

## **True worship:** A sermon by Rev John Castle

St Michael's Church, Sandhurst on Sunday 26<sup>th</sup> February  
2023

Reading: John 4:5-26

*John 4:23–24 (ESV): But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.”<sup>1</sup>*

What is *true* worship? Is it using the Book of Common Prayer? The language is beautiful and reflects the doctrine of the Church of England. No banal wording here! Or is true worship when people play guitars and raise their hands in the air and close their eyes as if they are in some sort of emotional ecstasy? Or is it true worship when the priest censes the altar and chants? I wonder what your thoughts are?

In today's passage from the Gospel of John, Jesus is engaged in conversation with a Samaritan woman outside a town in

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<sup>1</sup> ἀλλὰ ἔρχεται ὥρα καὶ νῦν ἐστίν, ὅτε οἱ ἀληθινοὶ προσκυνηταὶ προσκυνήσουσιν τῷ πατρὶ ἐν πνεύματι καὶ ἀληθείᾳ, καὶ γὰρ ὁ πατὴρ τοιούτους ζητεῖ τοὺς προσκυνοῦντας αὐτόν· 24 πνεῦμα ὁ θεός, καὶ τοὺς προσκυνοῦντας αὐτόν ἐν πνεύματι καὶ ἀληθείᾳ δεῖ προσκυνεῖν. John 4:23–24 (SBLGNT)

Samaria. The woman has twigged that Jesus is a prophet, and takes the opportunity to ask him about a controversial question: are the Samaritans right to worship God on their holy mountain, or are the Jews right to say that only their Temple in Jerusalem is a proper temple?

Jesus cuts through this petty argument between Jews and Samaritans, just as, I believe, he would cut through arguments between people today who think only their style of worship is real worship. “I’ll tell you what true worship is”, says Jesus. “It’s when you worship the Father in spirit and in truth.”

Jesus is asking the woman - and us – to look at the question of right worship in a different way. Instead of thinking about what we like, what makes us feel good, or what we think is the “correct” way to worship, how about looking at it from God’s point of view: what sort of worship would please God? Is worship for our benefit or God’s?

Now when I suggest that worship might be for God’s benefit, please don’t think I mean that God needs something from us. In the ancient world the usual way of worshipping a deity was to offer an animal sacrifice. But in psalm 50:10 God says he doesn’t need to be fed by animal sacrifices: “For every beast of the forest is mine, the cattle on a thousand hills.” Equally, he doesn’t need us to worship to satisfy his ego, or build up his flagging self-esteem. What God desires is a relationship with us. As Jesus says to the Samaritan woman, God is spirit, and the worship he wants from us is spiritual,

that is, connecting with him in our spirit, our inmost, intimate self. He wants us to come to him as we are, acknowledging how we are feeling, recognising our need for forgiveness and healing, receiving his love and showing him our love in return. It's about being real with God, connecting in our spirits with his Holy Spirit. That's worshipping in spirit and in truth.

It doesn't matter to God whether we do this while sitting quietly or while singing or raising our hands. All he wants is to see his children coming to him to share precious moments with their loving heavenly Father. He loves it when we come to him one to one, and he loves it when we come together with others for some family time. He loves it when we show him that spending time with him and with our brothers and sisters in Christ is important to us – more important than all the other things we could choose to do with the time.

Sometimes we feel like worshipping God, and sometimes we don't. Sometimes we are tired or stressed, or perhaps we are feeling disappointed with God because of something that has gone wrong in our lives or in the wider world, and we don't understand why God has allowed it to happen.

Now, of course God understands how we are feeling. But it's a shame if we decide that we are not going to worship God, that we're going to "blank" him, because he hasn't met our expectations. We can still worship God even if we don't feel like doing so. Worship is not about *how we feel*, but about *who God is*. Whatever has changed around us, God hasn't

changed, and he is still our Creator, our Redeemer and our loving heavenly Father.

I am reminded of the story of Job. One disaster after another strikes this godly man. In one day he loses all his wealth and his 10 adult children. On hearing this terrible news, we are told:

Then Job rose, and rent his robe, and shaved his head, and fell on the ground and worshipped. And he said, "Naked I came from my mother's womb and naked I shall return; the Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord." (Job 1:20-21)

Job doesn't go into denial, or try to minimise his loss. He tears his clothes and shaves his head, both actions which were ways of expressing grief in that culture. But he still worships God. His grief and confusion is all the greater because his relationship with God is so central to his life, and Job goes on to complain to God and demands a meeting with him. We too can wrestle with God if we are going through hard times and can't understand where God is in it all. Some people who don't usually spend much time praying make a particular effort to come to church when facing illness or bereavement. If you are a member of a church, being together with others who are worshipping can really help when you are finding it hard to worship yourself.

The bottom line is that worship is about our relationship with God. It's not about going through some religious ritual

in order to keep the Almighty on your side. It's not about beings seen to be a "good Christian". True worship, Jesus says, is in spirit and in truth. And God is actually looking for people who will worship him like that.

But God doesn't leave us to struggle on without help. Jesus said earlier to the Samaritan woman that if she asked him, he would give her living water. For those who receive this, "The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." Later, in chapter 7, Jesus makes another invitation to people to receive living water from him, and the writer explains that this is a reference to the Holy Spirit.<sup>2</sup>

St Paul wrote that the Spirit within us testifies that we are children of God and helps us to pray<sup>3</sup>. So we are not on our own. When we come to God to worship, we can invite the Holy Spirit to fill us and inspire us. The Spirit knows how we're feeling, and will pray with us.

So this Lent, let's make worship a priority, and let's ask God to help us to open up to him, to bring all that we are to him, whether we're worshipping alone or in church, in love and simple trust. James writes "Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you".<sup>4</sup> May we learn to worship God, as individuals and as a church, in Spirit and in truth. Amen

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<sup>2</sup> John 7:37-39

<sup>3</sup> Romans 8:14-16,26-27

<sup>4</sup> James 4:8

