

“WORSHIPPING THE RISEN CHRIST”

Revelation 1:9-20

One of the responsibilities with which the Elders of a United Reformed Church are charged is looking after the worship of the church. Although that doesn't mean that they have to do it – only ensure that it's done – it does mean that it is often discussed at our monthly Elders' meetings. In recent months we've talked quite a lot about it, in fact, as it seems that there have been a lot of people within the congregation who have quite strong opinions on the subject (mainly what's wrong with it). So we agreed to have a look at worship on a couple of Sundays and this is the first of those Sundays. I don't know if what I have to say will address the particular issues that people have raised – there's always a certain amount of vagueness in people's comments – but it does, at least, give us an opportunity to think about what we're doing when we come together on Sundays as God's people. You see, Sunday worship in most churches – and this is no exception – is the main activity in which we engage together as a whole church, the main gathering of God's people in a local church each week. We come together in church, in churches and, as the good old Prayer Book puts it, together with “*angels, archangels and all the company of heaven.*”

Now people may say, with Brother Lawrence, Martin Luther and many, many others, that all of life is worship. That is very true – and we'll look a bit more closely at that next week when we consider *Isaiah 58* – but this morning we are going to concentrate just on this particular aspect of it, the worship which we offer as consciously directed towards the Godhead in a way which is to some extent separate from what we do the rest of the time. We need to take it seriously as it is in corporate worship that we should be seeking to encounter Jesus. I say “corporate”, but this can equally well be true if we are just two or three people, or even engaged in worship on our own.

To kick off, let me offer you two quotations, both from people who are highly regarded in the world of evangelical Christianity. From the USA, John Blanchard writes this:

“Worship services in many churches today are like a merry-go-round. You drop a token in the collection box; it's good for a ride. There's music and lots of motion up and down. The ride is carefully timed and seldom varies in length. Lots of good feelings are generated, and it is the one ride you can be sure will never be in the least threatening or challenging. But though you spend the whole time feeling as if you're moving forward, you get off exactly where you got on.”

And the great British preacher, the late John Stott, wrote this:

“Whenever we fail to take public worship seriously, we are less than the fully biblical Christians we claim to be. We go to church for the preaching, some of us say, not for the praise. Evangelism is our speciality, not worship. In consequence either our worship services are slovenly, perfunctory, mechanical and dull or, in an attempt to remedy this, we go to the opposite extreme and become repetitive, unreflective and even flippant.”

Strong stuff! So, as biblical Christians, let's have a look at the Bible and see what that has to say. In fact, let's look at the *Book of Revelation*, from which we read a few moments ago. In his introduction to this amazing book, Eugene Peterson has this to say:

“The Bible ends with a flourish: vision and song, doom and deliverance, terror and triumph. The rush of colour and sound, image and energy, leaves us reeling. But if we persist through the initial confusion and read on, we begin to pick up the rhythms, realise the connections, and find ourselves enlisted as participants in a multi-dimensional act of Christian worship ... If worship is neglected or perverted, our communities fall into chaos or under tyranny ... Our times are not propitious for worship. The times never are. The world is hostile to worship. The Devil hates worship ... Some Christians even get killed because they worship ... John is ... passionate in his desire to bring us into the presence of Jesus believing and adoring. But the demands he makes on our intelligence and imagination are well rewarded, for in keeping company with John, our worship of God will almost certainly deepen in urgency and joy.”

As we reflect on these verses this morning, we will not find instructions about how to sing, how many times we should repeat the chorus, which instruments should be used, whether we should always include this prayer or that prayer, how long this or that part of our worship should last. But we will, as so often, discover, I hope, a bit about the attitudes we should bring to worship, something of how we should approach this activity which is so central to our lives as disciples of Jesus that it will continue on into eternity. This astonishing encounter which John has with the Risen Christ does not give us a blueprint for worship – it was, after all, a unique occasion – but it provides us with some principles we would do well to think about very carefully.

Briefly, a bit of background, just to set this particular episode in its context. John, generally considered to be the son of Zebedee and brother of James, a disciple of Jesus, has been exiled to the little island of Patmos in the Aegean Sea just off the coast of modern-day Turkey because of his preaching – proclaiming that Jesus, not the Emperor, is the Lord of all. He writes this book for the benefit of his brothers and sisters in Christ, people with whom he identifies. And on Patmos he has this astounding vision of the climax of world history and the final victory of God as his Kingdom is fully revealed. We do need to see it against the political backdrop of the Roman Empire, because all that we read in *Revelation* is a defiant challenge to ideas of empire and worldly power – and it is an enormous encouragement to beleaguered disciples of Jesus who are struggling to cope in an alien culture. (We won't go into all that this morning, but that comes over in little ways even in this opening episode.) But let's look at what we might glean from this about our attitudes to worship.

1. John was PREPARED TO WORSHIP

John tells us that this was “*the Lord's Day*”. It was a Sunday. This is actually the only use of this in the New Testament, but it is clearly meant to be Sunday, not, as some would say “*The Day of the Lord*”, the

day of judgement (the construction in Greek is different, as it is in English), nor even specifically Easter Sunday, as some have tried to claim. We know that the disciples of Jesus worshipped on the first day of the week in remembrance of the resurrection and in contrast to the days on which pagan deities and even the Emperor were worshipped. Sunday was the day set apart especially to take time to worship God. We have already said that we can worship God anytime, anywhere, but we get together on Sundays to remember together our Risen Lord. It's a convention that means we can all make time to do it. It fits into our weekly routine – between a lie-in and a visit to Wilkos or Tesco for many of us.

And John was, he writes, *“in the Spirit”*. He was especially open to the Holy Spirit, to the one who inspires and energises us in our worship. He was in the right frame of mind, expecting something to happen, but not sure entirely what, open to God and what he might do. This was a special day, a special time and he was waiting for something special to happen.

So how do we prepare for worship on the Lord's Day? Do you come here expectant, open to God, anticipating meeting him, at peace with those around you, and eager to encounter God, to meet with Jesus, to be moved by the Holy Spirit? The Anglican Prayer Book had a phrase in it used in the Eucharist about *“all ye that are in love and charity with your neighbour”* – and that, too, is part of our preparation for worship. Jesus himself pointed that out to John and the other disciples in his *Sermon On The Mount*:

“Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift.” (Matthew 5:23,24)

We're all in this together, folks, so we need to be at peace and ready to meet Jesus together.

2. John MET WITH JESUS

Meeting with Jesus – that's so central to our worship that it's pretty well the main thing. Yes, we come to glorify God, to pray, to confess, to be reconciled, to listen. But above all, we are here to meet with Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit. That's Trinitarian worship. (If you want to know more, ask David West-Mullen – he wrote his degree thesis on that!). In worship we get to glimpse inside the throne room of heaven. We get to meet Jesus. This is how Tom Wright puts it, writing about this passage:

“Now we are being asked to imagine: what would it look like if the curtain between heaven and earth were suddenly pulled up, revealing the Jesus who had been there all along but whom we had managed either to ignore, or to cut down to our own size?”

Jesus promised that when we meet together in his name, even if there are only a couple of us there, he will be present with us. And how often do we pray for Jesus to be with us in our worship? – *“Lord, be with us this morning ... Lord, come and meet with us ... God make your presence felt.”* He **IS** here. He has promised that he will be here. It's just that we are so often so caught up in our own concerns – “We

sang that last week. What's she doing in that dress? Did I turn the oven on? Why's he doing that?" – that we remain blissfully unaware of his presence.

John was ready, so when Jesus turned up he at least was prepared for something. Maybe not this, though. As the curtain was drawn back, John has this stupendous vision of Jesus. It's absolutely amazing! Not only does Jesus appear to him, but what an appearance! Now this is a vision, OK. This is a dream-like encounter and we should not try to envisage it in a kind of literalistic way. You know when you've had a dream, you see things that make perfect sense within the dream, but when you wake up and look back you realise that it just couldn't have happened like that in real life. John Sweet in his comments on this passage says that trying to depict this literally has "*produced many unhappy results in Christian art*" and the great New Testament scholar G B Caird warns against trying to "*unweave the rainbow*".

John is attempting to put into words an experience that is beyond his vocabulary, beyond his ability to describe. He writes about brilliance and majesty, about textures and colours, about amazing sounds and experiences. This is something that he says actually surpasses the sun in all its brilliance, and there's no way you can look at the sun for more than a moment. This is a glimpse of the overwhelming glory of God, an amazing encounter that can call forth nothing but worship. It produces almost a kind of ecstasy as John is overwhelmed with joy and wonder. You have probably heard in the past couple of weeks an Icelandic football commentator trying to describe Iceland's first ever goal in a major tournament – it just turns into a long shriek of joy! That's a bit like the feeling John must have had – and he really had no alternative but to worship. Do you ever turn up here on Sunday hoping to meet with Jesus like this?

3. John was **HUMBLED BY JESUS**

Now some of us here might have responded to this by telling Jesus rather firmly that that's not how we do things here and asking him how long this was going to take. John was so overcome that he "*fell at his feet as though dead*". He was absolutely bowled over. I was reading some stuff this week – nothing at all to do with this – but the author was writing about how some mystics and others used to look upon certain types of worship as "*practising dying*". John is overcome by this encounter with his Lord. And wherever you look in the Bible – and, indeed, in the history of the Church – you'll see that those who really do get to encounter Jesus in worship are forced to their knees in humbled obedience and acknowledgement. John was so affected by what he saw that he had no words, no response other than awed helplessness. Notice that John does not say anything at all in this passage.

Do we approach Jesus with that kind of expectant reverence? Do we sometimes feel that we simply have nothing to say? Do we ever kneel – literally or metaphorically – before our Lord and Saviour and just gasp in amazement? Probably not, because we tend to trim it all down to size. This kind of stuff might take too long. It's not what we're used to. We'd have to fit it in between the offering and the children going out – and there's always a couple of notices to mention as well. For most of us – and I point the finger most sharply at myself – we have a way of doing things, we have a routine to follow, we have time constraints and we always want to be in control of the situation. And, after all, we haven't got a PowerPoint slide for that! If we really do allow time and space to encounter Jesus on his terms rather than ours then we find ourselves humbled by him, overawed by him – changed by him.

4. John was REASSURED BY JESUS

As John lies prostrate on the ground, probably trembling with fear and wondering what on earth is going to happen next, he experiences Jesus' gentle reassurance. Jesus puts his hand on him in a gesture of encouragement and empathy. Those familiar words that crop up so often in the Bible are heard by John – “*Do not be afraid*”. It's all OK. Nothing to fear. This is something good and positive, not something to make you afraid. This encounter is amazing, unsettling even, but don't worry: Jesus is here.

Jesus reminds John that he is eternal, always there for him – “*the First, the Last ... the Living One*”. He will always be around to help. And that's the case because he is alive – he was dead (John saw that), but now he's alive and active and making a difference. He is actually the Master of everything, even death. The thing which humans seem to fear more than anything else is under the control of this benevolent and merciful Redeemer who holds the very keys of death itself. What could there be to worry about?

As we worship – in the power of the Holy Spirit – as we see God's glory blazing from his Son, so we can be reassured that he does not want to harm us, this is not something to bully or to belittle or to bewilder us: this is a powerful reminder that Jesus is in charge and that he wants the very best for us, his followers.

5. John was COMMISSIONED BY JESUS

Jesus has met with John in the context of this encounter because he has work for him to do. This vision of God's glory and this assurance that Jesus is in control and wants only the best for John is intended to lead on to other things. Yes, worship is brilliant on its own and it is well worth taking time to savour and enjoy it, but it is not all there is yet. In this case Jesus commissions John to write up this experience and

to send a letter round to seven of the local churches with some of Jesus' observations on their life together. Then there will be the rest of this mind-blowing vision to get down on paper for future generations. What John sees and hears he is to share with other Christians for their encouragement and edification.

Our worship – however we express it or experience it – must lead on to other things. The old Latin Mass ended with the words “*Ite. Missa est*”, which basically means, “*That’s it. Now go out and put it into practice*”. We’ll look a bit more closely at that next week, but for now just consider this. What we do here on Sunday mornings should inspire us, energise us and enthuse us to live out our commitment beyond those doors, from Monday to Saturday. This is where we get to talk to the Boss, if you like – to Jesus. We bring him our concerns in prayer. We offer him our thanks in our prayers and songs. We listen to what he has to say to us through his word and by his Holy Spirit. Then we go off and do something about it all – and that doesn’t just mean whistling the tune of the last hymn for a couple of hours.

In worship we should want to be going deeper, discovering more about our amazing Lord and Saviour, learning more about *his* ways and how that should affect *our* ways, being more and more amazed by Jesus and who he is and what he does. It can sound a bit scary. It might mean we surrender a bit of control over what we do here. But that’s worship.

Now, as we said at the beginning, what we have read this morning was just one way of worshipping. There’s nothing here about instruments or repetition or the involvement of others or speaking in tongues or dancing or any of those things that can so easily drive our discussions. But there are certain principles, things that we might want to think a bit more seriously about – even talk about (why not go along to a home-group this week and have a good old debate?). But I think these points are the kind of things we should consciously be pondering as we get ready to come along here on Sundays.

- **Prepare** yourself for worship – this is, after all, a special time.
- **Expect** to encounter Jesus – maybe not as dramatically as John did, but expect something special anyway.
- **Be humble** enough to receive from Jesus – directly from him or through the person leading worship.
- **Sense Jesus’ reassuring hand** on you – don’t worry: you’re here for good stuff, not bad.
- **Be ready to move on** in further service for him – what can you take away from this service that will help you in your mission this week?

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Worship is a vital part of our Christian experience. In the New Testament and in the subsequent history of the Church, worship usually precedes doctrine: in other words, people experience God, then try to make sense of the experience. In *Revelation 1* we read of John's experience of Jesus Christ whilst on the island of Patmos. He encounters Jesus in an awesome way and tries to describe that event in words. What he writes can help us in our worship, which can so easily become stale and repetitive.

1. John was prepared to worship

John was in a Roman penal colony, but he still is eager to worship. We are told that he was "*in the Spirit*", which most scholars seem to agree indicates that he was especially open to the work of the Holy Spirit. He was approaching his worship with a keen sense of anticipation. Somehow – he wasn't sure how – he was going to meet with God.

2. John met with Jesus and was humbled

As John saw and heard the Risen Jesus in all his glory he fell to the ground "*as though dead*". It was not simply a gesture of respect, but a sign of his awe and wonder in the presence of such glory. He found that he was completely surrendered to the holiness of God.

3. John was reassured by Jesus

Although the experience was clearly very scary, John was reassured by Jesus' words: "*Do not be afraid.*" Jesus was in control, so nothing was going to happen that would harm John as he worshipped.

4. John was commissioned by Jesus

John's encounter with Jesus was not an end in itself. It led to service for the cause of the gospel. John was probably in his nineties and there was not much that he could do (and he was imprisoned). He could, however, write – and that is what he ended up doing. The rest of this book of *Revelation* is the fruit of that.

Questions for discussion

- 1) What are your thoughts as you come along to church on Sunday? How do you prepare yourself for worship? Do you really expect to meet with Jesus? How will you know if you have?
- 2) To what extent is your participation in worship limited (or freed) by the expectations of others? Is it right that we should all worship in the same way? Why/why not?
- 3) Do you ever feel as if you are losing control in worship? Is that scary? What helps you to feel secure in worship?
- 4) In what ways could our Sunday worship enable us to encounter Jesus Christ more effectively?
- 5) How does worship inspire us to serve God?
- 6) What would you like to change about the way we worship on Sundays? What is it vital that we keep the same?