

## Talk 1

Every Sunday as we gather here, the person who is leading starts the service by saying “*Let us worship God*”. The call to worship is a reminder of why we are here. In a world where so many things compete for our attention, in an age where we seem busier than ever before, we are called to recognise who God is and also who we are. Every act of worship promises fresh witness to God’s revelation and fresh access into his presence. Unfortunately, not all acts of worship make good on the promise, but the call “Let us worship God” nevertheless calls us to attention before God.

This morning we are looking at what we do as we worship and in particular what role our singing plays. We gather, in the words of David Montgomery, before God who has something life-changing, soul-saving and world-renewing to say to us, and that has got to be important.

Singing in church is not the religious equivalent of television commercials; it is not a

bit of light relief between the serious bits like the prayers and the sermon. It is an essential part of our bringing ourselves before God. It is a moment when we can all take words which have been written by someone else and make them our own. The worship of God is not a casual thing. It is an expression of worth. That is what worship – or *worth-ship* – means.

As John Bell points out in his book *The singing thing*, worship which is offered with little forethought or preparation, worship which is shoddy and badly led, is not simply an inconvenience to the congregation, it is an insult to the Almighty. That is not to say that our worship has to be faultless, of course. There are many occasions when the worship leader gets it wrong or forgets something because he or she is human.

But the offering of our worship should be like the offering of a special present to a special friend. The gift is chosen with love and may well cost time, money, physical effort and

imagination. And the same applies to our worship, because God is worth it.

Part of what we are doing is responding to God's greatness and love and expressing our devotion to Him in return. Our first song this morning was a psalm ("*O Lord our Lord in all the earth how glorious is your name*") which brought us before the Lord our maker. We were addressing God and reminding ourselves of the vastness of the universe and our smallness within it; of the way in which the creator God has crowned humanity with honour and glory; and above all of the greatness of God's name throughout the whole of his creation.

The psalms are a good place to start in our worship, but we do not stop there. The writers of no fewer than 6 of the psalms encourage us to "*Sing a new song to the Lord*". Believers down through the ages since have enjoyed new songs, though sometimes it has to be said new songs have not been appreciated. Horatius Bonar was a minister in Edinburgh in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and wrote many fine hymns. He has

been called "*The prince of Scottish hymn-writers*". On one occasion he felt that his congregation needed a new hymn to express their response to God and he introduced to them his hymn "*I heard the voice of Jesus say Come unto me and rest*" with its response "*I came to Jesus and I found in him a resting place*". It is a fine hymn and we still sing it today. But Bonar's congregation were not so grateful; they asked him not to use it again in church and to keep his hymn-writing talent to himself!

One reason why we need new songs is that we worship a God who is constantly doing **new things**; new things in our lives if we let him; new things in his church. And sometimes the old songs, wonderful though many of them are, just don't seem adequate to respond to the God who is at work afresh in our hearts.

We find examples of new acts of worship in the Bible. Geoff read one of them to us a few moments ago. **Mary** is a simple peasant girl from Nazareth who has just discovered that that

she is being caught up in God's plan for humanity; she has been chosen by God to be the mother of Jesus. And her response is this song; a song where she celebrates God's work throughout the long history of her people; she sings of kings and rulers being overthrown; she celebrates the revolutionary upside-down kingdom of God which will be brought in by His son who is also her son. It is a new song of faith, of rejoicing in God of saying *Yes* to God. Let us join in Mary's celebration of God working as we sing Timothy Dudley-Smith's version of her song:

MP 631 *Tell out my soul the greatness of the Lord*

## **Talk 2**

If we did a survey this morning in church and asked everyone what their favourite book was, I'm quite sure that the book of psalms would feature in many answers. Why are the psalms still so popular after all these thousands of

years? One reason is that "The psalms are peculiarly in touch with what goes on in our lives" (Brueggemann)

An important part of this is the fact that the psalm writers not only celebrated God's goodness in creating us, leading and protecting us; they also believed strongly that the bad times had to be brought to God just as vigorously as the good times. And so we find people who are

- Going through the valley of the shadow of death
- Accusing God of not helping them but remaining at a distance
- Accusing God of being the cause of their problems
- Expressing despair at what life throws at them
- Demanding that God acts instead of sitting up there in heaven doing nothing at all, whilst here on earth the good suffer and the evil prosper.

God is big enough to handle our complaints as well as our praise.

And so, as the psalm writers faced real situations, they wrote things like this:

*“How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?”*

These words from psalm 13 were not written in an ivory tower, they were written by someone who felt that God was doing nothing to help them.

So this morning, let us not come to worship God at a polite distance, but bring to him the things which trouble us. Like the psalm writers, let us be honest as we approach the God who knows us. We do not have to wear a mask as we stand before God. He is after all the God who has searched us and knows us and before whom all things are open.

One thing which strikes me about many of the psalms is that they divide in two. There is a first section which starts in effect by saying “If only ...” If only life was fair; if only God seemed to be aware of what is going on in the

world; if only people would acknowledge God in their lives; if only there was not so much sickness, suffering and death”.

The second half of the psalm is very different. It starts with a “Nevertheless” We don’t usually hear whether things have got better or whether the writer is facing the same depressing circumstances as in the first section but with renewed faith – but there is a cry of “Nevertheless I will trust you. Nevertheless you are my God”

Praising God in the midst of life’s difficulties is something which we find in some of our best-loved hymns. George Matheson who wrote our next hymn is a good example of faith winning out in adversity. Matheson was a minister who went totally blind at the age of 20 and whose fiancée broke off their engagement as a result. He wrote *“O love that wilt not let me go”* at the age of 40. This is what he said about the writing of the hymn

*“It was the night of my sister’s marriage, and the rest of the family were staying overnight in*

*Glasgow. Something happened to me, which was known only to myself, and which caused me the most severe mental suffering. The hymn was the fruit of that suffering.”*

MP 515 *O love that wilt not let me go*

### **Talk 3**

Singing songs is not meant to be some kind of escape from reality. If we really focus on God and give him his place, we also begin to see the world around us in sharper focus. Indeed, if we claim to worship God and then ignore the needs of those around us, we fall under the same words of judgement that the prophet Amos spoke to God’s people many centuries before Christ. Just imagine someone getting up in church and telling us that this was God’s verdict on our worship:

*“Away with the noise of your songs!  
I will not listen to the music of your harps.”*

(Amos 5:23)

(or organ or praise band)

Why is God so angry when these people were as it were gathering in church to praise him? Strangely, it was nothing to do with the order of service, the newness or otherwise of the hymns or the hymn book. The clue comes in the next verse:

*“Let justice roll on like a river,  
Righteousness like a never-failing stream!”*

The prophet goes into detail about the hypocrisy of those who worship God but, in his words *“trample on the poor”, “oppress the righteous”* and *“deprive the poor of justice”*. If we reduce the gospel message to something purely sentimental; if we praise God with our lips but do not offer him our lives; if in our churches we ignore the hard issues of the day or the real issues in people’s lives, then God simply does not want our worship.

I read somewhere recently that if we preach the gospel but leave out the bits which refer to our own society, then we are not preaching the gospel at all. The same applies to our worship.

At the time when some hymn-writers in America were concerned to see the church taking a stand against the slave trade, James Lowell wrote these words:

*“Men whose boast it is that ye  
Come of fathers brave and free;  
If there breathe on earth a slave  
Are ye truly free and brave?”*

Do we have the courage to obey God’s command and include in our worship the issues of the 21<sup>st</sup> century? God is looking for a praising people who are not just concerned with their own comfort but whose worship spills over into loving service.

We are going to sing a hymn which points us in this direction:

MP 766 *“Who can sound the depths of  
sorrow?”*

#### **Talk 4**

So what makes a good hymn? It is a very personal choice. One of my favourites is the well-known “Be thou my vision”. But to some people it is just a reminder of school assemblies and being forced to sing.

However there are particular ways in which hymns can help us in our worship.

Hymns have got a vital role to play in **teaching us our faith**. Think of the way in which carols teach us the story of Christ’s coming into the world. The best carols are Bible-based. Look for a moment at this verse of Charles Wesley’s famous carol “*Hark the herald angels sing*” in which every line can be traced to a Bible quote or principle:

*Hail, thou heaven-born Prince of Peace,  
Isaiah 9:6*

*Hail, thou Sun of Righteousness  
Malachi 4:2*

*Light and life to all he brings,  
John 1:4, 9*

*Risen with healing in His wings.*

*Malachi 4:2*

*Mild he lays his glory by*

*Philippians 2:6, 7*

*Born that man no more may die*

*1 John 4:9*

*Born to raise the sons of earth*

*Ephesians 2:1,5*

*Born to give them second birth*

*John 3:3*

The carol is totally Biblical and gives us a new insight into the purpose of Christ's coming.

How important it is to choose inspiring songs for our **children**. While children's song should be catchy and fun to sing, this is not at the expense of teaching trivialities. A song like

*"Our God is a great big God"* is simple, catchy and conveys great biblical truths. There is never any excuse for teaching a chorus like the one I learned as a child called *"Running over"* and contains the lines:

*"Since the Lord saved me  
I'm as happy as can be"*

You certainly would not find that in the psalms.

It is not part of our theology or of our experience, so why sing it?

A good hymn will not only teach; it will **inspire**. A preacher could spend a long time teaching about the power of Christ in creation and contrasting it with the weakness of Christ on the cross. But a hymn writer can do it in 2 lines, and use words that you will remember.

Just consider for a moment Graham Kendrick's wonderful words referring to Christ:

*"Hands that flung stars into space  
To cruel nails surrendered"*

Or the same writer again, this time writing about Christ's victory:

*"Hell had spent its fury on him,  
Left him crucified.*

*Yet by blood he boldly conquered,  
Sin and death defied."*

Hymns should assist both our minds and our hearts to worship. They should also inspire us to move out in loving service.

It is my prayer that as we come to the end of our service this morning and go out into the outside world, these songs which we have been singing will go out with us; that we will find that they have something to say to us as we look after the children, do the housework, go to our work – indeed that we will live our lives closer to the Lord as a result.

Our final hymn reminds us of the Christ who came as a servant king; and as we sing we resolve to follow his example that the whole of our lives may be an offering of worship to Him.

MP 162 *From heaven you came*