

SERVICE TRANSCRIPT

10th January 2021

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Speaker: Mark Reid

Good morning everyone - and welcome again to our online service, on this the second Sunday of 2021. I hope that this last week has been a good one for you, and that you have known God's presence with you day by day.

CALL TO WORSHIP

"Great and marvellous are Your works,
O Lord God, the Almighty;
Righteous and true are Your ways,
King of the nations!
"Who will not fear, O Lord, and glorify Your name?
For You alone are holy;
For all the nations will come and worship before You,
For Your righteous acts have been revealed."

I will be glad and exult in You;
I will sing praise to Your name, O Most High.

I will sing of lovingkindness and justice,
To You, O Lord, I will sing praises.

O come, let us sing for joy to the Lord,
Let us shout joyfully to the rock of our salvation.

I will be glad and exult in You;
I will sing praise to Your name, O Most High.

LET US PRAY:

Heavenly Father – as Christ's first followers, we meet to praise you, to thank you for all you are to us, for all you have done for us and for all you will do through us.
We meet to worship you - in all that is said and done this morning.
May your name be glorified.
Accept our worship we pray
AMEN

AND WE SAY THESE WORDS

LEADER *Come, praise God, sing of His love:
Give thanks to the Creator of your life.*

ALL *It is our God who made the earth:
He is the Creator of the sky and the sea.*

LEADER *All creatures come from His almighty hand:
There is nothing that He has not made.*

ALL *Rejoice that He made us out of His love:
We come from Him and dwell in Him.
All that exists is in the heart of our God:
Great, mighty and wonderful is His nature.*

LEADER *Come praise our God, sing of His love:
Give thanks now to the Creator of your life.*

As I thought about today – January 10th – I wondered if there was anything special about the date. I discovered there are lists for every day of the year – here are some of the things noted as special for today.

Birthdays today

Rod Stewart (pop singer)
George Foreman (boxer – and grill creator!)
The first meeting of the United Nations

Celebration days (in America at least!)

Bittersweet chocolate day
Save the eagles Day

I especially like

National Houseplant Appreciation day

This is what it says:

By today, our various holiday decorations and Christmas trees have made their way out of our homes. National Houseplant Appreciation Day is on January 10 every year, and it reminds us that we don't have to lose the freshness and vibrancy that plants bring to our homes just because the holidays have drawn to a close.

So - What is appreciation

Dictionary definitions include:

- recognition and enjoyment of the good qualities of someone or something.
- Gratitude – say thankyou

Do you remember those evenings when we stood on our doorsteps and clapped our appreciation of the NHS and all those involved in front line work. We stopped doing that - but they didn't stop their work. And it continues for them – and so many others.

As we now enter this New Year- things still look a bit bleak - with political tussles about just about everything, the virus is still rampaging through the world, travel plans are still in total disarray, still in tier 4.....

And yet – there IS much to appreciate, to give thanks for

The vaccination programme has begun

The days are getting longer

We have at last Brexited – whatever that will bring

USA now has (almost) a new president

Laura Ingalls Wilder – of the Little House on the Prairie real life story wrote this:

“the real things haven’t changed – it is still best to be honest and truthful; to make the most of what we have and to be happy with simple pleasures”

She reminds us to give thanks for everything – however small.

But – best of all – let us give thanks that

Jesus is here, Immanuel – God with us - by His spirit. We are not alone – there is a real light at the end of the tunnel of our lives – we have such a wonderful promise and hope.

Our God is a “with us” God. On the heels of the celebration of the birth of our King, that reminder has the power to carry us right into a fresh, new start. He is Immanuel, God with us. And though things and people around us shift and change, our God never changes.

I have spoken before about SIFT – Seed International. Their work is in Nicaragua – a country that is already very poor, and now hit hard by Coronavirus and the limitations that has put on life there. SIFT has carried on as much work as they have been able but a lot has had to be put on hold. However, there have also been innovative ways to continue fundraising at least.

The young man I know from days in Stroud who is now SIFT’s finance officer has been walking -on a treadmill!

May 2020

Graham is ahead of schedule on his virtual sponsored walk and so he will be walking an extra 20 miles down Nicaragua's Pacific coast to the border with Costa Rica! He raised over £5000 for SIFT's medical work on Ometepe

November 2020

Graham started on his "North through Nicaragua" challenge. It's a 148 mile treadmill trek, from Nicaragua's capital Managua to the northern border with Honduras, and it's raising money for SIFT's health clinics.

Let’s pray for him, and for the work of SIFT in Nicaragua as they continue to bring hope, health and education to all those they are able to reach.

SO, LET’S PRAY:

Father, we thank you for the work of SIFT in Nicaragua. We pray for all concerned, either as workers or recipients of their care - that all will be blessed, all kept safe and well and that the work will continue and bring many blessings to the people and the areas in which they live.

Amen

Intercessory Prayers

This week we have witnessed some serious and sad happenings in our world, our nation and in our church. In our world we have seen political turmoil in America as rioters attacked the US Capitol. Here in Britain, there have been record numbers of Covid infections, hospitalisations and deaths. In our own church, we have sadly mourned the death of our former minister Ron Rivers. Let’s bring these before God. I am going to pray three short prayers that end in Lord, in Your mercy and we all say, hear our prayer.

Father

We bring before you the United States of America which has seen much turmoil this week. We look with sadness at the violence that has occurred, resulting in the deaths of four people. We pray that as the country prepares to inaugurate Joe Biden as President, that that wise and godly leaders will prevail that will start to bring healing to the broken society and politics of that land.

Lord, in your mercy

Hear our prayer

Father we pray for our own land that we have the huge contrast between seeing the introduction of now three approved vaccines and the disease spreading rapidly and causing many casualties. We pray for our national leaders at this time, that they may have wisdom in the decisions they make. We thank you for the commitment of NHS staff and Carers generally as they try to help those who are sick and vulnerable and pray that the tide of new cases will slow before our health service is swamped. We pray too for those who are struggling through lockdown, from mental health issues, family problems, financial problems and needing to shelter that they may find support from community and church.

Lord, in Your mercy

Hear our prayer

Finally Father, we pray for those in our own fellowship who are suffering from health problems and bereavement that you will be close to them. We thank you for the life and ministry of Ron Rivers who served as pastor of this church who is now with his Lord. Please be close to his family at this present time as they miss a husband, father and grandfather. Let's just take a few moments as we personally pray for others we know in the fellowship or are known to us individually.

Father, we lift all these people before you. Be close to them we pray. Bring your health and healing through the power of Your Holy Spirit.

Lord, in Your mercy

Hear our prayer

In the name of Your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ

Amen

READING: Acts 2:42-47 (NIV)

42 They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. 43 Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. 44 All the believers were together and had everything in common. 45 They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. 46 Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, 47 praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

SERMON

LIGHT AT THE END OF THE TUNNEL

So here we are, back in Lockdown but with the hope of the end of the pandemic on the horizon. The present pandemic has been a wake-up call for the church in this generation I believe. When we can't be everything we have been, it gives us the opportunity to ask ourselves the question: what should we have been like? What should we be like when we have freedom again and how can we prepare. And that's where Pentecost comes in.

The sound of a windstorm, tongues of fire, disciples speaking in different languages, thousands being added to the church and lots of excitement. When the Spirit works in power, the results are exciting, awesome, life-changing, challenging. God wants the Church of Jesus Christ to be awake to what it can be and what it can do in Christ.

In our introduction to our short series on the very early church last week we, I listed five features about the very early church in the six verses we read. I hope these will inspire and guide us as we reflect on where we now go as we leave pandemic conditions and ask the question "what sort of church?" In those days the church was filled with a passion for God and one another. Here's the list again.

The Church was:

COMMITTED TO WORSHIP
COMMITTED TO FELLOWSHIP
COMMITTED TO DISCIPLESHIP
COMMITTED TO SERVICE
COMMITTED TO SHARING

These are all throughout the five verses we read; they don't exactly each have a verse each but are interconnected. To be a healthy post-pandemic church, I believe we should give attention to these five areas. So here's the first.

COMMITTED TO WORSHIP: IT'S ALL ABOUT JESUS

Worship is one of those words that's much quoted but which bears unpacking. In English worship is short for worth-ship. Worship is an expression of the value, the importance that someone (or some thing) is to us.

Worship in English has the following range of meanings:

- the feeling or expression of reverence and adoration for a deity.
- religious rites or ceremonies, constituting a formal expression of reverence for a deity.
- great admiration or devotion shown towards a person or principle.

(In Britain we also use "worship" as a means of addressing certain kinds of respected citizens, for example judges or mayors.)

You won't be surprised to know that in both Hebrew and Greek, the same kinds of meanings are also used to describe worship and the concept of worship in scripture embraces all three meanings. Our worship of God is the way we express what He is worth to us.

FIRST ITEM

The first item in the list is one key to understanding worship. Our adoration and reverence to God should be borne out of us. It starts as an emotion rather than a response to a command. We worship God because we love Him, we adore Him, we are devoted to Him. It is a token of what He is worth to us. We often sing of loving Jesus. Why? Because we understand how much He loves and wants us and we see that as He hung on the cross and died for us.

We worship God because we want to. If worship isn't about our devotion, awe, passion, thankfulness, praise from our hearts, then it's not genuine – and God knows our hearts.

SECOND ITEM

And how do we express that devotion, that admiration, that reverence? That brings us to the second meaning of the word worship – the desire to worship corporately.

VERSE

This was the priority for the early church. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. They devoted (note that word, devoted) themselves to four things apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. They were spending time together to be close to God, to know more of Him – it was their passion. As they prayed, broke bread and listened to the word of the apostles and as they fellowshiped they grew in every respect as they engaged with God.

That's why we meet together as church. As our worship to God together we devote to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. We do all these things and affirm too the words of the writer to the Hebrews.:

VERSE

23 Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. 24 And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, 25 not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching. Hebrews 10:23-25

And they used the circumstances they were in in Acts 2 to be a worshipping people – in their homes, in the Temple, wherever. Some have used the Hebrew passage to argue that we must keep places of worship open during the pandemic so people can gather to worship. But gathering as Christians need not be in a sacred building, or any building. In the NT they used homes, the Temple, synagogues, lecture halls, down by riverbanks – wherever God’s people come to devote themselves to the apostles teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread and prayer, that’s where they engage with God. That’s where we worship Him. That’s where by His Spirit He ministers to us. Anywhere! So however unsatisfactory we think YouTube or Zoom, we take the opportunity to meet, to worship as opportunity allows. If we think hard done by, think of what the persecuted churches endure, empathise with them, applaud their resourcefulness and repent because we’ve complained of a temporary inconvenience!

We need to take every opportunity to worship Jesus that He presents us with, even if it isn’t what we are used to. The unfamiliar often takes us deeper into Jesus in my experience.

CHRISTIANS SINGING

What about singing you ask? It’s just one way to show adoration, to praise, to worship God. But if we are denied it, there’s plenty of other ways, some that we may have not embraced or taken advantage of over the years. Even just listening to words and meditating on them, rather than enjoying a tune, may have found satisfying during the pandemic. We can learn new things of God in new ways wherever we find ourselves.

One of the issues I’ve had for quite a while is how we equate music with worship. Praise is one facet of what our worship of God should be, what we commit and devote ourselves to. Our desire should be to honour Jesus in our praise, devotion and adoration – and through that we grow and thrive.

The strange irony of the last 10 months is that many of us have grown and changed and become closer to God because we have embraced the new and enjoyed the difference. Perhaps we should seek to appreciate more the opportunities we have to worship when “normality” returns and not take our devotion to God lightly. And add to it the lessons of Lockdown, that we will worship our God more fully and completely, using all facets of worship.

THIRD ITEM

Which brings us to the last part of our definition of worship: great admiration or devotion shown towards a person or principle.

Some of you may struggle with worship being online, fellowship being by Zoom and are thinking that you will just worship Jesus personally at home. After all what’s wrong with that? There’s nothing wrong – I fully endorse the principle that we must worship God as individuals. Lockdown is a great time to spend time with God – reading His word, praying, reading a good book or finding online teaching and allow God to speak to us.

VERSE

The Bible goes a lot further than that. Here’s a familiar verse I hope. It’s Romans 12:1 Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. (NIV). God has shown us so much love, so much mercy in Christ’s sacrifice that Paul says to offer our bodies as a living sacrifice. That’s our own, our spiritual service of worship.

TITLE

Having said all that, the emphasis on worship in the early church was on corporately praising God, seeking His face, coming around the table. Why, because of what Jesus has done on the cross for us. If we want the right focus in our worship, then it's not on how we do worship, but allowing our actions to be shaped by the one we worship. It's a song written against the background of realising that so often our worship is about us – the songs we like, the comfort of the style of worship, the type of preacher, refreshments after worship, how people are dressed, our traditions or whatever. Yet, it's all about Jesus. We are going to sing this song now as a prayer. I would then encourage you to reflect on the items for discussion and reflection which are back this week and think on some of the challenges that I believe God is bringing us this morning.

We say together:

**May the coming year be one of increased riches of grace –
Hearing His voice more clearly,
Knowing His heart more deeply,
Resting in His love more fully,
Trusting His care more completely,
Walking His pathway more peacefully,
Knowing His presence more intimately,
Blessed by His goodness more abundantly.**

**May the God who gave us last year
and the Saviour who walked at our side each day
and the Spirit who filled us with life abundant,
grace the coming year with peace and hope and joy,
Amen.**

And so we come to the end of another service.
Go into this week with the knowledge that Christ, Immanuel, is with you.
Keep safe and keep well – until we meet again.

Items for Reflection and Discussion

1. We have now worshipped in this unconventional way for 10 months. What has been the downside of doing church this way, and what for you have been positives in your walk with God and relationship with others in the church?

Read Acts 2:42-47.

2. In verse 42 we read that "*devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.*" We associate at least three of these as what we do as part of worship services. Why are all these things of importance in the life of the church?
3. Do we really need a building to worship God in? Where were the early church worshipping?
4. In what way may we be short sighted in thinking that worship is only singing praise or something done in a worship service. Romans 12:1 may help here. In what ways may our lives be worship?