

**“TRUE WORSHIP”**

***Isaiah 58:1-14***

Last Sunday, you may recall, we took some time to think about worship – worship as a particular activity, something we do together in a particular place at a particular time; worship as a specific, discrete experience. We reflected on the experience of St John, exiled on the island of Patmos, as he encountered the Risen Lord Jesus Christ one Sunday morning. We saw that John was prepared for worship and that the encounter which he then had with Jesus was a humbling one, but also a reassuring one, which led on into his actually doing something for Jesus. His worship resulted in mission.

And, as we were thinking about that, we noted that many people have said that all our lives should be worship, all that we do should be done under the gaze of Jesus and directed towards his service. There is a sense in which all that we do is offered to Jesus as part of our response to his great love and compassion. So this week we are going to think for a few minutes about how worship and the rest of our lives should be interlinked, the ways in which one bleeds into the other. And to help us crystallise our thoughts, we'll focus on the passage we've just heard from *Isaiah 58*.

This is a powerful passage of prophetic teaching from the great preacher Isaiah. God speaks through the prophet to communicate his words to a people who were, to say the least, wayward in their response to God. And what he says is echoed by many of the other prophets whose words we find towards the end of our Old Testament (and we'll be having a closer look at those “Minor Prophets”, as they're called, over the summer). The bottom line of much that they have to say is that the people have separated their religious observance from the social righteousness which they ought to be living out day by day. So taken up are they with their attempts at what they take to be worship and with their own concerns, that every now and then God has to shout into their situation and bring them up sharp. This passage begins with God telling Isaiah to “*shout aloud ... raise your voice like a trumpet*”. That “*shout aloud*” is translated “*give a full-throated roar*” in some versions – and *The Message* captures some of that. This is a bellow of outrage on behalf of a God who is frustrated and furious at his people's attitudes to him and to their responsibilities.

A Bible scholar from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, George Adam Smith, wrote about this cry in his comments on these verses. He translates the phrase as “*to call with the throat*”, which is a literal rendering of the Hebrew word. And he says:

*“Those who have never heard an angry Oriental speak, have no idea of what power of denunciation lies in the human throat. In the East, where dry climate and large leisure bestow upon the voice a depth and suppleness prevented by our vulgar haste of life and teasing weather, men have elaborated their throat letters to a number unknown in any Western alphabet; and upon the lowest notes they have put an edge, that comes up shrill and*

*keen through the roar of the upper gutturals, till you feel their wrath cut as well as sweep you before it. In the Oriental throat, speech goes down deep enough to echo all the breadth of the inner man; while the possibility of expressing within so supple an organ nearly every tone of scorn or surprise preserves anger from that suspicion of spite or exhaustion, which is conveyed by too liberal a use of the nasal or palatal letters. Hence in the Hebrew language 'to call with the throat' means to call with vehemence, but with self-command; with passion, yet as a man; using every figure of satire, but earnestly; neither forgetting wrath for mere art's sake, nor allowing wrath to escape the grip of the stronger muscles of the voice ... In this chapter there is not a sneer from first to last. The speaker suppresses the temptation to use his nasal tones, and utters, not as the satirist, but as the prophet. For his purpose is not to sport with his people's hypocrisy, but to sweep them out of it."*

In other words, Isaiah is really giving them what for, but so that they will repent and change, rather than just taking the mickey out of their pathetic attempts to ingratiate themselves with God.

You see, these people – God's people – are worshipping regularly by keeping to their fasts and all that; they are coming before God in apparent humility. They seem to be eager and enthusiastic, doing all the right stuff at the right times in the right order. But somehow they are not connecting with their God. They complain that he is not listening – or, at least, not responding (v3). In the prophecy of Amos, where the same stuff is being dealt with, God goes even further:

*"I hate, I despise your religious festivals;  
your assemblies are a stench to me.  
Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings,  
I will not accept them.  
Though you bring choice fellowship offerings,  
I will have no regard for them.  
Away with the noise of your songs!  
I will not listen to the music of your harps."*

The problem is that the people are prepared to put up with the minor inconveniences of worship as they try and keep in with God, but they are not prepared for any of it to affect their daily lives. They'll go through the motions with their fasting, their offerings, their worship songs, but they still want to be able to do what they want the rest of the time. As Geoffrey Grogan writes: "*What did a little abstinence matter if they could retain their basic lifestyle of disobedient rebellion?*" In fact, what was happening was that the attitudes which characterised their everyday lives were starting to leak into and affect their worship.

Through his prophet Isaiah, God upbraids the people for those things that have started to affect them when they come before him with their apparent eagerness to worship – "Let's get this box ticked, then we can get back to normal." They are mistaking – as we can so easily do – enthusiasm for sincerity, piousness for holiness. On the day when they are supposed to be fasting they are still doing just as they please. In this instance, they're still exploiting their workers, still trying to better themselves at the expense of others. Believe it or not, they are bringing their arguments into worship and actually coming

to blows as a result. We laugh and shake our heads at the comedy of it all – surely this is exaggerated, we think. The church where I worked in London counted amongst its congregation an ex-minister, and the reason he was an ex-minister was that, after the morning service one week, on the church steps, he had laid out one of his deacons with a single blow. I'm sure there are some of us who harbour that attitude, even if we never actually get round to expressing it.

“Look,” says God, “Is this the kind of worship I want? Just a bit of formality one day a week, just an hour each Sunday for you to go through the motions of worship?” He doesn't just want an outward display of beatific smiles and raised hands as we appear to be offering God our best in our songs. That kind of hypocrisy has bled into your worship from the attitudes you display in your offices and homes and workplaces and leisure activities during the week. In *v9* he talks about “*the pointing finger and malicious talk*” – that's a bit easier for us to identify with perhaps. It has no place in worship. It should have no place in our daily lives. Sadly, we find it in both very often.

Jumping back to *Amos* again, we read this as God speaks to his people through this prophet. The people are worshipping, OK – they're keeping the festivals and all that kind of stuff – but what's actually going on in their minds?

*“When will the New Moon be over  
that we may sell grain,  
and the Sabbath be ended  
that we may market wheat?” –  
skimping on the measure,  
boosting the price  
and cheating with dishonest scales,  
buying the poor with silver  
and the needy for a pair of sandals,  
selling even the sweepings with the wheat.”*

When's all this going to be over? I want to get on with my life – a life that involves all that stuff that we're not supposed to think about in church. The attitudes of the world around are affecting their worship which, however eager and enthusiastic they seem, is being done insincerely and hypocritically.

It ought really to be the other way round. What they do in worship – their encounter with God, their fine words and music, their prayers and petitions – should be shaping them for life the rest of the week. Worship of the God of grace and mercy should issue forth in lives that exemplify the kind of social righteousness that will stand out distinctively in a world of selfishness and greed. Just one recent example – how many people prayed along fervently in church when people were seeking guidance about how to vote in the referendum and then actually cast their vote purely out of economic self-interest? (That's a rhetorical question: no need to put your hands up).

Look, says God through Isaiah, you want to know why I don't answer your prayers, why I'm not blessing you in the ways you want. Here's why. Get out there and loose the chains of injustice, untie the yoke of oppression that has been laid across the shoulders of so many people so that you can enjoy the lifestyle you want. Set free those who are trapped by the policies and programmes that benefit you. He's not talking about signing petitions or going on demonstrations or writing to the MP or whatever they did in those days. He's actually saying, share your stuff with them – food, your home, your clothes. Don't "*turn away from your own flesh and blood*". These are fellow human beings who are suffering, people just like you who haven't had your breaks, haven't got your advantages, so do something about it: don't just sing choruses from *Spring Harvest* in the 1980s when social justice was more fashionable than it is now and Ronald Sider was writing books about it all. Don't just say "Amen" to prayers that you really have no intention of otherwise getting involved in.

And that includes what is said here in *v13*. This is all about keeping Sabbath, about honouring God by pausing from that relentless chase after material stuff. Sunday (for us) is a day to step aside from the rat race and from the concerns and priorities of the workplace to ponder how great God is, to take time to re-connect with him. Which also mean allowing other people to do that – the people whom you are exploiting by expecting them to staff your supermarkets and department stores, to work to meet your desires. If, by engaging in worship together today we are saying that Sunday is special, why can't we allow it to be special for everyone? And it's probably not even the breaking of the Sabbath in itself that is the main problem – although that's bad enough (or was for them) – it's the fact that they just "*do as they please ...go their own way [and] speak idle words*". Worship is not about doing as you please – and nor should your life beyond this hour on Sunday mornings be about that.

You see, that is the main issue that is being addressed here. Whatever the details of the situation, however you may or may not be exploiting workers, breaking the Sabbath, quarrelling and fighting, the principle is this – and once again it is to do with attitudes. Let the attitudes of true worship spill over into your daily lives, not the other way round. We are so used to chasing what we want from Monday to Saturday, so used to this idea that "I've earned it, I deserve it, so I'm going to do just what I want and stuff anyone else who gets in the way" that we come in here with that attitude. I want to sing **MY** favourite songs. I want to hear **MY** favourite words. I want it all done the way that **I** am used to. I want it to be over by the time that suits **MY** programme for the day.

And God says that if we come with that attitude, then we might as well not come at all. What *should* be happening is that the words we sing about wanting to follow God's ways should be put into practice in our lives during the week. The prayers that we pray about justice and equality should prompt us to re-think our shopping habits and our political decisions. The words we hear from the Bible should be the

ones which shape our thinking and our behaviour. The things we declare about the greatness and awe-inspiring glory of God and his creation should find an echo in the way we treat what he has given us to steward and manage. What we do in here is not a hermetically sealed compartment which is separate from the rest of our lives. What we do in here should enliven, enthuse, empower the rest of our lives as we seek to serve God in the places where he has called us to live and work and play.

Now, says God through Isaiah, if you start doing that you will soon notice a difference. And not only you, but others will notice a difference. Look at *vv8,10b*:

*“Then your light will break forth like the dawn,  
and your healing will quickly appear;  
then your righteousness will go before you,  
and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard ...  
then your light will rise in the darkness,  
and your night will become like the noonday.”*

You will find that your otherwise sterile worship will start to have an effect. God will answer your prayers. Things will start to happen. There will be blessings and your lives will bear fruit. Others will see that God is at work here. Don't mistake enthusiasm for sincerity. Start getting this kind of thing in place – don't let the attitude of the world bleed into your worship but let the attitudes of worship seep out into the world – and, says Isaiah, *“you will find your joy in the LORD.”* You'll notice a difference. Your life will become more joyous, more peaceful, more Jesus-focussed. *“Is not this the kind of worship I have chosen?”* says the Lord.

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**Questions for discussion**

In what ways do we "*do as we please*" in worship? How might the things that Isaiah denounces – quarrelling, striking each other with fists, exploiting workers etc. – be demonstrated in our worship?

How can we put into practice the things that Isaiah lists in vv6,7?

Isaiah talks about people who "*seem*" earnest and who think they are humbling themselves, but clearly are not. How can we guard against mistaking enthusiasm for sincerity?

We have had Sunday trading for many years now. Is that a good thing? Why/why not? Are there other things that should not be done on a Sunday? Why do you think that?

What does it mean that our "*light will break forth like the dawn*"?

What particularly strikes you about this passage? What are you going to do about it?

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