

Together in Worship

by Rev John Castle

A sermon given on Sunday 29th September 2024 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Readings: Hebrews 10:19-25, Mark 11:15-19

Part of series "Six Building Blocks for Life"

Introduction: the challenge of Islam

Yesterday I attended prayers at Bracknell Mosque. It was their open day, and as a member of the Bracknell Forest Interfaith Forum I had become aware of this at our meeting on Monday. The prayers were followed by a presentation about Islam by one of their imams, and I came away with a pack of booklets about Islam.

You may not know much about Islam, but you will have heard of the Five Pillars of Islam, which are:

1. The declaration of faith: "I bear witness that there is none worthy of worship except Allah and that Muhammad is His servant and messenger"
2. Prayers five times a day. These are essentially prayers of worship, in a prescribed form, acknowledging the greatness of God
3. Fasting in the month of Ramadan
4. Almsgiving – Muslims have to give 2.5% of their net income to support the poor

5. Pilgrimage to Mecca, which a Muslim should try to do once in his or her lifetime, provided he or she has the means to do so.

You will note that these are five practices that enable Muslims to make God central to their lives. The opening words of one of the booklets I was given says this:

“A Muslim is one who accepts freely and willingly the supreme power of Allah and strives for total re-organisation of his life according to the revealed teachings of God. He also works towards the establishment of a just social order which would totally reflect the guidance of God.”¹

A rule of life

Can you see any similarities between this philosophy with its five practices and the lives of Christians today? One of the things that struck me about many Muslims is how intentional they are. Every Muslim must be aware of the five pillars, even if they don't follow them very “religiously”. By contrast, I suspect a lot of people are far more vague about what defines Christians: many people would say they are Christians because they believe in God, pray when they feel the need and generally try to live by what they think are Christian standards of behaviour. I wonder how intentional each of us is in trying to order our lives so that God is at the centre?

In his talk the imam reminded us that one day we will stand before God and have to give an account of our lives. This is a

¹ *Islam at a Glance*, published by Islamic Dawah Centre International
www.idci.co.uk

teaching of Christianity too, one which nowadays gets rather less emphasis than perhaps it should. We preachers don't want to be thought of as trying to scare people into faith and good behaviour by talking about the Day of Judgment, and prefer to talk about God's love and mercy, which, of course, we all need. But the theme of accountability is very important in the New Testament, including in the teaching of Jesus – think about the parable of the talents, for example².

One way that Christians try to make sure that our lives are pleasing to God in everything we do is to have a *Rule of Life*, and this is the philosophy behind the current sermon series which I've entitled "Building Blocks for Life". We are looking at six practices which can help us to put God first in our daily lives, and they are Prayer, Bible study, Service, Corporate Worship, Witness and Giving. Today we are looking at Corporate Worship, under the heading "Together in Worship".

Worshipping together

I hope we all have some idea what worship is. It is not just singing religious songs in a religious building, or mindlessly going through a religious ritual. Worship is opening ourselves up to God in wonder, love and praise. It is spending time contemplating God's majesty and power, his beauty and his grace, receiving his love as we sing, pray or remain silent, and offering him our love and submission in return. When you sing a hymn in church or join in the liturgy, do you just go along with everyone else, or do you use this as an opportunity to reflect on the words and offer

² Matthew 25:14-30

God your thanks, praise and love? If you feel sometimes that remaining silent while others are singing helps you to concentrate on the meaning of the words or connect with God, please feel free to do so. Or if you need to sit down and just be in the presence of God, just do it!

Of course, we can worship on our own and anywhere. So is it important for us to worship together? Is going to church an optional extra, simply a way to get a little boost from time to time to help us with life? You will be aware that statistics for church attendance have shown a steady decline over the years. One part of the explanation is that people who do attend regularly do so less often – once or twice a month instead of every Sunday. Clearly there are some people whose jobs require them to work on Sundays, for example shift workers such as nurses, firefighters etc. They may only be able to get to church on a few Sundays. But there are lots more Christians who choose to skip worship some weeks in order to visit relatives, decorate the house or go to the seaside or some other leisure activity. Not to mention many parents who face the conflict of their children's sports activities taking place on Sundays.

Today is our Patronal Festival, which reminds us that our church building is dedicated to St Michael and All Angels. This church building and its medieval predecessor have provided a place for Christian worship for over eight hundred years. We all know that the church is the people, not the building, but our church building is nonetheless a focus for God's people to meet together for worship. It also

represents the presence of God to the community of Sandhurst.

In Bible times, the Temple had that function for the people of Israel. In today's gospel reading Jesus showed his outrage that the commercial activities in God's house were detracting from its primary function as a place of prayer for people of all nations.

In both Old and New Testaments worship was a corporate activity. In the writings of Paul and Peter, the church community itself was seen as a temple³, a place where God lived and was worshipped. This presupposes that Christians see themselves not just as individuals who believe in Jesus, but as members of Christ's Church, who belong together, worship and pray together, teach and encourage each other, and together are seen as a group by the wider community.

The Letter to the Hebrews, an extract from which we heard earlier, was written to groups of Jewish Christians who were finding it tough identifying as Christians. They were tempted to give up being Christians and revert to Judaism. The writer spends most of the letter showing how Jesus Christ is the fulfilment of God's purposes, and that by his sacrifice for our sins he has opened up the way into God's presence. In today's extract, he urges his readers to hold onto their faith in what Jesus has done for us, and also to encourage each other to express their faith through love and good deeds,

³ See 1 Corinthians 3:16, 1 Peter 2:4-5

not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.⁴

There were clearly people among the readers of the letter who were making a habit of *not* meeting together, as there are in today's church. But thinking you can be a Christian on your own is a big mistake.

We're in this together!

There's an illustration that I find helpful for understanding this. Think of a coal fire – not an imitation one, but a fire with real coals, giving out heat and a warm glow. All the coals together share heat and energy, and glow brightly. But take out one coal and leave it on its own on the hearth, and what happens? It will continue to glow for a while, but will gradually grow colder and go out. This is what often happens to someone who stops coming to church. Instead of being kept burning through the spiritual energy of others, and in their turn contributing their own light and warmth, their faith grows cold. I am sad to say that I've seen this happen to many people over the years. But it doesn't need to happen, if only we take seriously the fact that as Christians we are “in this together”.

Those who take their faith seriously and are keen to grow in it make meeting with other Christians a priority. Some not only go to Sunday services but take the opportunity to join a course or a house group, where they can ask questions,

⁴ Hebrews 10:25 NRSV

listen to others and explore the Bible and how it relates to our lives in more detail.

As Christians we belong together, not only with other members of our local church, but with the whole company of believers on earth and in heaven. When we worship together we are joining with those who have gone before us and are now in the nearer presence of God – those who are referred to in the phrase “the communion of saints” in the Creed. We are also worshipping with all the angels, archangels and heavenly beings who are assembled around the throne of God, something we are reminded of in the communion prayer and in hymns like “Ye holy angels bright”.

None of us needs to struggle on in the Christian life on our own. We belong together. So let’s take every opportunity to stir each other up to love and good works, sharing our faith and our struggles with each other, and joining together in worship of our almighty Creator God, his son Jesus Christ our Saviour, and the Holy Spirit, our helper and guide. Make Sunday worship a priority, something you do because you’re a Christian and belong to other Christians, not because you happen to feel like it today and have nothing better to do!

Conclusion

My visit to Bracknell Mosque yesterday reminded me of some of the important similarities between our two faiths. Both religions believe in one almighty Creator God, and that he has revealed his nature and his will, although we have different views about *how* God has revealed himself. Both religious teach that we should submit our lives to God and try to live according to his will, and that we will ultimately be

accountable for how we have lived our lives. But unlike Muslims, Christians believe that this Almighty God revealed himself by becoming human in the person of Jesus, and showed the extent of his love for us by suffering and dying on a Cross. As the letter to the Hebrews puts it, “we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus” and each of us can have a personal relationship with God as our loving heavenly Father.

If that’s what we believe Jesus has done for us, what difference should that make to our daily lives? Muslims have the Five Pillars of Islam, five practices which are intended to help them live out their faith. We have prayer, the Bible, the worshipping community, and practical ways to grow as disciples of Jesus through service, witness and generous giving. Will we be as intentional about these practices as Muslims are about theirs? Will we make living for Jesus day by day and worshipping him with his people the number one priority as we decide how to spend our time, energy and resources?

Let’s take a moment to reflect on what God has been saying to each of us today...

Prayer

Lord God, we acknowledge you as the Creator of the universe, infinitely beyond our comprehension, unlimited in power and majesty. Yet you have graciously reached out to us in your Son, Jesus Christ, to bring us back to you through the shedding of his blood, so that we might know you as our loving heavenly Father. Teach us what it means to worship you. May your Spirit fill us, inspire us and guide us. Help us

to see the strength we have in being united in love, encouraging and supporting one another, and joining together to offer you the worship of our hearts, our lips and our lives. We ask this in the name of the one who gave up his life for us, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.