

It has been claimed that we are what we eat – at the psychological level what may be more true is that ‘we are what we see’! We live in a society which constantly bombards us with ‘me’ and convinces us that we are fully entitled to seek to satisfy this ‘me’. Although it may be the catch phrase of one particular cosmetics house to say ‘Because you’re worth it’, this is actually the message of most of our advertising. Whether it is a symptom or cause of our postmodern self-centring can be debated, but it is certainly an appropriate symbol for it.

Unfortunately this ‘me’ disease is making strong inroads into our attitudes to worship and often our experience of worship. People so easily evaluate the quality of worship by considering ‘what did I get out of it?’ and their criticisms are along the lines of ‘it didn’t suit/help/interest/excite ME!’ Because of this constant ‘consumerist’ pressure, those who lead worship often offer a liturgy (or present the liturgy) in a way which is conducive to the perceived ‘MEs’ in the congregation, or even worse, devise the approaches to suit their own ME!

And yet...

Our experience of worship ought to be the most powerful antidote to the encouragements and enticements to narcissism with which we are bombarded endlessly in our social interactions. Instead our worship is in danger of complying with it. Rather than renewing our minds, we are re-enforcing our socially driven, but personally welcomed, self-pre-occupation.

Contrast all of this with the perceptive unfolding by William Temple,

- **Worship is the submission of all of our nature to God.**
- **To worship is to quicken the conscience by the holiness of God,**
- **To feed the mind with the truth of God,**
- **To purge the imagination by the beauty of God,**
- **To open the heart to the love of God,**
- **To devote the will to the purpose of God.**
- **And all this gathered up in adoration the most selfless emotion of which our nature is capable.**

I wonder what Temple was trying to combat when he penned this words – what was this comprehensive account responding too, what was in his mind? Was it an unthinking involvement in church activity

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for its own sake? Or did he have sentimental attachment to priest or cathedral before him when he wrote? Maybe it was an impersonal sacramentalism. It probably wasn’t dry doctrinal preaching and the supremacy of emotional language had not yet been accomplished. But whatever ‘brand’ of worship we might think of, this has something profoundly challenging to offer.

Yet, even here, I wonder whether this deeply spiritual and wise leader may have confused the outcomes of true worship with the reality of it. Certainly if we truly worship the living God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, then our conscience will be quickened because we are responding appropriately to the holiness of God. Certainly if our conscience is not quickened we will have withheld something of ourselves from the act of worship. But is that ‘quickenning’ itself the heart of worship?

While worship, from our perspective, is a human activity, its centre of gravity is not human, let alone ‘me’ but God. Worship is essentially our response to the reality of God. For Christians therefore it is our response to God as revealed to us through Jesus Christ, in the Scriptures.

Given the growing inter-faith environment in which we all live, we are more keenly aware now, than say 20 years ago, that worship is a general human possibility rather than inevitably a distinctively Christian one. This reminds us that worship involves intentionally becoming truly open to the other, the transcendent, and responding appropriately to that other. To be ‘truly open to the other’ requires that our self-awareness, let alone our self-centredness, in all its subtle forms, be diminished so that ‘my perspectives, my needs, my desires’ do not intrude on our receptivity of the other. It affirms that there are other ways to engage with reality than those of the human intellect, especially when ‘intellect’ is closely identified with rational analysis, deduction and construction alone. Such worship is a necessary part of developing our humanity to the full. Failure to worship (or failure in worship) is both a sign of immaturity and a consequence of it.

Yet, given this context, it is proper and necessary to ask ourselves what are the core distinctives of **Christian** worship.

A substantial part of the answer lies in the essential Christological focus or ethos for Christian worship. I find this sparkling passage from Paul a helpful guide.

For it is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness!' who has shone in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ Jesus. (2 Corinthians 4.6).

This verse does full justice to recognising that the God we worship is the source of all creation and in so doing echoes the Old Testament. So, for instance, in Psalm 19 there is a wonderful balance between God's 'availability' in the world (creation is a source of divine mediation) and in the law.

**The heavens are telling the glory of God;
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.**

**The precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart;
The commandment of the Lord is clear, enlightening
the eyes.**

**Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of
my heart be acceptable to you,
O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. (Verses 1, 8, 14)**

The first verse of this psalm indicates that all creation can, properly perceived, become a source for us of revelation and so, lead us to worship the creator. Indeed, as Paul indicates failure to do this takes us to the heart of sin (Romans 1.18-32). So, for us as Christians, worship should be a continuous attitude of the heart rather than only an activity in the sanctuary.

When we respond with delight, fascination, awe or laughter as we see or experience some aspect of creation, we are actually imitating God! Dallas Willard puts it like this

God leads a very interesting life. Undoubtedly he is the most joyous being in the universe ... All the good and beautiful things from which we occasionally tiny droplets of soul-exhilarating joy, God continuously experiences in all their breadth, depth and richness.

We pay a lot for a tank with a few tropical fish in it and never tire of looking at their brilliant iridescence and marvellous forms and movements. But God has seas full of them, which he constantly enjoys.

I would go further than Dallas Willard and suggest that when we are delighted by the fish in the tank, we are already responding in a kind of unfocused way in worship to the Creator God. As Christians we can, and I suggest, should take this further by recognising and gladly admitting to ourselves and others that this joy we experience (and delight, awe or laughter) is from God and we will offer him our responses as continuous praise. Equally, however, when we see creation spoilt, we need to grieve for our human selfishness and greed. When we observe people seeking to protect the diversity of creation we can support them in prayer. By extension, these attitudes of the heart can apply to the human derivatives of creation – all the wonders that we make whether artistic or technological. Every insight into the vastness of the universe or the intricacies of living organisms that we humans discover and communicate to each other is another source for worship. A scriptural warrant for this attitude is provided by Paul, in Philippians 4.8-9. For if God is 'with us' as we 'fill our minds with these things' then we can certainly respond to him in worship.

Learning verses from the Psalms can provide us with an instant repertoire to support the response of our hearts (e.g. Psalm 8.1-4; 24.1-2; 29.1-4; 67; 95.1-5; 104.1-4, 10-12, 24-26, 33-34).

But whether our response to God is prompted primarily through our encounter with creation or through his revelation in the law or even the Gospel, our response to 'the other' is recognised to need to be appropriate, that is 'acceptable to God'. The validation of worship is not on human terms, even noble ones, but lies with God, 'Let (them) be **acceptable to you.**' So it is, that when in John's Gospel Jesus states

The hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth, for the father seeks such as these to worship him. (John 4. 23 – NRSV)

while this may liberate us to worship away from sacred sites such as Jerusalem or the Samaritan holy mountain or any other church building, yet it does not validate every offering of the 'human spirit'. For the spirit is the Holy Spirit who facilitates true understanding and true access to the Father and the truth is the truth of Jesus who claims to be the truth (John 14.6)

This is affirmed by the verse from 2 Corinthians. While we certainly recognize that in this verse creation can reveal God to us and this is important, yet the emphasis is still on the fulsomeness of God's revelation in Christ. Now there are many subtle and complex nuances which this verse in 2 Corinthians 4 raises. Do we see by the light of creation, or do we see God through the light of creation or are we illuminated by the light? When God shines in our hearts are we reflecting his revelation or is his light showing up our darkness. But certainly there is encouragement here to respond in worship to the reality of God both through his creation and even more so to his revelation in Christ.

Biblically speaking 'glory' is a major category when it comes to worship. To glorify God is to worship him – it is to recognise and respond to his revelation. It is to privately and publicly endorse and adorn the revelation of God which is covered by the word 'glory'. Without the manifestation of God's glory there is nothing to contemplate. The removal of or lack of God's glory indicates the absence of God, his non-availability. If the glory departs from the Temple worship is not feasible.

Engaging with Scripture is the resource for accessing the reality of Christ (the glory of God), assisted by the ministry of the Holy Spirit. This is essential for our worship, whether personal or public. Hence, we need to spend time engaging with all that the Scriptures have to share with us about the reality of Jesus

Interestingly, but unsurprisingly, this Jesus, when it comes to hints about worship, focuses us on God. Consider, for instance, the prayer which has become the hallmark of the whole Christian community which we call 'The Lord's Prayer'. This begins intentionally by focusing us on God and his realm – Our Father who is in heaven, but also underlines that the aim of worship is not to satisfy our emotional needs, nor to stimulate our personal development, let alone entertain us! Rather it is to 'make holy the name of God'. To explore and express the reality of who God truly is.

This prayer is shaped by the reality of God. This does not, of course, mean it is lacking in compassion or devoid of sensitivity to our human situations. The God we worship in Christ encompasses all of these. But it prioritises God and his Kingdom. The engagement with 'sin' is not about pampering the sinner by encouraging us to 'feel how much God loves us' but requires us to face up to the tough realities and admit that in the light of the holiness of God we are in desperate needs. Moreover, it insists that we practice the God-like quality of forgiving others, perhaps to ensure we cannot think that forgiveness is an easy or cheap activity!

Worship, as this prayer indicates, has a personal commitment but also a communal dimension. Biblical worship, I suggest, does not give us the option to hide our own luke-warmness towards God within the communal 'we'. But nor does it promote 'me' on to the throne! Each of us is, through worship, called to account before the one true God, but we come supporting and supported by the whole community of which we are part. It is as though God calls to us and says 'Where are you, Adam?' And this Adam is both each of us and all of us. Indeed through our worship we come to accept, as Christ accepted, that 'I' am responsible before God for the 'we' of the whole world. So there is a proper place for intercession within our worship, and without it we are failing to respond to the truth of God.

Naturally, there are many adjuncts to the Christological focus which Scripture provides. Iconography and Christian art will assist many. But the insight of iconography, that we look through the icon and not remain on the icon, is vital. For some sacramentally focused contemplation will play a vital part. Christian music may also assist our attentiveness and sharpen our perception. But, the music fails unless it carries us beyond itself to the one we contemplate in order that we may respond in worship. In engaging our emotional being, they can assist us in freeing us to worship with a fuller self than is possible for some of us when contemplating through the text of Scripture alone. Yet, these only contribute to our worship if 'they bear witness to me'.

For those of us involved in 'leading worship' it remains our primary task to help others encounter the reality of God through Jesus and then to facilitate their wholesome and whole - person response to Him; to see and reflect his glory. Part of that wholesome response within the Christian tradition is that worship is transformative; such transformation will also have a 'Christ-like shape' to it. Whatever the interpretative challenges of 2 Corinthians 3. 18, this seems to be a central point,

And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord ... are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another.

The outward components of worship whether participation in 'active listening', in affirming prayer, creedal declaration, sacramental involvement or sung praise are all emblematic of this transformatory shift.

It was this transformation, in its many dimensions, that Archbishop Temple so succinctly and magnificently captured. He certainly provides a rich 'check list' for those who have 'been to worship' and

without such responses, we all need to ask ourselves whether we have been involved in real worship. But first we need to see the glory of the Lord in the face of Christ and then, with deep surrender and genuine attention, to respond to him. In worship we are not looking at ourselves in the river, we look in the river to see God reflected there and adore him. Yet our worship is incomplete if through our worship we do not grow in our longing to be transformed into the likeness of Jesus. Such longings can be easily dissipated if they are not co-joined with decisions of our wills and enabled by the spiritual disciplines which are integral to Renovare. But such disciplines themselves run the risk of becoming self-driven 'good works' unless they are nourished and watered through the work of the Holy Spirit. In the end, being transformed into the likeness of Jesus is God's work not ours as Galatians 5.22-25 and 1 John 3.1-3, in their different ways make clear. It is also worth reminding ourselves that such transformation is not for our personal satisfaction but so that we can be equipped to carry out God's mission in the world (e.g Ephesians 2.10)

So, I am convinced that if we are to avoid a shallow Christian presence in our contemporary world we need to rediscover the practice of focusing on God's glory in Christ, through our worship. We therefore need to do everything within our control to ensure that all our worship, whether personal or communal, is continuously evaluated with this in mind.

To him who by means of his power working in us is able to do so much more than we can ever ask for or even think of: to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus for all time, for ever and ever! Amen. (Ephesians 3. 20-21)

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