

God is spirit; key to Christian worship NPC 28/5/06

The last time I had the privilege of speaking here, my theme was

“God is light; key to Christian fellowship”

If you were here, I’m sure you remember every word!

This morning I would like us to consider the story which we read earlier, the encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman, and in particular verse 24: *“God is spirit and his worshippers must worship in spirit and in truth.”*

The previous chapter, John chapter 3, is the story of Jesus meeting Nicodemus, a Jewish male, a respected teacher and the sort of person that Jesus as a Rabbi might have been expected to talk to.

John chapter 4 is the story of Jesus meeting an illiterate Samaritan female, a meeting which according to the customs of the time should never have happened. For a start, as John points out in verse 9, Jews do not associate with Samaritans. For reasons going back hundreds of years, reasons to do with race as well as religion, the Samaritans had built their own temple on Mount Gerazim and claimed that theirs was the way to worship God. Secondly men were not

supposed to speak to women in public, indeed as one rabbi had written:

“One should not talk with a woman on the street, not even with his own wife, and certainly not with somebody else’s wife, because of the gossip of men.” And thirdly, Jesus as a Jewish teacher should not have been talking to this woman in particular. She was coming to get her water, not with the other women at dawn, but at noon, the hottest part of the day; because she was despised by the others because of the kind of person they thought she was. She had no choice but to make the daily journey all alone.

But Jesus knew that Nicodemus, the respected teacher, and the Samaritan woman whom everyone else despised, had an equally great need of him; and he seemed equally at home with both of them. Is that not reassuring for us? We come this morning, different faces, different backgrounds, different life stories, but all of us in need of meeting Jesus. How good it is this morning to know that Jesus welcomes all who come to worship in spirit and truth, regardless of out track record.

The story starts with Jesus tired from walking and thirsty, a reminder that the Word had indeed become a human being and was sharing all our needs and frustrations, In fact Jesus makes his very weakness his

point of contact with the woman by asking her for a drink (verse 7). The woman is astonished that Jesus is speaking to her at all. And when Jesus goes on to offer her “living water”, it’s not at all surprising that she misunderstands. She thinks he is offering some kind of magic water supply which will save her the chore of coming out here on her own every day. But instead, Jesus is offering her eternal life.

And Jesus then gets right to the heart of the matter. This woman’s life is an emotional desert, a dry place where relationships fail. She is now caught, realising that there is more to this stranger than she could possibly have realised. Jesus is not trying to rub her nose in it; he wants her to recognise the reality of her deepest need. Much more than the water from the well, she needs the life-giving water of the Holy Spirit in her life.

But Jesus is getting a bit too close for comfort, and so she changes the subject and starts talking about one of the big issues which divided the Jews and the Samaritans (verse 20):

“Our fathers worshipped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem.”

Jesus’ response in verses 21-24 gives us some of his most basic and radical teaching on worship;

- You will be transformed to a new way of worship
- Your mind will be opened to a new vision of God
- The Spirit will come and all the questions about where we worship and what tradition we follow will become irrelevant

Let’s look then in more detail at verse 24.

We must worship in **truth**. To put it negatively, we must avoid error. We have in our hands the word of God, God’s guideline on how to worship. And the number one rule is that only in and through Christ can we worship God. People may come to us with all kinds of theories, New Age and others about new ways of worshipping, but unless they acknowledge that Jesus is Lord, we will stay well clear of them. But worshipping in truth means more than simply avoiding error. We need to have a true picture of who God is. We have to realise that we are approaching our Creator, the One who holds our breath in his hands and who controls all our ways (Daniel). We must give God His place and recognise his worth – that’s what worship (worth-ship) means. That’s why the heavenly host in John’s revelation fall down and cry: *“Worthy is the Lamb who was slain”*
We need to give God His place.

We also have to realise the truth about ourselves. One of the most scandalous stories that Jesus told was the story about the 2 men who went up to the Temple to pray. One was a good man, a religious man, a Pharisee; the other was a bad man, a tax collector. The good man stood up and told God what a good person he was and reminded God about all the good things he did – fasting, praying, giving money to charity and being generally superior to the bad man. He actually thanked God that he is not like the tax-collector. The bad man didn't need to be reminded that he was a bad man, he simply prayed: *“God, be merciful to me the sinner!”* And Jesus points out that it was the man who repented who went home justified, made right before God. But is there not something in all of us that wants the good man to be rewarded? It is so subtle, is it not? We still want to earn our way to heaven. We want to get to heaven and say: “I did it my way.” But that is not an option, because Jesus is the only way to God. I am reminded of the story of the Sunday school teacher who told the children this story of the 2 men who went to pray. When he had finished he said: “And now children, we are going to pray. And we are going to thank God that we are not like that awful Pharisee.!”

You see, **worship does not have to be perfect, but it does have to be honest.**

Our worship does not have to be perfect. What a relief that is, even on a superficial level. It is a great relief to me to know that if, or rather when I make mistakes in leading worship, we can just laugh about it together and move on. And it is a great relief also for the elders to know that they too are not putting on a performance, but simply serving the Lord this morning. On a deeper level as well, it is good to know that we do not have to be perfect as we come to worship. If we did, how many of us would be here? Answer: none of us. But we do have to be honest. As Psalm 51:6 tells us:

“You desire truth in the inmost parts.”

We have to be totally honest as we come to the God who searches us and knows us.

We must also worship God **in spirit**. And this too brings us to the heart of worship. In the evening service, Calum is giving us a bird's eye view of the Scriptures. And one thing which comes across strongly is that God is a being who seeks our worship. Right at the start of the Bible we are given a wonderful image of God walking in the Garden in the cool of the day, looking for fellowship with the people

He has created. And when they spoil things by listening to the serpent and thus turning away from God, it is God who immediately sets up a rescue plan, promising one who would come to “bruise the serpent’s head”. And this theme continues throughout Scripture. God, the One who made each of us a unique person in His image, wants a relationship with each one of us; He wants our worship.

What is important as we come to worship God? Not the external things like form of worship or liturgy. As most of you know I have had the privilege of going to Africa and of worshipping with African brothers and sisters. It’s amazing how, as they worship, in particular as they sing, their bodies seem to become part of their worship as they move in time to the music. But that does not make their worship superior to our more staid way of worshipping. Nor is our form of worship better or worse than our fellow Christians in the Baptist church, the Episcopal Church or the Free Church. What matters is not whether we raise our hands in the air or keep them at our sides. The externals are not important, what matters is what is going on in our hearts before the Lord.

You know, as I was preparing this sermon, I could not help thinking of the many occasions when I have gone out of church on a Sunday and met someone who has

asked me: “How was church this morning?” And to be honest, usually my answer is something like: “The singing was great” or “There weren’t a lot of folk out today”. But these are not the things which really count. Yes, the singing is important. Yes, it’s great to see more people coming to church. But what really matters is whether or not we meet the Lord

I would like to give you 2 X’s to take away with you this morning.

Experience worship on a Sunday. It is good to be here this morning and to worship together. Of course we can worship at home, and I’ll come to that in a moment. But right here and now we can meet God corporately, as the body of Christ. If our worship does not include corporate worship, then it is not complete. Eugene Petersen (who wrote the modern paraphrase of the Bible called “The Message”, says this: “*Let us worship God* is the most important sentence spoken week after week, year after year in congregations all over the world. It calls us to attention before God who has something life-changing, soul saving and world-renewing to say”

Expand your idea of worship. Some moments ago we were singing Psalm 139:

“Where can I go from your Spirit?”

Where can I hide from your presence?

If I go up to the heavens, you are there.

If I make my bed in the depths, you are there.”

If God is everywhere, then we can worship him any time any place. One of the easiest mistakes to make is to restrict our worship to an hour on a Sunday morning. We compartmentalise our lives and say in effect: “Here’s the holy bit, the bit between 10.30 and 11.30 on a Sunday. The rest is different.” No, let’s expand our worship out into the week. Whatever we are doing – washing the dishes, gardening, driving – in all our daily activities we can turn to the Lord and honour Him by giving Him His place.

So much of our time can be spent in fulfilling different roles, being the people others want us to be.

Modern life can be busy, complex and fragmented.

We need to come and sit quietly in the presence of our Father and present ourselves to the one who made us, knows us and loves us.

Incredible as it may seem, our worship matters to God. He sent His only Son to earth to make it possible

These are wonderfully encouraging words:

“True worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshippers the Father seeks.”