

Prayer & Worship

Ephesians 5:15-20

I have a few favourite things: a good lipstick, my books, my new trainers and my dog are all included! One of my favourite things to do is to meet my good friends for coffee and talk and dream and wonder about the world as we worry and sort out our lives and the issues of home, church and work! I love to read, and I love to be out on the wild coast of the North East, breathing in the clean, bitter cold air from the sea. I love chips, eaten in the open air and, the smell of hot salt and vinegar wafting down the alleyway on a warm summer's night. I also love wandering round the streets of Norwich, eating locally made Gelato and window shopping. I say window shopping, but this is something Gavin views as an extremely dangerous sporting activity... They may not be Maria from the Sound of Music's favourite things, but they are some of mine...

These things, lovely though they are - are temporal and earthly - they pass away and they are pleasures that only scratch the itch of need for a little while - the chips soon become yesterday's news, the books are soon read and the dog is soon in trouble for some crime of great heinousness...

My most favourite thing to do is to worship and to pray. When Paul says don't get drunk and behave reprehensibly, but instead be filled by the Spirit, he knew what he was talking about. We may invest our time in hobbies and stuff and not God things, but when we live a wise life, fixed and focussed on God through Prayer and Worship, it will lead to greater satisfaction in every area.

Paul in Ephesians warns us against scratching the itch of our need by losing our wits and our wisdom in drunkenness and the sensuality that comes from debauchery - the second of which is very easy to resist on a Sunday Morning... Paul though is linking the two... The things that cause wisdom to flee are the things that get us so distracted from God that they result in sense being so dumb and numb that we seek the pizzazz needed in life, the spark for life in godless and morally bankrupt activity.

If we are to be wisely careful of our life, we will seek God's wisdom and that comes from immersing ourselves in his very self - which we do in prayer and worship. The first words that a preacher or worship leader should say in setting out the worship time are ones of both invitation and expectation. We expect that this IS a time of worship. We Expect that we will meet with God in Christ through the Holy Spirit. We expect to see him and be transformed by him. The songs of praise should be ones from the Holy Spirit as we discover and express the heart of God together in song...

I'm not sure that our Methodist courses - important though it is that they are trained in preaching and leading worship - actually lead the new preacher or worship leader into an understanding of them being 'the one who stewards people into the presence of God' - into God's very throne room. There seems to be an over-emphasis on form and procedure at the expense of encounter and transformation. It has become a greater omission to not have three readings than to not have met the risen Jesus.

Expectation is key to both prayer and worship - both together as we are even now as we view this from different rooms on the livestream and separately as we catch up later, reading through the script or listening on the phone service. Do we actually expect that God will meet with us?

This expectation of meeting with God isn't dependent on singing or having fancy words or very much else other than an *attitude and bearing of expectation towards God*, where we use our cognitive abilities at whatever level to understand that it is better to be in the presence of God than anywhere else in time or space. Just a quick trot through Psalm 119 - read it when you have half an hour to spare - Psalm 119 shows the wisdom of keeping God at the front of our minds in all things... v 10: "I seek you with all of my heart - do not let me stray from your commands."

When we are children or new Christians, we are not taught the joy of worship in any meaningful way - it is something we are just supposed to pick up. Many of you have favourite hymns or worship songs- *and you can send those through on the live chat now if you wish* - some of those will be based on the tune or a phrase that caught you up. Some will be associated with weddings. -and hopefully to a lesser extent- funerals. We sing them out with great delight - but are they worship?

Do they cause us to truly honour God by our transformed attitude or is the singing of our favourite hymn simply a telling out of the songs we know? Like *Dancing Queen* or *Green Green Grass of Home* or *Fireball* or *Baby Shark*?? *And Can it be? My Jesus, my Saviour, In Christ Alone, What a Friend we have in Jesus* ... what is the difference in these as we sing them?

Surely it is the the direction of their focus... I suggest that "we will now sing hymn number 739" isn't actually a call to be worshipping - it is a continuity announcement in a programme. This is pretty much a throw down challenge to however I pray and lead into the worship here and now! But I'm up for it! I know where God is and it will be an honour and privilege to take you with me all the way there!

We have a right to be led with joy and expectation into God's presence. To expect that our leaders of worship and our preachers have been there and know the route... If they don't, they have no business trying to get others there. It is just frustrating and irritating to feel that the person leading the worship has no knowledge of the person or the whereabouts of God. How can we all get there if the person driving can't steer towards it...?

One thing I've missed this past few months is worshipping with you all - physically - drawing near to God, together as his church. Ben has done a brilliant job in being the one who represents our worship here on YouTube. But the space for and the sinking into the worship is not the same. When we learn to worship, it is a real sense of everything else being laid aside and for God alone to fill our time and to occupy all our space. It is in this moment that we discover that we are 'lost in wonder, love and praise' as Charles Wesley describes the experience of worship.

When we learn to worship, it is far more than a song, the song is a vehicle on which all our love for God is carried - which is why closing our eyes and singing along, humming or singing in tongues is a good expression of worship. It is about God. The environment of church or living room - and I 'm told, though I obviously don't believe it - that some people even show up for this YouTube worship in their Jim jams from their beds!! - The environment itself is not the vehicle for worship, we don't worship our pew or architecture - those in Sprowston or meeting in a School like in Old Catton know this to be true! Worship is a song from the heart to God. What is your song? What does your heart respond with, when your Spirit meets with the Spirit of God in that joyful, yearning, searching, yielding movement of worship into God's presence. It is there that we find his wisdom and can know his mind... I suggest that although a 4 verse chorus hymn might be very worthy in its words and proper in its expressed theology, it is often teaching us rather than letting our spirit soar and the worship rise up like incense to God.

Worship should be an expression of our prayer. We bring a prayer of praise and adoration, we worship God in acclamations of who he is. We worship and pray as we declare the goodness and character of God. We offer the words that proclaim the goodness and truth of God and discover that our worship is prayer, it is seeking after God's own heart, resting in God's own presence, experiencing the transformation that comes through surrendering ourselves to Jesus at the cross and allowing the truth of who God is to so fill our lives that our every breath becomes an activity of worship because we are in every respect, Living and working for God's praise and glory...

We learn to worship when we realise that knowing a lot of hymns is not the key. I know a lot of hymns, a LOT, even the real old ones - the ones that seem to go to every Methodist tune. But they don't make my heart soar or lose me into God's presence. I have a good English Degree from a good University, but I still don't fully understand what co-eternal, consubstantial mean or ineffably sublime... sure, they help with the whole God is a mystery but, but actually, they don't fix me with the sense that I am drawing closer to God, and I suspect that every child today who is made to sing those words will be left on the outside... Worship and prayer are our offering to God wherein we cannot tell where one ends and the other begins. We align ourself with God's purposes and goodness in them. We choose to lay self aside and to be more like Jesus through their expression. We lift each other in faith as we worship and pray corporately and as Paul says, they make us sort ourselves out.

We don't go looking for a fix to fulfil our lives in football, shopping, eating, drinking or sex says Paul - well, we doesn't say it, but it is implied because of where he does take us. Wise-up, he says. Be filled with the Spirit. Sing songs and Psalms to one another in the Spirit and give thanks to God for everything.

So today I give thanks that I can offer you the opportunity to give your life to Jesus once again. To set aside the itches of this world and seek God in worship. To expect that God will satisfy you and that you can expect to meet him in worship and through your prayers.

So do it. Do better, preachers and worship leaders... we will not now sing hymn 66, but we will lift our hearts to God, we will open our hands and invite Jesus to make his home within us right now as we invite the presence and power of God to cover us as we are lifted into the very throne room of God to declare the praise of his holy name and seek his wisdom and power over us and the world, for the Glory of his Name....