

Chalmers Church – Some of the Sunday service at Home!

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Sunday 16th August 2020 – “What is the Church?” (3) – “Worship”

Introduction

Hello and welcome to this podcast. My name is Robin Allison and I am the minister at Cockenzie and Port Seton: Chalmers Memorial Church.

As you'll know by now over these last couple of weeks, we've been working our way through some thoughts on the subject of “*What is the Church?*”. This short series of five reflections, of which we are now at the third, has been inspired – or perhaps the right word should be provoked – by the challenges of these recent months when so much of what we would normally have done as a church has been turned on its head.

Church is about meeting together and yet we've found ways of being together even when we cannot meet.

It's about diversity and talents, as we were thinking about last week, and we've all had to find new ways of using those talents in different ways outside of the walls of a church building.

Church is also about worship which is what we'll be thinking about today.

In Chalmers Church worship takes place on a Sunday at 10.15am and at 11am every week with occasional evening services where we share Holy Communion. We sing hymns, pray, read the bible, listen to a sermon – all of the usual constituents of a normal worship service. Sometimes we sing traditional hymns and at others we learn new songs... we hear organ, piano, guitars – even Tom Gordon's Mouth Organ! It's all there in its rich variety.

However, we've even had to lay that to one side for a while. And yet, as we have all discovered, worship is still possible. We've still continued to worship.

The themes for these reflections have been taken from Hymn 204 in CH4, “*I am the Church*” with this week our thoughts centring on the third verse of that hymn which goes, “*And when the people gather, there's singing and there's praying, there's laughing and there's crying*”.

To help us think about that today, we're going to join the Psalmist at Psalm 95 where he helps us to understand a little bit more about what we mean by saying that we worship God.

But more of that in a moment. First of all, though, shall we pray?

Let us pray...

Opening prayer and Lord's Prayer

Eternal and sovereign God, with awe and wonder we come before you in worship this day. We come to declare your praises and to offer you our homage.

You are all powerful, all seeing and ever present. You shape the pattern of history and are at work in your church and our lives.

You are good and all loving, ever merciful showering us in blessings too numerous to count. And through those blessings you enable us to reach out to your world, restoring brokenness, mending division and discord.

So, we thank you this day for the faithfulness you have shown to us as well as the challenges that you have laid before us.

We confess that we are sometimes slow to respond to the challenges that you give us because we are fearful of what they mean for our daily living. We are often victims of our own wayward sense of priorities, caught up in our daily living and our personal concerns which we try to resolve on our own instead of bringing them to you.

We confess too that we are often fitful in our worship – sometimes ready to listen to you and to enter into your presence and, at other times, slow to approach you and less inclined to listen to you.

Forgive us, we pray, as we pray that you would open our eyes afresh to your wonder, our hearts to your love, our minds to your purpose and our spirits to your presence. In all things help us to praise you not just in words but in the joyful service of our lives.

So, hear us now as we bring these our prayers in the words of the Lord's prayer saying:

Our Father

who art in heaven

Hallowed be thy name

Thy kingdom come

Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread

And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil

For thine is the kingdom, and the power

and the glory, for ever, Amen.

Bible Reading – Psalm 95

Our reading today comes from the book of Psalms at Psalm 95. It will be read for us today by Ian Bulloch.

*1 Come, let us sing for joy to the Lord;
let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation.*

*2 Let us come before him with thanksgiving
and extol him with music and song.*

*3 For the Lord is the great God,
the great King above all gods.*

*4 In his hand are the depths of the earth,
and the mountain peaks belong to him.*

*5 The sea is his, for he made it,
and his hands formed the dry land.*

*6 Come, let us bow down in worship,
let us kneel before the Lord our Maker;*

7 *for he is our God
and we are the people of his pasture,
the flock under his care.
Today, if only you would hear his voice,*
8 *'Do not harden your hearts as you did at Meribah,
as you did that day at Massah in the wilderness,*
9 *where your ancestors tested me;
they tried me, though they had seen what I did.*
10 *For forty years I was angry with that generation;
I said, "They are a people whose hearts go astray,
and they have not known my ways."*
11 *So I declared on oath in my anger,
"They shall never enter my rest."*

Amen and thanks be to God for this reading of His Holy Word and to his name be the praise and the glory.

Reflection

Thank you to Ian for sharing that reading with us.

I can remember it vividly because it was about the only time that I think I've whistled in a church... Let me explain...

As many of you will know, when I was a teenager, I used to sing in a Church Choir in Peebles where I lived at the time. We were a robed choir and each week we'd process elegantly into the chancel to take our place in the choir pews ready to sing the introit for the week as well as the weekly anthem that we'd practiced – often over long weeks – at our Thursday night rehearsals.

Most of our anthems, I have to say, were fairly traditional, in keeping with the style of worship. My home church, in those days, didn't do guitars or keyboards. Mind you, come to think of it, in the mid 1980's neither did most churches!

Anyway, to get back on topic, one week our choirmaster announced that over the coming weeks we'd be practicing a brand new anthem the likes of which, he said, we'd never sung before... and what's more half way through the anthem the men had to whistle! The minute he said it we all laughed... Nobody whistled in our church, except occasionally the odd pipe in the organ that got stuck! Presbyterians don't whistle – at least not in church!

But our choirmaster persisted... for not only were we going to whistle but he was going to accompany us from the Church piano and we were going to sing from the Chancel steps... Folks, there was a whole unwritten rule book being thrown out here...!

The anthem, to get to the point, was composed by Donald Swann, the composer and performer perhaps best known for his long standing partnership with Michael Flanders, making up the duo known as "Flanders and Swann". They wrote such famous songs as the Hippopotamus Song (Mud, Mud glorious mud) and a song about Gnu which contains the line – *"I'm a gnu? I'm a gnu. The g-nicest work of g-nature in the zoo"*

Donald Swann was also, however, interested in church music. Not all his works were flippant or meant for entertainment and he wrote a number of hymns and anthems for choir among which was the Anthem we were set to learn and perform, a version of Psalm 95, which Ian has just read to us.

I can't remember how well the performance went. But I certainly remember it getting folk talking at the after church coffee!

Psalm 95 is a very familiar Psalm, probably best known in the liturgical world of those church traditions that observe daily prayers – morning and evening – where the words of the Psalm are often to be found and used.

The Latin name for this Psalm is the word, “*Venite*” which translated means simply “*Come*”, the meaning of which is taken from the opening word of the Psalm itself – Psalm 95 verse 1, “*Come*” ...

The imagery for this, writes one commentator, is taken from the way in which a group of travellers, weary from their long journey towards the Temple, are greeted at the Temple gates.

Here's how he describes the scene, “*A group of villagers (he writes) has come up to Jerusalem, perhaps taking several days to make the pilgrimage, and they are now (he continues) excitedly gazing at the first set of gates at the top of the staircase. They are all there (says this writer) in their Sunday best, children included, and they are met by a temple functionary who welcomes them and invites them in with the words “O Come” ...*

Having made the journey to reach the temple in the first place the weary travellers now need to be invited to cross the door...

At the heart and root of all worship is an invite... the opening, we might say, of the metaphorical gate that allows us, as the Psalm continues to say, into the presence of God.

And what is the first thing that this Temple functionary asks the weary travellers, and presumably us, to do?

He asks us, the verse continues to “*sing*” and to “*shout*”.

Verse 1 in its entirety – “*Come, let us sing for joy to the Lord; let us shout aloud to the Rock of our Salvation*”.

It's a wonderful image, isn't it, that the Psalmist uses here. It's as if he is saying that once we get into this place of worship that we're going to make a bit of noise. We're not going to sit in silence... or at least not only in silence. In that place we're going to sing aloud... We are going to let God know that we are there and that we are there to lift our voices in praise to him.

I know that's one of the things that folks have missed the most in these recent months. After all, singing is such an integral part of our act of worship. Once we too have been welcomed at the door of the sanctuary, ushered into the building, find our seat and hymn book we know that one of the very first things that we are going to do is to sing.

Sometimes we sing before even a word is said, or hardly a word is said... and, so very often, the opening hymn is what I like to call a “*big hymn*”... the sort of hymn that clears the proverbial cobwebs from our minds.

Perhaps a Psalm – the old 100th is always a good start... One of my own personal favourites was one that was sung at my wedding, “*Christ is made the sure foundation*” with that glorious tune written by Henry Purcell... or if we're moving on in style what about a bit Graham Kendrick's “*Shine Jesus shine*”...?

In some church traditions the pattern is even to spend the first several minutes simply singing songs, the sort of songs that in recent weeks and months that Sheila has been posting to our Church Facebook page... music written by more contemporary writers such as Chris Tomlin

and Stuart Townend whose songs have been gaining ground in the world of contemporary worship.

For other contemporary artists the style is more akin to Christian music done “*Rock Band*” style. It’s not everyone’s cup of proverbial tea, to be sure (who likes every style of music, after all?), but it certainly fulfils the demands of the Psalmist who encourages us to make a bit of noise in our worship.

Singing with commitment shows God that we are ready to approach him as a response to his invite to each one of us.

And so, the Psalm continues reminding us at verses 3 to 5 that the God to whom we bring our songs and our singing is a “*great God*”. He’s a God who plumbs the depths of the earth as well as the peaks of the very mountains themselves. He’s a God whose hand stretches far across the depths of the ocean, that same hand that touched the ocean also fashioning the dry land.

That commentator I mentioned earlier on in this reflection also reminds us that this Psalm would most likely have also been used in a responsive way. Each great attribute of God being recited by the worship leader would receive from the congregation a verbal response... a shouting back...!

Verse 3, for example, the worship leader would say “*For the Lord is a great God*” and the response would come firing back, “*the great King above all god’s*”

So, there’s the invite in... the invite to worship.

Then there’s singing... lots of it and given with full voice.

There’s even, as the Psalmist says, a bit of shouting – the responses of the people of God to the words of the worship leader.

Now up until that point we’re keeping well on track with the words of the hymn that have formed the basis of this series of reflections.

This week’s verse of CH4 Hymn 204 speaks about the gathering of God’s people... the singing and the praying... There’s even a bit of laughing as well – jokes, amusing stories and incidents - like forgetting to ask for the right set of hymn books to be handed out and having to halt worship until the correct set were issued... That was embarrassing, even if it was funny...!

But then that hymn also goes onto mention another word... the word “*crying*” ...

There’s laughing and there’s crying...

There’s crying, of a sort, in Psalm 95 and you’ll find it at verses 8 and 9 where the words of the Psalmist seem harsher in tone and the voice that we hear stops being the voice of the Psalmist and become the voice of God remembering how one time, a long time ago, the people had cried to Moses during their wilderness wanderings at Massah and Meribah which you can read about in Exodus chapter 17.

They are tired, hungry and thirsty and they torment Moses with the accusation that he brought them out there into the desert to watch their livestock and their loved ones suffer. This is the passage where Moses strikes a rock and water for the people gushes out. They call the place “*Massah*” and “*Meribah*”, words which mean “*testing*” and “*quarrelling*” and no doubt a place of tears being shed too.

Its ok to cry in church. That's what the American writer and Episcopal Priest, Heidi Haverkamp, wrote in an article for a magazine in 2018. "*Church*" she says, "*is the perfect place to cry*", especially when we remind ourselves that the one whom we come to worship, Jesus himself, is also the one who knew tears.

Here's what she writes, "*Most of us have something to cry about. So, I find myself wishing that people cried in church more often. Why not? We welcome people to wear jeans, to bring their children, to receive communion, to fill out a visitor's card — why not also welcome people to cry? Most of us could stand to be reminded that we are not alone in carrying grief, worry, and struggle. If we can't cry in church, what's the point?*"

Once we are invited into his presence God is glad to hear our songs... our shouting... our laughing and even, if that's how we're feeling, our tears too. That is what we call worship.

Let us pray.

Closing Prayer

Lord God, we have come before you this day because you have invited us to be in your presence. We are here because you called us to be here. You have opened wide the gates so that we may enter in and we thank you, therefore, for the privilege that is worship itself.

Today, we have reflected on singing and that, in these recent months is something we have missed greatly, perhaps more so than anything else. But still we rejoice in the gift of song as we pray for those who lift the hearts of others through music and voice. We reflect on well chosen words, phrases carefully crafted that draw people in – that reassure, that protest against injustice and bring challenge to the world and to us.

Bless all who are gifted with the ability to use music and words to bring us closer to you.

We have reflected too on the reason we come to worship you in the first place – simply that you are a great God, a God above and below, a God whose reach is wide and strong and yet, at the same time, whose touch is strangely tender.

Remind those who seeks greatness in their lives that the true model of greatness is the one whose arms are wide and reassuring and whose voice is used as often as their ears to hear the concerns of others.

And, as we have been reflecting on today, we also recall the things which have the potential to bring tears to our eyes, even as we worship you. We confess that that the path we walk – as with the wanderers of old – is sometimes hard and wearisome.

So bless, we pray, those for whom tears are a reality at this time – perhaps brought on because of loss or grief, illness, loneliness or a sense of emptiness in their daily routines, even their lack of expectation of better days that will be with us.

We bring all of ourselves in worship to you and ask that you take us as we are – singing, shouting, laughing and even sometimes crying for it is in Jesus' name we ask it, Amen.

Benediction

Gracious God, take this time of worship and help us through it to sing and to shout, to laugh and to cry so that all may come to know the one who is worthy of all worship – you the very creator and redeemer of the world.

And may the blessing of Almighty God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – be with you and with all whom you love this day and forevermore, Amen.