

THE PARISH CHARTER – WORSHIP

Ron Nicholson - 25th July 2004

I have just got back from a week's holiday. My son and his wife and their two babies took a beach cottage. From bitter experience we were too wise to share the cottage, but we took a nearby time share so that we could spend time with them. Grandpa was duly dragged into endless games of make-believe with the three year old and although his imagination sometimes ran short of new ideas it was good to have some quality time with her. But it was very special to spend time with the baby who is just 7 weeks old. She has learned to smile and gurgle, and most days grandpa and she spend some time just gazing and gurgling at each other.

My wife said I should spend some quality time with my son as well, so every morning at 5.30 I got up to join him on the rocks hoping to catch a shad run. Actually I'm not very good at fishing nor really so enamoured at tying on frozen sardine bait in the cold dawn but fishing is his passion and doing things together as father and son seemed a good thing to do.

Thank you for letting me do things together with you this morning in your parish charter programme. Today the theme is worship. We have just finished our charter programme in Howick and we did the filling in of questionnaires on Friday night. In some ways the results were predictable. In others they came as a surprise. People's impression of our worship was very positive. People's impression of our preaching was less unanimous than I would have liked.

We timed our Sunday in Howick for thinking about worship to co-incide with the day of Pentecost, because I think that the pattern which the story of Pentecost puts before us is still the pattern of Christian life today. Come together, stay, wait and worship, so that you may go out and do the tasks God has set you. It's a little like the pattern of breathing: breathe in, breathe out; breathe in to take in oxygen, breathe in to take in the living power of the Spirit, breathe out so that you may spread the power of the spirit abroad. Without breathing in, without worship as the start and foundation, we have no power, no vision. Life is not just about good works, it's not just about the tasks we must do in God's name as we set about our daily busyness. Without worship all of that busyness loses its point and its direction and its power.

And what is worship? Literally, I guess, the word comes from the same root as worth, giving God his worth, his due, his proper honour. But worship is not just honouring God. "What is the chief end of man?", asks the Presbyterian Westminster Confession. "Man's chief end is to glorify God", answers the confession, "and to enjoy him forever." But we can put it more simply. Worship is spending quality time with God. Of course you know that every

moment of every day you are with God. We are never out of God's sight even though we may not always have God in our own eyes. Worship is when we stop and think and look upon God and enjoy God,

I do like that old Father Faber hymn, "My God, how wonderful thou art, thy majesty how bright", sentimental though it may be. It captures something of what it means to glorify and enjoy God. I am sure the older among you will remember the words. "How wonderful, how beautiful the sight of thee must be". And then that last verse: "Father of Jesus, love's reward, what rapture will it be, prostrate before thy throne to lie and gaze and gaze on thee."

I know the idea seems bizarre. We have a dog at home, a labrador, whose greatest delight is to just lie and gaze into your eyes - for unlimited hours on end if you would let her. I picture all of those thousands gathered before the heavenly throne and gazing on God with doggy eyes. But of course that's just what Charlotte and I were doing, and what we all need to do before God - to be held in his arms and just gaze upon him. That's part of worship.

Worship is deeply personal and contemplative. It is gazing on God. It is the experience and the expression of our delight in being in God's presence, warmed and enthralled in his presence. This ought to be what we do in private and in personal prayer. But it should be part of our corporate worship too. Do we achieve that in our worship in the Church of the Ascension, we may ask, or are we missing on something. We need times of quietness and adoration in our services.

Worship is also a time of acknowledging with awe the holiness and majesty and even the terror of being in God's presence, as the Isaiah passage today captures so well. "I am a sinful man", says Isaiah, "yet with my own eyes I have seen the King, the Lord Almighty". Is there that sense of the holy, the numinous, in our services? Of awe before God Almighty? Or are we too blasé?

Worship is individual but also communal and that makes it more difficult. We are not just individuals before God but part of his whole family, on this earth and beyond, worshipping him along with the angel voices ever singing. We can't just worship God entirely on our own, though in some ways that would be easier. Humans are made to live in families. Families are nice but families are also sometimes a pain in the neck. But we have to worship alongside them. Humans need to worship in families - not just their own nuclear family though that would be nice to see families worshipping together, but with an awareness of being part of the wider family of all God's people in this life and the next. With angels and archangels and all the company of heaven we cry "holy, holy, holy is the Lord our God". Do we have enough sense of being a community united in worship here in the Church of the Ascension? Do we have a strong sense of all of God's people, including the beloved departed, around us as we worship?

Worship is spontaneous and informal. Yet worship involves liturgy. It involves praying and singing together and this requires set liturgies. Worship is informal and from the heart, but worship is also structured with measured words of prayer and hymn and bible. There is a place for spontaneous prayer in our services and perhaps we need to allow more space for it. Worship is also however, the disciplined habit of prayers and liturgy week by week, year by year, generation by generation as we stand in the grand historical tradition of our church. Some of you, I guess, like spontaneity and freedom in our worship. Others will find this an irritation and a distraction. But if we are to be a community at worship, it means doing things together, like Simon and me fishing together, even if fishing might not be your first choice of what you like to do. Bearing in mind that we are a community at worship, have you found the right compromise here?

Worship should be uplifting, sending us out joyfully and filled with God's spirit with a song in our heart. Is that how it is for you? But also worship can be salutary as it reminds us of our failings, humbling as we see more clearly our own unworthiness and smallness before God's majesty. I hope that in your worship in Hilton you are sometimes rebuked and humbled by God's word.

"Craftman's art and music's measure for thy pleasure all combine". For a while we at St Luke's after our church fire have been denied the beauty of our church building and have been worshipping in the hall. There is no doubt that beautiful buildings, beautiful music, beautiful art, lift our spirits in worship; except, of course, that we all have different ideas of what constitutes beautiful music and beautiful art.

In our worship we must indeed offer to God the best that we can; prepare our music as well as we can; prepare our readings as well as we can; make our churches as beautiful as we can; in all of this we honour him. But it is the spirit in which we do this, rather than the technical quality of our achievement, that matters. Perhaps we need to remember Jesus' words to the Samaritan woman. Our Samaritan custom, she told Jesus, is to worship God in sacred groves in the mountains, in the beauty of nature; but you Jews say the only true worship is that which is offered in the temple in Jerusalem. And doesn't that still sound a familiar story. Only our priests are validly ordained; only our Mass is the true Mass; only our worship is pleasing to God. God listens to Anglican prayers but not to what we think of as Full Gospel rantings. God is pleased when Christians celebrate the Eucharist but pays no heed to the Hindu's daily puja. And Jesus says to her, the place doesn't matter, the manner of prayer doesn't matter. God is Spirit, and only by the power of his Spirit can we worship him. It's the spiritual quality of our worship that makes it true worship which is pleasing to him

I truly hope that our worship here captures something of all these many facets. I am sure that it often falls short of God's glory. But if we come willing to

offer him our hearts, our best skills, our faltering love, if we come also in love with one another, enduring the things that irritate us, if we come faithfully both when we are in the mood and when we are not, if we come saying, in the words of the old prayer book, “here we offer and present unto thee O Lord, ourselves, our souls, our bodies, to be a reasonable (or carefully thought through), holy and living sacrifice unto thee”, then we will be sent out in joy and in power to serve him all the week through. We glorify and worship him, to whom be, as is most justly due, all might, majesty, dominion and power, both now, henceforth and for ever more.