Worshipping God

Jesus said that the first and most important commandment was that we should love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength (Mark 12:30; Deuteronomy 6:5). How do you feel about God demanding your exclusive, total loyalty and devotion in this way? God is not so insecure that he needs our worship. Far from it! But he is a God who loves his people passionately and is 100% committed to us, and he longs for that love and devotion to be reciprocated. He calls us to love him because love is the key element in any relationship.

Furthermore, worshipping God is good for us. We do not remain detached from whatever or whoever we worship; whatever we make the focus of our hearts and minds shapes and moulds our attitudes, our priorities and our character. In short, we become what we worship. So if we worship a God who is supremely good, completely loving and forgiving, holy in all his ways, that has to be good for us. How do you feel about the idea that we become what we worship? Can you think of examples of how you have seen or experienced that happening in practice?

William Temple said that worship is ‘the submission of all our nature to God. It is the quickening of conscience by His holiness; the nourishment of mind with His truth; the purging of imagination by His beauty; the opening of the heart to His love; the surrender of will to His purpose – and all of this gathered up in adoration, the most selfless emotion of which our nature is capable’ (*Readings in St. John’s Gospel*, 68). How do you like his definition? Does anything strike you as significant? If someone were to ask you, ‘What is worship, and why do you worship?’ how would you reply?

There is a lot more to worship than singing songs or hymns! It’s also about giving your best to God so that whatever you do is done for his glory; honouring God by looking after your body because it is a temple of the Holy Spirit; offering the whole of your life to God as a living sacrifice and placing everything on the altar; recognising and welcoming God’s presence with you and living each moment for him; serving others in the name of Jesus and inviting Christ to minister to them through you; declaring God’s goodness and praises; aiming to be holy in thought and deed and word; being generous in giving our time, our gifts and our financial resources; seeking to honour God as we discover and fulfil his tailor-made purposes for our lives; developing a habit of being grateful, giving thanks in all circumstances. Again, does anything on this list strike you as being important? Is anything important missing? For you, in your situation, how practical, easy or difficult is it to worship God in every area of your life? What difference does it (or could it) make if you did so? If all of our life is offered in worship to God in this way, why is coming to church (or watching a service online) still important? If we are in church on a Sunday, then a worship experience is not something which other people provide for us; worship only takes place when we all contribute and play our part in a communal act of worship. When we come to church, what are the different ways in which we can inhibit or release the Holy Spirit in his work of inspiring and leading our worship? Does ‘Spirit-led’ worship have to be spontaneous?

In many Hebrew manuscripts, Psalms 42 and 43 are combined as a single psalm; the two psalms share a common refrain (42:5 ,11; 43:5), and there is no title to mark Ps. 43 off as a separate psalm. The psalms seem to reflect the experience of an individual who is no longer able to participate in corporate worship. Reading them may remind you of how you felt when you could not come to church during Covid, or maybe you are not in a position to come to church now: if so, how do these psalms relate to your experience? Do they help you understand and express what you were (or are) going through? Does reading these psalms help at all?

Reading the two psalms together, what emotions are expressed to God? These psalms remind us that worship can - and probably should – include expressions of lament, the opportunity to pour out the contents of our hearts to God, honestly and openly telling him exactly how we feel. Yet while the psalmist expresses some deep, heartfelt emotions here, the psalmist also seeks to hold those emotions in check so that they are not simply driven by their feelings. At what points in these psalms can you see the psalmist expressing determination and decision rather than emotion? To what extent is giving God worship a matter of the will rather than of emotion? If we worship God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, how do our heart, soul, mind and strength contribute in different ways to our worship of God?

Lord our God, help us to give our minds to you in worship, so that we may listen to what you have to say to us, and know your will. Help us to give our hearts to you in worship, so that we may really want to do what you require from us. Help us to give our strength to you in worship, so that through us your will may be done. In the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (Caryl Micklem, *The SPCK Book of Christian Prayer*)