

Back to Basics: Worship
Revelation 5:1-14
May 10, 2020

My memories of worship in the large parish church in my home town are not happy ones. I can count the times (probably only about two) that as a young boy I sat with my father and older brother in our paid pew in the side transept, far from the high pulpit. It was a dreary experience. My brother fell fast asleep with boredom and my father sat erect and attentive. I have a vague memory of a large bowl passed at communion, but other than that I have little or no recollection of what happened in worship. It all seemed far removed in language and style from what my real life was like. Fundamentally for me it seemed excruciatingly boring. Was it me or was there something wrong with the stiff, formal, unemotional manner in which the whole thing was conducted? I suppose it could have been me, but sometimes I wonder.

Worship seems to be the natural response of the human family. As soon as Noah emerges from the flood on to dry land he builds an altar and worships. When Abraham moves from one place to another in his journeys he stops, builds an altar and worships. When Moses went to Pharaoh he asked him to let my people go so we may worship in the desert. When the king died Isaiah went into the temple to worship and had a startling vision of God. When Jesus arrived in a village or town the first thing he did on the Sabbath was go to the synagogue to worship. When the early church met after Pentecost we are told that they were daily in the temple worshipping. And when we are taken by John's vision into the other dimension worship seems to be at the centre. Throughout the bible worship is as natural as breathing in the experience of God's people. Still true?

If there was ever a time for us to reassess what we do in worship it ought to be now. Other than churches able to do live streaming of worship services, we are limited to recorded services. Preaching into a phone or camera has brought a brand-new challenge to clergy and teachers. But it's surely an opportunity to reassess what we do in worship once we are back in our buildings.

Over the past few decades we have seen a widespread and sometimes painful assessment of worship. There remain many different styles of worship, even within our Presbyterian church: some choose a high liturgical approach with vestments, organ and a classical music style: some are much more fluid with a blend of contemporary and traditional hymns, and a more casual liturgy: some feature only contemporary music led by praise band, and perhaps a more emotional, personal style: and perhaps some with a mixture of all of these. What is important, it seems to me, regardless of the style adopted, is that the Gospel is clothed in a language that is relevant to the modern ear and eye. Fundamentally, worship must appeal to all our senses if we are to be faithful communicators of the Good News. And above all worship ought to be comfortable with emotion as well as the intellect. We cannot risk leaving our minds at the door of church, nor can we be afraid of heightened emotions in response to worship.

In the other dimension, we commonly call heaven, John allows us to be flies on the wall witnessing this strange and grand worship that is happening in the throne room of God. And certainly there, both intellect and emotion is witnessed and encouraged.

While we may find the symbols and colourful pictures John paints somewhat weird, the people who listened to it read to them in their worship gatherings would have connected easily to the language. One of the most popular books in the latter half of the 1st century was Daniel, and especially chapter 7. His dramatic, symbolic language about beasts emerging from the sea was keenly studied in the 1st century.

John's purpose was to address the fear of the seven churches in Asia Minor, their growing apathy, their lack of courage in the face of the threat posed by Rome's hostility toward Christians. The apocalyptic language is the vehicle used by Daniel and other Old Testament writers as well as John to communicate hope. Unlike us, who are commonly much less conversant with the such Old Testament writings For many of us it just seems strange, foreign and bazaar.

In 70 AD Rome had already crushed any uprising in Israel by destroying Jerusalem. In 79 AD Vesuvius erupted and buried Pompeii

and several neighbouring towns. There was also the threat of the imperial cult of Caesar which resulted in the execution of many Christians. Nero was the first emperor to openly call out Christians for death. At the time of this letter toward the end of the first century, Domitian, who was known to be naturally inclined to cruelty, was the author of the second widespread persecution of Christians. In the Roman Empire, and certainly during these last two decades of the first century, to refuse to call Caesar god was to be, not only an atheist, but a traitor to the empire and worthy of the death sentence.

Christians were viewed as atheists because they didn't join in the festivals dedicated to the Roman gods, or worship at the shrines like their neighbours. For this they could be socially and economically discriminated against. This was a time of crisis for Christians in Asia.

In Revelation chapter five we are taken by John into the other dimension, unseen by us mortals, and we watch and listen. What's happening? God is on the throne and in God's hand is a scroll in which is written all that is about to happen. Who will open this scroll? There is none able and so John weeps bitterly. But wait! There is one, an elder informs John, who is able, who has conquered. He is **told** that the lion of Judah can open it. But what John **sees** is a lamb that has been slaughtered. Because of the lamb, who has borne our sins and been resurrected and sits at God's right hand with power, he can open the scroll. At this very moment the twenty-four elders fall before the lamb and sing to him: **You are worthy**. And in addition, there is a host of angels and all the living creatures who represent the animal creation and who also sing to the lamb. They sing, but can you hear them singing? **Worthy is the lamb**.

What this vision tells this persecuted minority of Christians is that God is in control, not Rome, not Caesar. Surely the apparent crises they have witnessed, in nature, in politics, and in their small communities, is now set in the larger framework of God's providence. It may appear to them that things are falling apart, that the future of their churches is in doubt, but look at this scene in heaven's throne room. John shows them the majesty, power, and control of the one seated on the throne. Everything is being worked out. The scroll of the future has been opened by the lamb, their Saviour.

And need I say this, but this is still true today for us. God is in control of the rhythm of history. God is moving history to its destination. History is not, as many imagine, a cyclical, never ending rhythm. No! God has a plan and is moving everything to its destined end. Regardless of the empires of the world, regardless of their might and threats, God is working out his purposes on earth. God is in control. God loves the universe and all that it is in it. Indeed, as the Gospel reminds us, God loves the human family and knows every hair on our heads.

This is the encouragement John brings to these anxious Christians in first century Asia. The same message is for us today! In spite of appearances that suggest that we are on the losing side, that the church is heading for extinction, that we are at the mercy of empire, it is not so. The lion of the tribe of Judah, and the lamb who was crucified, he has the power and authority to open the scroll of the future and knows the end from the beginning. He is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.

So, is it important who or what we worship? If we don't worship the God revealed in Jesus Christ, who or what do we worship? As we said at the beginning, worship is not an option for the human family. We seem to be hardwired for worship. If we worship money, or fame, or success, or ourselves, we may find ourselves shaped by those gods. But that is another story for another sermon.

In the meanwhile, let us be reminded that John's vision of the throne room speaks to us of the reality that lies hidden behind the curtain. God, the Lord, is Sovereign and in control of the universe's destiny!

Amen