

Study 1 - Reasons for worship



Remains of the earliest surviving Christian house church (2nd Century) at Dura-Europos in Syria

Opening Discussion

Where can you personally see God at work today and does it matter if others have problems in understanding this?



'At the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.'
(Philippians 2:10-11)



The Divine Command - We Shall Worship God Alone

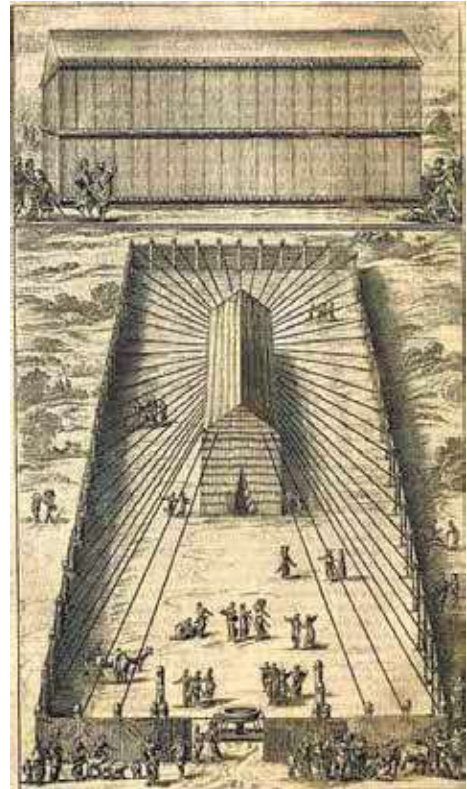
(Read 1 Chron 16:23-31, Psalm 148:7-14, Matt 28:16-20)

So, our study on worship begins not in a building but outside and a tent pitched by David to accommodate the Ark of the Covenant. After recruiting his worship band (lyres, harps, trumpets, and cymbals) he explains poetically (paraphrasing several psalms) why the people must not forget to worship the one true God. The reasons David gives include remembering all that God has done for them, his everlasting covenant with Abraham, the miracles displayed, and justice dispensed.

Above all, they are not to forget that the one they worship is the Creator and worthy of all praise. All other gods are idols.

The psalmist is inclusive in his instruction that all of creation should worship their Maker. It does not matter whether they are young or old, male, female, prince or pauper, they are to 'praise the name of the Lord' because he is their 'horn', their strength.

God has a covenant relationship with his people, who can draw together in his presence wherever they might be; 'What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the LORD our God is near us whenever we pray to him?' (Deuteronomy 4:7)



The tabernacle, engraving from Robert Arnauld d'Andilly's 1683 translation of Josephus.

SAMPLE

Matthew's message reminds us that worship of God is at the heart of the Church's mission to reach out to others. Here we find Jesus' followers worshipping him as representatives of the Church to be, even if their faith was not fully mature, with many unanswered questions.

Soon would come the Spirit at Pentecost and these followers of tender faith would become the people Jesus knew they always could be.

Q) Remembering was important for people who had been through so much and with God's help. Is remembering something that we are good at in our worship, and how far back should we go?

Q) The psalmist wants the whole of creation to worship its creator. That might stretch our imagination somewhat, but how might this planet, its plants, animals, and landscapes reflect something of their creator and aid our worship?

Q) Why is worship so important for the mission of the Church in the wider world?



Even the angels worship

(Read Isaiah 6:1-3, Psalm 103:19-22, Rev 4:8-11)

Isaiah's vision emphasises the importance of worship, for here is God seated high on his throne, a symbol of eternal, sovereign, and universal rule over all other kings or gods. The angels who attend show their humility by covering their faces as they sing their song of worship.

To say the word 'holy' twice in Hebrew is to describe someone as 'most holy.' To say the word three times brings the honour to its highest level, almost indescribable in human language.

This song repeats in Revelation as the four angelic beings, representing all God's created creatures including humankind, celebrate God's holiness and power as seen in his past, present, and future activity.

The strange description of these creatures as being covered with eyes might be an image representing their knowledge of God, and the chosen animals hint of some of God's qualities - of power, strength, spirituality, and swiftness of action.

Q) We may not grasp the full importance of angels in the bigger picture of creation (we only know the name of two, Michael and Gabriel), but they appear from Genesis though to Revelation, adopting various roles including carrying out God's plans and directly glorifying God through their worship (Psalm 103:20). What is your understanding of angels, and can they be an example to us?

Q) The writer of Revelation uses the image of creatures to represent some of God's attributes. If you were thinking of doing the same, what would the attribute be, and which creature would best represent it?



We are a worshipping people

(Read Exodus 19:5-8, Psalm 105:1-6, Isaiah 43:18-21)

Exodus brings us into the desert, just three months after Moses led the people out of Egypt. Here they would remain for several months while God's glory rested on the mountain. For the first time in Exodus, we find the word covenant, which is an agreement here between God and the people. If they will follow His will, a blessing will follow and they will become a kingdom of priests, a holy nation.



Cosimo Rosselli, Descent from Mount Sinai, 1480

Psalm 105 sweeps poetically through a broad sweep of God's dealings with his people from the time of Abraham to that of the entrance into Canaan. It covers many generations, but the emphasis is the same, on giving praise for all that God has done. Here is a faithful promise keeping God (mysterious in his ways but always mindful of his people) ever planning for their good and always worthy of their praise.

The reading from Isaiah reminds us of God's promise to make his people a holy nation. The previous readings have been about looking back at what God has done and praising him for what is coming. Here, Isaiah concentrates on the future relationship that he wants with his people. Do not look back, simply open your eyes and see what is happening now! God gave them a way through the waters and now he would make a way through the desert, where water would be a blessing rather than a barrier. Why does God do this? Because these are a chosen people, a holy nation who will spread God's name throughout the world through their lives of praise.

Q) Do God's words to the people in Exodus about becoming a kingdom of priests and a holy nation begin and end with them, or do you see God painting a bigger picture for all believers?

Q) How can looking back help us in our future planning, particularly where life has sometimes been tough?

Q) Isaiah relates God's words to the people, including this phrase, '... my chosen, the people I formed for myself that they may proclaim my praise' (v21). How does that speak to you about our relationship with God?

*'I like the silent church before the service
begins, better than any preaching.'
(Ralph Waldo Emerson)*

SAMPLE



Worship is the response of God's people

(Read Psalm 95:1-7, Joshua 5:13-15, Luke 5:24-26, Hebrews 12:28)

There is a great encouragement to worship in Psalm 95, which scholars believe the author wrote for people gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate a festival on a theme of the renewal of the covenant. But first, their hearts need preparing. They are responding to God's eternal love, the God who saved them and continues to do so when they respond in humble adoration to their rock and faithful protector. They worship a God who has the entire world in his hand, and all are welcome to 'Come into the temple and sing their songs of adoration.'

People can get very emotional when visiting a great cathedral or place of beauty, and the concept of 'thin places', where the divine presence seems close enough to reach out and touch, is one many would acknowledge. But what of being in the presence of someone of great importance? A King or Queen, Archbishop or Pope? Angel or God? Joshua's response to this enigmatic figure standing before him says something about his appearance because Joshua falls on his face in reverence. Some believe it to be the pre-incarnate Christ,

others the angel of the Lord who occurs elsewhere in Scripture. Joshua does not use the divine name 'Yahweh' in addressing the man, but his action speaks of awe and reverence in knowing God will be with him in the battle to follow.

Luke gives us a moment of recognition as a formally paralysed man, and those who were around and watching, acknowledge that they have seen something miraculous, and even if they are not ready to acknowledge Jesus as Messiah they know that God has been present through him in both actions and words. Their immediate response is one of awe and praise. There is a similarity between the crowd's response and that of the shepherds leaving the stable, 'glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen.' (Luke 2:20)

A response to God's actions; to his working in, through and for us, is important because it acknowledges the relationship that God wants to establish with us. 'Let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe.' (Hebrews 12:28)

Q) Assuming there is not a vast and noisy crowd already inside, how would you describe the atmosphere as you walk inside one of our great cathedrals?

Q) In a place of beauty, maybe one of those 'thin places' where God seems close, is worship an automatic response or do we maybe need more practice?

Q) Non-believers and atheists see this world differently, as one run more by chance and human design. How might we exploit this difference when talking to someone who has not yet explored matters of faith?



Personal Reflection

Think about your own attitude to worshipping God in your daily life, and how you might benefit in adjusting your daily routine to allow for time to spend in worship.