

What should a church member be? (2)

Someone who worships.

7th Sept. '03

Ps.84 & John 4

Someone who believes should be someone who worships – at least, that's what this leaflet called, *what should a church member be*, says – especially someone who says that that they believe in Jesus Christ as the Saviour of the world and the Hope for their lives.

And it's not just this leaflet that says that people who believe should be people who worship – the whole Bible shows us that God's people have always been worshipping people:

- way back in the earliest days of people like Cain and Abel, or Noah, we're told about them worshipping God by bringing their sacrifices and offerings of worship to God.
- The whole book of Psalms is a powerful testimony to the worshipping life of God's OT people.
- Jesus, himself, was a person who worshipped regularly, according to the gospels.
- The Christian people in the early church were people who met together for worship very often, for the book of Acts and the Letters of Paul tell us this.
- And the Bible tells us that Heaven will be filled with the worship of God's people.

So, if God's people were worshipping people away back then, and if they will be worshipping people for ever in heaven, surely it is totally right to say that God's people should be worshipping people now.

This is our topic for this morning – and it's probably quite suitable for today, as church life and worship gets back to normal after the summer holidays. It's great to see you all here, and I want to encourage you to be here as often as you possibly can. Perhaps today's sermon will help us as we thinking about why a church member should be *someone who worships*.

By the way, if you didn't get one of these leaflets last week, make sure you get one today – it's important for all our services in September.)

So, we've seen that for God's people, there's always been a clear pattern of worship. Let me offer you 3 other thoughts which begin with P! - 3 basic reasons why worship together in church is important for us. Here they are:

1. A Priority that comes first.
2. A Person who comes first.
3. A Purpose that comes first.

1. A Priority that comes first.

The days I spend in worship are better and more important to me than any other days and any other things I do regularly – so says the man who wrote Psalm 84. Listen to his familiar words for a moment: *Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere* - that's clear enough, but I was fascinated by the contemporary translation of this verse in The Message:

One day spent in your house, this beautiful place of worship, beats thousands spent on Greek island beaches – that's really pushing it, isn't it? However, whatever translation we prefer, it is clear that this man regarded worship as both a priority and a pleasure. He longs for the times of worship in God's house, he looks forward eagerly to those opportunities, he tells us in verses 2 & 4 (*My soul yearns*).

What was it that made worship such a priority for him – because maybe, if we are all honest, we don't always feel as enthusiastic and motivated as he did?

Well, I think we can pick out his reasons fairly quickly:

1. For a start he just knew that when he came to worship, he came much closer to the things that really matter in life. He knew that this was where the deep, deep longings of his life were met, and where he found help for all the struggles and fears of his journey through life.

My heart and my flesh cry out for the living God – maybe that’s also true for us. We mightn’t just put it like that, we mightn’t even always realise that our hearts cry out for God’s presence, but we all know that longing to be sure that there is more to life than what we can see and work out for ourselves, more to life than these short years we last here, more to life than the problems which we all struggle with in one way or another.

In our own way and in our own words, my heart and my flesh cries out for reality, for truth, for help, for hope, for eternity. This is what the psalm writer tells us he finds when he comes to worship. It helps him to come near to God, and there he finds his deepest longings and needs met.

That’s why worship was a priority which came first for him – and that’s why we should try to make it a priority which comes first for us. It gives us space and time for the deep, deep matters of life, of eternity, of God.

2. Further, as this psalmist tells us, he had seen and proved for himself, that those who gave worship this priority, and who, through worship, had come to trust and hope in the living God, whom they met in worship – those people were had something uniquely special and important, something lovely and lasting: *Blessed are those whose strength is in you they go from strength to strength, till each appears before God in Zion.*

And, I think, we have seen this too, in some of the godly, Christian people we know, for whom worshipping faith in Jesus is a priority that comes first.

3. And all of this was exactly the same so many years later, when Jesus met a woman by a well. She was a woman whose life was full of natural disadvantages and deliberate moral disobedience. Jesus talked to her about *living water* which would meet her deepest thirst, long term, and which would *become a spring of water welling up to eternal life* – and her response was, *Sir, give me this water.* She may not have fully understood what she was saying, but she knew her needs, deep down – and so, I think, do we.

So, here are some of the reasons why worship should be a priority that comes first – it’s nothing to do with the outward forms of how we worship – it’s everything to do with the inward longings and needs of our lives. It’s the longing and the need that the old Christian saint, Augustine expressed when he put it like this: *Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you.*

So let me encourage you to make worship a priority that comes first – not just a duty to try to be here as often as possible – although sometimes a bit of discipline is needed – we can’t always depend on enthusiastic ‘feelings’ about worship – sometimes we may have to push ourselves a bit, but long term we’ll reap the benefits and the blessings of which Ps. 84 speaks. Discipline is often a part of anything that we want to do – like athletes who may have to push themselves to train even when they don’t feel like it, or when the weather outside is miserable! There may be times when it seems temptingly easier not to bother with worship – that’s when the discipline is important.

Of course there are also other pressures which sometimes make worship difficult for us – family responsibilities, other social commitments, and not least modern working schedules and requirements. We certainly do have to struggle with these things. With some of them the decision rests with us alone, with others it may be a little bit more out of our hands – but it is often amazing what is possible when something is a priority for us – life is about shuffling all our competing responsibilities, and the picture will be determined by the things that are really a priority for us. So here is our first point for this morning: A church member should be someone who worships – worship should be a priority that comes first.

2. Worship is not just about a priority that comes first, even more importantly it is about **a Person who comes first.** This is maybe actually where should have started. We’ve been thinking, rightly, about how worship deals with the deepest needs

of our lives – but we also need to think about worship from the opposite angle – we need to think about the Person whom we worship – God who has made it very clear from all of the Bible – that he desires and deserves worship from people like us – he is our Creator, and he made us to be people who worship him. Ultimately, worship is about God and what he rightly deserves – even more than it is about what we get out of worship for ourselves.

Worship is about recognising that God is, indeed, God, and that we are human beings whose lives are in his sovereign hands. Worship is a way of showing that we really do know who God is, and who we are.

When God said at the beginning of the 10 Commandments, *I am the Lord your God you shall have no other gods of any description before me or instead of me*, he was emphasising that he is the Person who comes first – and worship is a critically important way of showing that we accept that he comes first for us.

The word ‘*Worship*’ comes from the same word as ‘*worthy*’ – if God is who we say he is, then he is worthy of our worship in the most important of ways.

Many of the Psalms make this point for us – none more clearly than Ps. 100. Here is its central affirmation about God: *Know that the Lord is God. It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, the sheep of his pasture*. And because this is who God is and who we are, the psalm tells us what we should be doing: *Worship the Lord with gladness; come before him with joyful songs enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise*.

God is the Person who comes first, and making worship the priority in our lives is a critical way for us to show that he comes first in our thinking.

1. Set times for worship and a weekly pattern of worship is a most important element in all of this. If God is this important, we can’t say to ourselves that we’ll worship when we can fit it in –

God is just not a person to be ‘fitted in’ as and when it suits us, and there is nothing more pressing to be done. Because of the ‘person’ God is, we need to be fitting our lives around him, not the other way round!

I think that is one of the really important reasons for Sunday – I don’t come at it from the angle of ‘You must not do this, that or the other thing on Sunday’ – rather Sunday as a set day for worshipping together helps us to give God the priority he so rightly deserves. It’s a good thing to have to make the special effort to be here at church. I think that I would even want to say that it’s not the same as choosing to worship in the privacy of your own home, or feeling that you are close to God in the garden or up in the beauty of the hills. Worship in Church should help us to allow God to be the focus, far more than ourselves or anything else. Unless, we just can’t come to worship in church, we should be here.

2. However, it is also important to say that when we are here, It must be about much, much more than simply being able to say that we were at church. Worshipping the Person who comes first is about so much more than sitting through a service.

Worship is not about watching what happens at the front of a service, it is about what happens in our hearts and minds as we meet together in church.

Do you recall how Jesus explained it to the woman at the well? She has asked him some questions about where she should worship, Jerusalem or somewhere else; and that would have included questions about what form worship should take, for Jews and Samaritans would have done worship differently. Jesus didn’t really answer those questions for he seems to have regarded them as very secondary issues. He more or less said to her, It’s not where or how you worship God, *the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshippers the Father seeks.*

And so we have to ask ourselves some serious questions: Is this how we come to worship?

- Do we really come wanting to seek God's truth, more and more, for our lives, or are we too often content to sit sleepily through the service? And when we do hear his truth encouraging or challenging us, do we ever do anything about it in response?

- Do we really worship God from the heart, showing him that we truly are glad and thankful for his love and hope? When we are doing that it almost certainly ought to show up a bit more than it often seems to. Too often we seem to be keen to simply sit there, and overly keen that we shouldn't have to sit there too long! Our worship should have a life and a reality and an intensity of involvement that is all too often missing.

So a church member should be someone who worships, because of a Person who comes first – and remember he comes first and will have the last word, whether we want it or not!

3. One final point. We've mentioned that a church member should be someone who worships because of a Priority that comes first, and a Person who comes first. Lastly there is **a Purpose that comes first.**

The purpose is this: Worship produces Worship – in the sense that what we do here together in church makes a difference to what we do during the rest of the week. Worship in church produces worship in everyday life – and that's how the bible says it should be. Romans 12:1 says *Offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God – this is your spiritual act of worship.*

Our whole view of life in the world, our whole approach to our own everyday lives is to be an expression of worship to God. Worship is not just about what we do on a Sunday.

However what we do on a Sunday, or any other day, in church is crucial to our desire and ability to worship God with our lives everyday.

1. For a start, worshipping together helps us to get right back to the foundations of faith – *in view of God's mercy offer yourselves*, says Paul in that chapter from Romans. Because of how God has treated us with amazing grace and goodness, and

with marvellous hope, we will want to live our lives for him. We need worship together in church in order to be renewed and inspired again and again in this foundation for all faith.

2. As well as that, we need worship to function as the classroom for the rest of life. It needs to be the teaching context that helps to equip us for everyday life, helping us to think about how our faith in Jesus works out in the practical realities of our lives.

So therefore, worship should never be separated from the rest of life – it's not meant to be a comfort zone where we escape from the way life really is outside. Maybe it should be more like an oasis in the desert, where thirsty and weary travellers find water and refreshment and readiness to carry on with the journey – there is a strong flavour of that in Psalm 84.

But if this is so, then it means that our worship must struggle to address all the realities of life – it must be in touch with the real world – it must speak about the real issues and it must do all of that in language and by methods that are appropriate to the real world in which we live – you've heard me say plenty before the summer about these issues that lie behind changes in worship patterns, and that make me very keen to use visual communication as well as dimply verbal – all so that the purpose of worship will be fulfilled as adequately as possible – worship here in church that truly helps us to worship out there in the real world with our real lives.

So what should a church member be? They should be someone who worships.:

- **with a priority that comes first**, because deep down most of us long to have the hope of God as the hope for our lives.

- **recognising a Person who comes first**, because whether we allow him

or not, God does come first over all, and will always have the final say. He deserves and desires our worship.

- **committed to a purpose that comes first**, that of worshipping the Lord with our whole lives, out of gratitude for his kind grace towards us.