and inventor Oliver Lodge wrote: "*It cannot be that the instinct which has led to the creation of cathedrals, and of churches in every village, is wholly misleading. There must be some great truth underlying the instinct for worship.*" And, perhaps more pithily, C S Lewis said, "*A man can no more diminish God's glory by refusing to worship him than a lunatic can put out the sun by scribbling the word 'darkness' on the walls of his cell.*" Even if a person does not direct his or her worship towards God, there is a need for something or someone to be the focus of admiration and adulation – just look at the supporters of sports teams or the fans of rock bands.

But underlying our worship there is a sense of wonder. And that seems to me to be the key to it all. In a world that is becoming ever more scientific, ever more analytical, we may find ourselves starting to lose that sense of wonder. There is, of course, nothing wrong with science, with research, with analysis. After all, God has given us enquiring minds and the capacity to understand. In many ways that can help us. I remember hearing the great mathematician and theologian John Polkinghorne saying that what had drawn him into the Christian faith was his fascination with patterns of numbers and the beauty (yes, he actually said "beauty") of mathematics. But we can find ourselves travelling down a road where all we want to do is explain stuff, to work it out and to "master" it all. If we allow that to happen, we are on the slippery slope to becoming functional atheists, believing that we can work it all out ourselves, so every now and then, God has to come round and "*smash our windows*" with something so awe-inspiring that we are forced to our knees in worship. Every now and then he has to do or say something that "*leaves us limp*" with amazement. As Thomas Carlyle put it, "*Wonder is the basis of worship.*" There are a couple of examples in our two Bible readings this morning.

The first reading we heard was from the last chapter of the book of *Job* in the Old Testament. It's a book that is full of problems – and they are problems that Job is caught up in himself. He cannot understand why he is having to put up with all the trials that have come his way. He is baffled by the treatment that he, someone who has tried his hardest to serve God faithfully and with integrity, seems to be getting. His three friends come along and try to tease out the answers, try to analyse his predicament – in very much the same way that any of us would, using the understanding that they have of God and his ways. But there is no real answer for Job in all of that. So he keeps badgering God for an answer. What have I done wrong? How should I have lived my life? How should I have responded to you?

And God responds in chapters 38-41 of this book in the most amazing piece of poetry ever written. It's a shame we haven't got time to read it this morning, but please try and find time to read through it yourself when you get home. Let me just read a bit from the beginning of it – *Job 38:4-18*.

⁴ *'Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation?*

Tell me, if you understand.

⁵ *Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know!*

Who stretched a measuring line across it?

⁶ *On what were its footings set,
or who laid its cornerstone –*

⁷ *while the morning stars sang together
and all the angels shouted for joy?*

⁸ *'Who shut up the sea behind doors
when it burst forth from the womb,*

⁹ *when I made the clouds its garment
and wrapped it in thick darkness,*

¹⁰ *when I fixed limits for it
and set its doors and bars in place,*

¹¹ when I said, “This far you may come and no farther;
 here is where your proud waves halt”?
¹² ‘Have you ever given orders to the morning,
 or shown the dawn its place,
¹³ that it might take the earth by the edges
 and shake the wicked out of it?
¹⁴ The earth takes shape like clay under a seal;
 its features stand out like those of a garment.
¹⁵ The wicked are denied their light,
 and their upraised arm is broken.
¹⁶ ‘Have you journeyed to the springs of the sea
 or walked in the recesses of the deep?
¹⁷ Have the gates of death been shown to you?
 Have you seen the gates of the deepest darkness?
¹⁸ Have you comprehended the vast expanses of the earth?
 Tell me, if you know all this.

God directs Job’s attention to the absolutely amazing, awe-inspiring, heart-stopping beauty and brilliance of creation and basically says to Job, “I made all that. You didn’t. I know what I’m doing!” In one way, it’s a bit of an anti-climax – a bit like the computer Deep Thought in *The Hitchhiker’s Guide To The Galaxy* coming up with the “Answer to The Ultimate Question of Life, the Universe, and Everything” as 42. It doesn’t really seem to answer the question. But in every other way it is the most climactic answer there could possibly have been.

And Job is gobsmacked. He is left quivering with amazement and blurts out “*Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know.*” God is beyond any explanation. His creation is just so brilliant that the Creator must be on a completely different plane altogether. There’s a great song by Geoff Moore (some of you will have heard it at an early service) entitled *The Artist*, which paints a wonderful picture of the beauty and intricacy of creation, then says in the chorus, “*If that impresses you, just wait until you meet The Artist*”. That realisation humbles Job, forces him to his knees in awed worship. That’s why we worship: because God is so great.

We live in an amazing world, surrounded by the wonder of creation. And worship is what we do when God comes and smashes the windows of our limited awareness of it, the windows of our desire for total understanding and therefore some kind of control over things. Through those smashed windows we see world which leaves us, like Job, limp at the very thought of it all, a world of colour and splendour, of rhythm and melody, of fragrance and taste and texture, a world of joy and challenge, a world of love and friendship, a world of such astonishing diversity and variety that, examine it and analyse it and deconstruct it as we may, always leaves us with more to discover and appreciate and applaud. It’s a world in which we need to stop every now and then, to pause and simply gaze, to allow ourselves to be swept away in amazement. There was an old Welshman over at the church in Cannock who, when you asked him how he was, would often reply, “*Lost in wonder love and praise*” – words from Wesley’s hymn and a pointer towards why we look upwards in worship – to wonder at God’s work in creation.

And then there’s Thomas – good old Doubting Thomas – forever saddled with that nickname because he took a week longer than the other doubting disciples to overcome his initial scepticism about the resurrection of Jesus. We read about him in the passage from *John 20*. He’s heard rumours about Jesus’ return to life. He’s heard the other followers of Jesus going on about how they’ve seen him, but he’s not immediately convinced and wants to have a bit of evidence to confirm their stories.

So Jesus turns up again, next Sunday evening in the same place – as the continuity announcer might have said, “And now a second chance to see ...” Thomas just can’t get his head round it. And Jesus, who showed the others his scars last week, now holds out his hands to Thomas, pulls up his cloak to expose the wound in his side, and invites him to touch these physical manifestations of his suffering and

sacrificial love. “Here you are, Thomas. Investigate and examine. Handle the evidence. Stop doubting and believe” It appears that Thomas doesn’t need to handle the evidence. John makes no mention of his actually touching Jesus at all. Carlyle (again) writes, “*Wonder rather than doubt is the root of knowledge.*” Thomas kneels in awed wonder and blurts out his brief statement of praise, “*My Lord and my God.*”

Suddenly he has been confronted with the tremendous truth of Jesus’ love for him. There in front of Thomas stands a man who has been nailed to a cross and left to die, a man who has had a Roman spear shoved up into his rib cage, a man who has been, quite literally, to hell and back to show Thomas how much he loves him. Just imagine your spouse, your partner, your boyfriend or girlfriend surprising you one evening with the most wonderful gift, something that has cost them an absolute fortune, but they’ve managed to find the very thing you wanted, the thing you never ever thought you’d own. And there it is in front of you, right out of the blue, as sign of the love they have for you. You’d be pretty astonished and unbelievably grateful. That’s what Thomas felt, no doubt – and then some (as they say)! And Thomas’ words of faith and worship, his acknowledgment of Jesus as Lord and God, are an expression of his wonder. There’s no attempt to analyse it, to theologise it, to appraise the whole resurrection thing with a critical eye. It’s that instinctive response of worship that we mentioned earlier on. Here’s Thomas “*lost in wonder, love and praise*” – looking upwards in worship at God’s love in salvation.

If we are to worship with real integrity and authenticity, we need to grasp something of that amazing love of God. In some ways we’ve inoculated ourselves against a really awed and emotional response by our long familiarity with the story, with the phrases of our songs and liturgy, with the pictures and images of Jesus on the cross and outside the tomb. We’ve limited our reaction to it all by the soundness of our doctrine, fencing Jesus in with our theories of why he did it and what it all meant. We’ve sucked the wonder out of it by our desire to explain the reasonableness of it all to a rational, scientific world, creating a defence of atonement and an apologetic for the resurrection that can almost make it all seem very mundane. There’s nothing wrong with doctrine or reason or familiarity, of course, but we need to leave a bit of room – a lot of room – for wonder and amazement. We need to remind ourselves from time to time of just what a scandalous, prodigal, loving, iconoclastic, unexpected God we follow, to pause and relive the story, to ask the Holy Spirit to give us a new vision of what it’s all about. We need to rejoice that when it all seems to be getting a bit predictable, God comes round and smashes our windows. We need to allow ourselves to go limp at the very thought of what God has done – is doing – in creation and salvation.

Then we need to allow that to affect our worship – personally and corporately. The American humorist Erma Bombeck once wrote: “*We sing ‘Make a joyful noise to the Lord’ while our faces reflect the sadness of one who has just buried a rich aunt who left everything she had to her pregnant hamster.*” Or, if that’s not highbrow enough for you, Nietzsche wrote, “*If they want me to believe in their Redeemer, they’d better look a bit more redeemed.*” Our sense of wide-eyed wonder at the love of God in creation and salvation can not only help us in our relationship with God, but also serve as a witness to those around who are never quite sure where to direct their instinctive desire to worship someone or something. Allow yourself to be swept away in wonder, love and praise as we worship together. Reflect on that as we listen to a piece of music – with some images on the screen and then we’ll pray.

"UPWARDS IN WORSHIP"
Job 42:1-6; John 20:24-31

As people whose lives are being changed by God, we look *"upwards in worship"*. We like to have some idea of where God is, so we say "upwards", despite the fact that we believe he is all around us, within us and beyond us. Worship is integral to our lives as followers of Jesus. All that we are, all that we have, all that we do is part of our response of worship to God for his love shown to us in creation and redemption.

Why do we *"look upwards in worship"*? As human beings we seem to have an instinct for worship. Even if a person does not direct his or her worship towards God, there is a need for something or someone to be the focus of admiration and adulation. And underlying our worship there is a sense of wonder. In a world that is becoming ever more scientific, ever more analytical, we may find ourselves starting to lose that sense of wonder. Thomas Carlyle said, *"Wonder is the basis of worship."* There are a couple of examples in these two Bible passages.

Job cannot understand why he is having to put up with all the trials that have come his way. So he keeps badgering God for an answer. God responds in *Job 38-41* and directs Job's attention to the absolutely amazing, awe-inspiring, heart-stopping beauty and brilliance of creation. Job is left quivering with amazement and blurts out *"Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know."* God is beyond any explanation. That realisation humbles Job, forces him to his knees in awed worship. We worship because of the love of God in creation.

In *John 20* we read about Thomas. Jesus, who showed the others his scars last week, now holds out his hands to Thomas, pulls up his cloak to expose the wound in his side, and invites him to touch these physical manifestations of his suffering and sacrificial love. It appears that Thomas doesn't need to handle the evidence. He kneels in awed wonder and utters his brief statement of praise, *"My Lord and my God."* We worship, too, because of the love of God in salvation.

If we are to worship with real integrity and authenticity, we need to grasp something of that amazing love of God. Familiarity and an emphasis on sound doctrine can sometimes empty the creative and redemptive love of God of their wonder for us. We need to remind ourselves from time to time of just what a scandalous, prodigal, loving, iconoclastic, unexpected God we follow, to pause and relive the story, to ask the Holy Spirit to give us a new vision of what it's all about. And then we need to allow that to affect our worship – personally and corporately. Our sense of wide-eyed wonder at the love of God in creation and salvation can not only help us in our relationship with God, but also serve as a witness to those around who are never quite sure where to direct their instinctive desire to worship someone or something.

Questions for discussion

1. What makes you think that human beings may have an "instinct" for worship? How is that expressed by those who do not believe in God?
2. Why do we talk about looking "**upwards** in worship"? Is it helpful? or a hindrance?
3. Isn't God just avoiding the question when he responds to Job? Do you find his reply helpful in any way? How would you have responded to God's answer if you had been Job?
4. What do you think convinced Thomas that Jesus was his "Lord and God"?
5. How can we ensure that we don't lose a sense of wonder in worship?
6. In what ways can our worship be a witness to those who do not yet know Jesus?