

Worship and beauty

11 August 2024

INTRODUCING TODAY'S THEME

Today we're talking about **worship**.

... and the why, when, where and how of worship.

What aspects of worship do you particularly **engage** with?

What for you is the **core** of worship?

BIBLE READING

Your word, O Lord, is a lamp to our feet
and a light to our path.

[Exodus 35 \(selected verses\)](#)

Moses said to the whole Israelite community, 'This is what the Lord has commanded: from what you have, take an offering for the Lord. Everyone who is willing is to bring to the Lord an offering of gold, silver and bronze; blue, purple and scarlet yarn and fine linen; goat hair; ram skins dyed red and another type of durable leather; acacia wood; olive oil for the light; spices for the anointing oil and for the fragrant incense; onyx stones and other gems to be mounted on the ephod and breastpiece.

All who are skilled among you are to come and make everything the Lord has commanded: the tabernacle with its tent and its covering; the ark with its poles and the atonement cover and the curtain that shields it; the altar table; the lampstand; the altar of incense; ... the curtains of the courtyard; the woven garments worn for ministering in the sanctuary ...

Everyone who was willing and whose heart moved them came and brought an offering to the Lord for the work on the tent of meeting, for all its service, and for the sacred garments. Men and women alike, came and brought gold jewellery of all kinds ... Everyone who had blue, purple or scarlet yarn or fine linen, or goat hair, ram skins dyed red or other durable leather brought them. ... Every skilled woman spun with her hands and brought what she had spun – blue, purple or scarlet yarn or fine linen. ... They also brought spices and olive oil for the light and for the anointing oil and for the fragrant incense. ...

Then Moses said to the Israelites, 'See, the Lord has chosen Bezalel son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, and he has filled him with the Spirit of God, with wisdom, with understanding, with knowledge and with all kinds of skills – to make artistic designs for work in gold, silver and bronze, to cut and set stones, to work in wood and to engage in all kinds of artistic crafts. And he has given both him and Oholiab son of Ahisamak, of the tribe of Dan, the ability to teach others. He has filled

them with skill to do all kinds of work as engravers, designers, embroiderers in blue, purple and scarlet yarn and fine linen, and weavers – all of them skilled workers and designers.

[Ephesians 5:15-20](#)

Be very careful how you live – not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is. Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

May your word live in us

and bear much fruit for your glory.

MESSAGE Worship and beauty

Here we are on Sunday morning doing something that many people in our community find a little odd. We're gathering with other somewhat odd people and alternately we're sitting quietly while someone speaks and then standing up to all sing together. Some of us are beautiful singers and others not so much. We aren't a community choir yet we all participate in this all-age sing-along. We then share a somewhat average quality cup of tea or coffee and go on our way.



To the outside observer it all seems a bit odd and a bit pointless.



What we are doing of course is gathering to worship God, a communal activity that Christians have done for 2000 years. It involves coming together, praying, singing, speaking, sitting in silence, sharing our joys and concerns in life, and often finishes with

eating and drinking together.

There is no one right way to worship but in our particular tradition, worship usually involves lots of words that change week by week, while in Catholic and Anglican traditions the words of the liturgy often stay pretty much the same.

In traditions such as the Quakers, not much is spoken at all.

However odd Christian worship appears to an outsider, it must offer some benefit because otherwise it would have died out long ago.

While we all have a view on what worship is about, what it should look and feel like, our views don't necessarily line up closely with what the Bible teaches.

So in the New Testament, for instance, the most common word for worship is **proskuneo**, which means to kneel or prostrate oneself and kiss the feet of the person you are paying homage to. It's how the Elders worship in the book of Revelation.



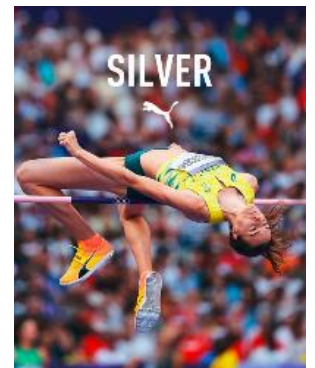
When Jesus is talking with the woman at the well in John's Gospel and says that true worshippers of God will worship in spirit and truth, the word used for worship is **proskuneo**. So Jesus is urging people to kneel or prostrate themselves before God as they seek the truth and engage with God who is spirit. Perhaps Muslims get this aspect of worship better than we do.

Another common word for worship in the New Testament is **latreuo** which means to serve. So in Romans 12, for instance, Paul writes that we should present ourselves as a living sacrifice before God, which is our spiritual act of worship. So according to Paul, we worship God through our **service**.



Paul goes on to explain that as we use our gifts and talents to help build up the church – whether ministering, teaching, encouraging, giving, offering compassion or leading – we are actually serving – or worshipping – God. Using these gifts may happen during Sunday morning worship or at any other time of the week. They may take place anywhere. So whether it’s reading the Bible on Sunday morning or serving a meal here at Croydon North on a Tuesday, all these types of service are acts of worship according to Paul.

If you’ve watched the Olympics this week you might have seen that one of our very talented women high jumpers, Nicola Olyslagers, won the silver medal. Nicola describes herself as a devout Christian and the joy of jumping is her form of worship. She writes that:



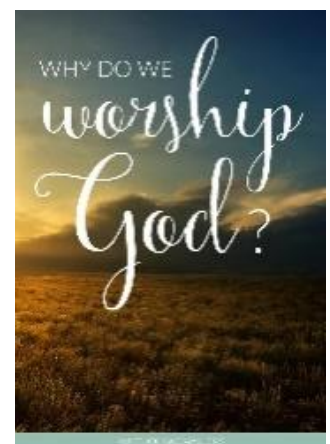
In the moments just before jumping, sport becomes more than a performance, it becomes the platform and instrument to praise God with.

In other words, for Nicola, her chosen sport becomes her way of worshipping God, her way of serving God. It’s similar to when Jean plays the organ, when Kathryn sings or when Sue leads our prayers, or when others visit the lonely or pray for the sick in our midst – all of these are forms of worship.

So why do we worship? At our worship group meeting this week I asked the members this question ... ‘why do we worship?’

Their answers included the following:

- To support one another in our journey of faith
- To glorify God
- To learn how to live more faithfully



- To be encouraged and motivated to act differently
- To step aside from our other responsibilities, to be reminded of what's important and to be refreshed for the week ahead

It's time now to think what aids or hinders our worship.

Perhaps the biggest factor is the attitude we bring.

We can be so anxious and wrapped up in our own bubble that worship flows over us and around us but never engages our heart or our mind.

Or we can be overly critical of the elements that make up worship and spend the time thinking 'I really don't like this song or that tune, or that style of prayer. I really don't know why the preacher is rabbiting on about what the Bible says about an issue that isn't relevant to the issues I'm facing right now.'

English song writer, Matt Redman, was part of a booming young congregation that loved to sing contemporary music during worship. At one point the leaders noticed that worship was more focused on the quality of the music than on God. Worship had become a performance, which, the leaders discerned, offended to God. Redman wrote a song about the experience called 'The heart of worship'. Some of the lyrics go like this:



When the music fades, all is stripped away, and I simply come,
longing just to bring, something that's of worth, that will bless your heart.
You search much deeper within, through the way things appear;
you're looking into my heart.
I'm coming back to the heart of worship
and it's all about you; it's all about you Jesus.

The attitude we bring to worship is central. Rather than being critical or frustrated, we can choose to lay down our anxieties and issues for this hour or so, and open ourselves to hear a word from God, and to offer God our praise and thanks for all that is good in the world.

I want to spend a few minutes now thinking how beauty affects our worship.

I'm sure that most of us have had times in nature – whether a beautiful sunset, the rugged splendour of mountains or the web of life in a forest



– where we experience a moment of awe and worship of the One who created it all. No words are needed.

Likewise, in our curated worship, art and music are valuable aids to worship that communicate in a different way than spoken words.

In our reading today from the book of Exodus we learn that the setting for worship matters a good deal to God. The final 15 chapters of the book, nearly half its length, are dedicated to the design and building of the tabernacle, the portable tent of worship. The climax of the book is God's presence filling the tabernacle as the people gather to worship.

In the passage we heard, everyone is invited to offer a gift for the tabernacle – whether precious metals or gemstones, wool or fabric, oil or spices. What matters is the willingness to give and offering the best of what one has. God then anoints two people, Bezalel and Oholiab, with special skills in working with metal, wood and fabrics.

The place of worship is to look beautiful and colourful and to smell wonderful, a special place to lift the spirits and the soul towards heaven. The later Temple in Jerusalem was designed with similar aims. As were many churches down through the centuries, including great cathedrals.



As Protestants, we have inherited an unfortunate distrust of such beauty in worship. At the time of the Reformation, most of the artistic beauty was deliberately removed from churches lest it entice people back to the Catholic Church – no paintings, no statues or icons of the saints, no candles, no fancy robes, no ornate carvings, no incense. Instead, worship spaces became fairly plain and functional, with the emphasis placed on the reading from Scripture and the sermon. This concept again became popular in the 1970's. What was lost was the sense of awe one has walking into some older churches or cathedrals that draws one naturally into worship.

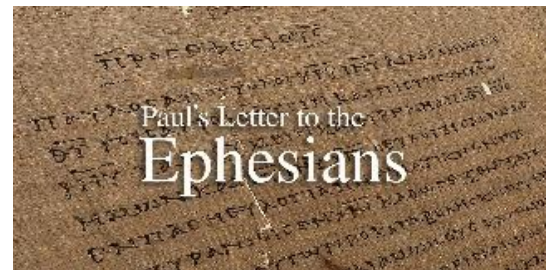
The architecture of our worship spaces hasn't helped. Here at Croydon North the building is modern and light and warm – but fairly functional apart from the two stained glass panels saved from the old church. At Croydon, the architectural style is called brutalist. It suffers from being quite a dark and cold space that is lifted only by the unique stained glass windows and by banners.



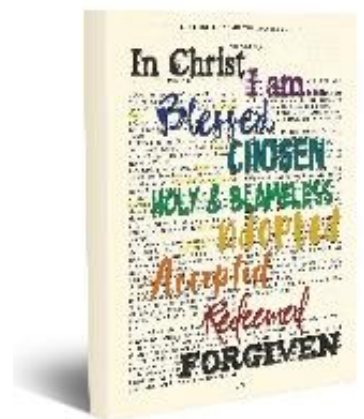
When the building at Croydon is redeveloped, the aesthetics of the building need some careful consideration, just as in the original design of the building. There are budget constraints of course. But we will have to think what is really needed for function – dividing walls, a new entrance to the garden space, quite possibly a new entrance at the front of the building, adequate storage, adequate heating – and what is needed to beautify the space in the form of artwork, banners, wall hangings, liturgical furniture and lighting.

Both of these aspects matter, but it would be a great shame and lost opportunity if the budget for the artistic side of the redevelopment is skimped. It may sound outrageous, but in a total budget of approx. \$800K up to \$100k may be justified to transform the space into one that draws you into God's presence and fills you with a sense of awe and thankfulness.

The second half of the letter to the Ephesian church is full of advice about how to live a faithful life. In the passage we heard, the people are urged not to get drunk on wine but instead to be filled with God's Spirit and to speak to one another through songs and hymns. Part of this singing will presumably be verbal as the congregation sings psalms and other songs of praise. But part of the singing is in people's hearts as they give thanks to God in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.



As we read back through the first half of the letter, Paul encourages the congregation to give thanks for being chosen in Jesus, for being adopted as God's children, for being redeemed from darkness, for the inheritance that awaits us in heaven, for the gift of God's grace, for the peace that Jesus brings us with God, for the overwhelming love of Christ and for the gifts God has bestowed on the church.



A key part of our worship then is remembering these many blessings that we enjoy in Christ and to sing of them to each other and also to God.

This invites us to sing and to pray and to praise and to gratitude – in other words – to worship.

None of this will directly or magically change the challenges and difficulties that we face, but it will remind us of God's immense love and care for us that stretches from before time to our future in heaven.

So it's time now for us to sing in such a manner, singing our faith, and having the blessing of praying twice (this thought is usually traced back to Augustine who explained that when we sing we pray with our lips and also pray with our hearts). We will sing one of the many great hymns from our tradition penned by Charles Wesley ... O for a thousand tongues to sing! This hymn was written in 1739 and originally had 18 verses of which our first verse appears as verse 7. The uplifting tune that we sing was written later in 1803.