

## Acts 2 Verses 42ff Expanding Our Ideas of Worship

Have ever played one of those word association games? They're good fun and they show you a little bit about how people's minds work. What happens is you say a word and the other person has to say the very first thing that springs to mind. You say a phrase like "True Love" and then wait for their answer or "happiness" and they tell you the first thing that they think of.

Turn round to the people around about you in the pew and form little groups of two or three at most and once you have done that I am going to tell you a word and you must tell each other the first few words that spring to mind now you only have about a minute and a half to do this. Everybody sorted? Now the word, as you may have guessed from the theme of our services is worship. Talk away.

Now what sort of ideas did you come up with? What sort of words sprung to mind? I'm sure there were words such as singing or praying, phrases like going to church or giving your offering. I'm sure that most, now not all but most, of the words that sprung to mind were words to do with what we ourselves do in relationship to God. When we think about worship we tend to think about what happens between us, as individuals, and God.

We pray and it is me, myself, I, on my own or on my own in a group of people praying to God. We sing hymns whether old or modern and it is us singing to God, whether on our own or with a group of fellow believers. Our ideas of worship tend to be shaped by a principle that for want of a shorter word we will call individualism. Now that is not very surprising, because we live in an age when individualism is one of the foundations of how we think and act.

Now that's not always a bad thing because with an emphasis on the individual comes a number of good ideas such as being able to look after ourselves and take care of ourselves. There is the idea of personal responsibility, that we ourselves are responsible for the things that we do wrong and setting them right and there is of course the emphasis on the fact that God loves and cares for individuals, you say it yourselves in your little catchphrase "People Matter to God" and therefore individuals need to come to God to work out their own salvation and not simply rely on their family or church.

There are bad sides though to individualism, it can lead to among other things selfishness and isolation. You see this selfishness quite clearly in families when people place their own wants and desires above those of their family. Whether that involves a son or daughter not living up to their responsibility towards their parents and leaving the rest of the family to cope, parents who place unreasonable demands upon their children, fathers and increasingly more mothers who give in to our workaholic culture and do not give time to their children.

Selfishness breaks up relationships and tears apart our society and it is linked to the second problem caused by individualism and that is isolation. You would be amazed at the number of lonely and isolated people there are in this world, whether they are older people who rely upon the social services for everything or young people who feel they have no-one to talk to or relate to. You don't have to be on your own to feel isolated either. In a busy church, in a family, whether big or small or even in a loving relationship a couple can feel isolated so easily from the people around them.

You don't have to do anything in a church to make a family or a person feel isolated and lonely, all that you have to do is not talk to them, never get to know them. Don't smile when you catch their eye, in fact don't even catch their eye, that's a good start when isolating people. If you want to isolate someone in your family you don't have to do anything either – you don't have to listen, you don't have to talk, you don't even have to remember important events in their life. Just ignore them and don't treat them like they are important and pretty soon they will be isolated and lonely.

In sharp contrast to this isolation and individualism is this description of the church in Jerusalem in its very early days. Now this church wasn't perfect, you find that out later on but for a while Luke describes some of the good things about this church, he seems to pick his words carefully –

(42) They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. (43) Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles.

(44) All the believers were together and had everything in common. (45) Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need.

(46) Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, (47) praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

Every verse emphasises the togetherness of these people, it is filled with words and phrases like, “they devoted themselves,” “all the believers were together,” “fellowship,” “everything in common,” “they ... ate together.” Do you get the impression that Luke is trying to emphasise something here? Worship in a church like this is worship together. Service in a church such as Luke is describing is service not just of God but serving one another.

Luke is emphasising here that there are two important aspects to worship that we should never try to separate. These were summed up by Jesus when he was asked, “What is the greatest commandment and he replied, “Love the Lord your God with all of your heart and all of your soul and all of your mind and all of your strength.” We tend to stop there and think that that is enough but Jesus continued on to say, “and the second is like it, love your neighbour as yourself.”

We can visualise this using the cross. In the cross Jesus not only reconciled us to God the Father but he also reconciles us to one another. Paul in his letter to the Ephesians states that Christ came into this world not only to reconcile us to God but also to reconcile us to each other. Eugene Peterson translates really clearly one of the more complicated parts of chapter 2.

Christ brought us together though his death on the cross. The cross got us to embrace, and that was the end of the hostility. Christ came and preached peace to you outsiders and peace to us insiders. He treated us as equals, and so made us equals. Through him we both share the same spirit and have equal access to the father.

Now that was talking primarily about Jews and gentiles but he goes on to say –

God is building a home. He's using us all – irrespective of how we got here – in what he is building. He used the apostles and prophets for the foundation. Now he is using you, fitting you in brick by brick, stone by stone, with Christ Jesus as the cornerstone that holds all the parts together. We see it taking shape day after day – a holy temple built by God, all of us built into it, a temple in which God is quite at home.

In Jesus God reconciles us to himself but he also reconciles us to each other. In the Jerusalem fellowship we see a people not only reconciled to God and worshipping him on a daily basis but we see a people reconciled to each other through Christ. This was not simply a friendly gathering or a chummy little clique of people meeting together either because they liked to or because this was what their parents had done, no this was a people formed out of a common goal and a common purpose.

They were to be the people of God in Jerusalem. They were becoming a new Israel that would do what the old Israel had not been able to do. They were a people who listened to God's word as taught through the apostles and they were a people who put that word into action. Now don't imagine for a second that everything in that fellowship was all sweetness and light.

We read later on of how there was still selfishness and dissention in the community. The relationship between the Greek believers and the Palestinian believers could still be difficult, as we see in the introduction to the story of Stephen, there were still people who were self centred and deceitful like Ananias and Sapphira. These weren't special people or people who had more ability than us to follow the will of God, these were normal people who were just as sinful and weak as we are but they were a people who grasped the fact that God wants us to worship him together as a body, to serve him together as a body and to look after each other together as a body.

Now that is costly. It cost some people in the Jerusalem church their lives. It cost a lot of money to the better off people in the Jerusalem church, I sure it must have hurt some people's pride never mind their pockets to acknowledge before God that they were now equal not only in status but in money with the beggars and homeless people that Jesus seemed to have round him all the time. As money was made in the community it was shared out and I am sure that on some levels that must have hurt the rich not only in their pockets, there would have been quite a wrench there for people who were used to living lives as comfortable as we live to have to give up some of their luxuries to feed and clothe their fellow believers.

So why did they do it if it was that costly, why did they go to the lengths of sharing all their worldly goods with each other? They did it because they realised that worship was not just what you did in the temple every day as you sang and gave your gifts to God but was also how you treated your brother every day as well. We have too narrow a vision of worship if we think it is only about how we behave towards God.

Our view of worship is incomplete if we do not see that worship is also about how we behave as a community toward one another.

We might sing good sound hymns that have stood the test of time and have good Presbyterian tunes but if we are an unfriendly church that does not welcome new people or people that are different from us, if we don't look out for each other, even the people we don't like, then we might as well stay at home and watch songs of praise for all the good our meeting together will do.

If we have every new song up on our multimedia projector screen within weeks of it having been written and do nothing to help the poor around us then we might as well be in the pub as be here making a mockery out of worship as though it were only to do with us having a good sing-a-long in some selfish, weekly act of recharging our spiritual batteries.

We could become a church that gets its music spot on, has its liturgy balanced, worships God using the best of the best of the old and new but if we do not lift a finger to help those in our fellowship who have spiritual, emotional, social or financial needs then we might as well have chosen to worship using the worst of the worst of the most banal and lifeless music we could find for all the good that it would do us.

What attracted people to the church in Jerusalem on a daily basis was not their up to date songs or their fine tradition of metrical psalm singing, what attracted people was the way in which they looked after each other as a fellowship of believers, the way that the message of Jesus had impacted that part of everyone's life that is closest to their hearts, it had impacted their wallets, they were attracted by a people who showed genuine, practical love towards one another.

If a complete stranger were to walk past the doors of Ballyclare Presbyterian Church and ask one of the locals, "What do the people who go to that building every Sunday actually do?" What do you think the reply would be? Do you think that they would say well they are a community of people look after each other as though they were one big family? There is no one who is poor among them because they all share their resources. There is no one who is needy among them because they all give generously to each other and provide support for each other.

"Why do they do that?" The stranger would say, "Well, the local would reply, they do that because that is one of the ways the Bible says that we should worship God."

Apart from the stilted dialogue, is that a realistic conversation or would the local simply say, "Well you know they traipse in there in their in their ones and twos and threes and fours, they sing a few songs and listen to a few prayers and a sermon and then come back out again and I'll tell you this it doesn't make a blind bit of difference to how they treat each other on a day to day basis."

I'll leave you with 2 questions...

Which one of those do you think is the most true?

What do you think God wants you to do to change it?