

2. Worshipping offers us fresh insight

Two weeks ago, we began a new sermon series on Worship. The first sermon was *‘Worshipping engages our whole lives’* and we were challenged to see worship as placing before God as an offering our everyday, ordinary lives – our sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around lives. If you were away that week, you can read the sermon on the website, and some little cards I handed out, giving some suggestions for how you can infuse your everyday life with worship and praise are still on the church table. Do take one.

This week, we’ll be considering how worshipping offers us fresh insight.

In order to live whole lives of worship, we need to see the world a little differently. There are many competing ‘stories’ which act as lenses through which we can see the world. For example, there’s the ‘success’ story, which encourages us to believe that life is all about getting a good job, a good house and having amazing holidays. These may all be blessings, but is that what life is really all about? Many people have all of this, but still feel that something is missing. Others may be driven by a ‘fear’ story, which portrays everyone as a potential enemy,

likely to take advantage. So life is all about trying to stay safe. Safety may be sensible, and important in certain contexts. But is life *all* about staying safe? Endless predictability, never taking risks?

The lenses through which we see our lives will ultimately shape how we live them.

On Friday, a parishioner from my curacy church came to see me. We’d been good friends during my three years in Oundle and she’d been very supportive when I set up a new Friday morning service of sung Celtic Morning Prayer. Taking over the leadership on the occasions I wasn’t there, I soon discovered that she had incredible gifts of prayer and leadership and so, before I left, I encouraged her to think about lay readership, and was delighted to hear last year that she’d been accepted and had begun her training.

The reason she came to see me on Friday was because since her training began, she’d had a strong sense that it was ordination training she should be doing, supported by comments from people who knew her well. But she was struggling with accepting this calling, so came to me for some advice. *‘I just want someone to tell me I’m not bonkers’*, she said. As she talked, I began to understand

more of why she was doubting her sense of calling. She spoke of a childhood where she was always encouraged to play it safe. *'Don't aim for the top, Claire,'* her mother would say, *'then you won't be disappointed.'* *'Ambition is fine for others, but you're ok as you are.'* So, she never had the aspirations her friends had, always settled for the safe option, and never dared to see herself as someone who might one day do something different. *'Safe'* was safe, so why rock the boat?

But God was clearly rocking her boat, and the confidence that she'd developed from a year's readership training was encouraging her to explore what following his calling might look like. Scary, clearly. But she also wanted to be obedient to a God who she knew loved her unconditionally, just for who she was. And as we chatted, she began to see that this lens of safety, which had shaped her life up till then, wasn't God's lens. It wasn't how *he* saw her, and so shouldn't have the final word in dictating how she responds to this call to ordination. We had an enjoyable couple of hours together and she left determined to speak to the relevant person in the diocese and explore further where God might be leading her.

Each of us will have our *own* lens, our own stories, through which we view the world, which ultimately also affects how we engage with faith. But what if we were to see life more through God's perspective, his story, and putting his purposes at the centre.

What we do on a Sunday morning, in our gathered worship, is an opportunity to keep revisiting God's big story – the big story of creation, fall, redemption and re-creation. We tell this story to each other week by week as we recite together the Nicene Creed. Words we say on a regular basis, words we know so well that we can easily miss the life-changing implications of these words. When we recite the Creed together, we're retelling a radically different understanding of how the world was formed, what sustains it and where it is ultimately headed. This is in contrast to the stories told to us by the world. As we say the words of the Creed, we are rooting ourselves in a counter-cultural story, and this perspective can and should dramatically change how we live our lives in the world.

Paul's letter to the Ephesians is an amazing letter. This young church was clearly struggling, and Paul sends them such a letter of encouragement. A letter beautifully

crafted where he begins in chapter 1 by re-telling God's big story, but then places the Ephesians (and us) firmly in the middle of it. *'Get this'*, he says in verse 11 (or something similar!) – *'Long before he laid down earth's foundations, he had us in mind, and settled on us as the focus of his love, to be made whole and holy by his love. Long, long ago, he decided to adopt us into his family through Jesus Christ. What pleasure he took planning this'*. Wow! Doesn't knowing that change how you might feel about yourself today? Change the lens through which your life has been lived up till now? Change how we worship?

That first part of chapter 1 is a long cascade of praise. Paul wants the Ephesians to be captivated not by all the temples of Diana or the symbols of the Roman Empire that surrounded them, but by a sense of what God, *their* God has done. He knows that *this* is what will help these early Christians to stand firm and act courageously. And in the midst of this brilliant passage, he then prays for the churches, today's passage from the second half of chapter 1, entitled in my Bible as 'Thanksgiving and prayer' for the church.

If we wanted Paul to pray for our church here at All Saints today, what would we want him to pray? [Maybe have a chat with other about that over coffee?] The letter to the church in Ephesus was most likely to be read in many different churches, so we might be able to see what Paul thinks 'ordinary' churches need. What we discover is that Paul believed that they/we need to see better. He prays for a whole-life vision: a vision that sees Jesus filling everything in every way. No area of life was to be untouched.

In our passage, you will have heard that the word '*power*' crops up several times, and power is one of the great themes of the letter of Ephesians. Perhaps this is because Ephesus itself, and the surrounding area, was seen as a place of power. Certainly in social and civic terms the city was powerful, and was set to become more so. It was a major centre of imperial influence in Paul's day. When we visited Ephesus a few years ago on holiday, we were taken aback by the view of the massive amphitheatre that greeted those entering Ephesus from the marble road leading from the port. Seating 25,000, it is an impressive sight that speaks of power and authority.

But it was also a centre of religious power. All sorts of cults and beliefs flourished, and frequently they focused on power: the power of what we might call magic, power to make things happen in the world, to influence people and events, to gain wealth or influence for yourself and to bring about the downfall of your enemies. Their world, in other words, was dominated by the 'principalities and powers', the various levels of rulers and authorities from local magistrates up to internationally recognised gods and goddesses, and all stages in-between.

For Paul though, the greatest display of power the world had ever seen, took place when God raised Jesus from the dead. *'That power is like the working of his mighty strength,'* he says in verse 20, *'which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead.'* [If anybody imagines today that when the early Christians said Jesus had been raised from the dead, they meant that he'd simply been exalted to heaven, they should think again. That wouldn't have been an extraordinary display of power, but rather the normal expectation of many, both Jews and non-Jews. This power of the creator God at once sets itself apart from, and superior to, all the 'powers' that people might ever come across. The risen Jesus, in fact, is now enthroned, on the basis of this power of God, over the

whole universe]. And, at the centre of Paul's prayer for the church in Ephesus, is his longing that they will come to realise that this *same* power, the power seen at Easter and now vested in Jesus, is available to them for their daily use.

But many Christians today, and, one suspects, in Paul's day, are quite unaware that this power is there and is available. It will take, Paul says in verse 17, *'the Spirit of wisdom and revelation'*, to see things people don't normally see. And this in turn will come about through knowing Jesus and having what Paul calls *'the eyes of our heart'* opened to God's hope and light.

That power, the power that raised Jesus and which will transform the whole world and flood it with his glory, is in fact already available to us. Verse 19 promises *'an incomparably great power for us who believe.'* This doesn't mean we can suddenly perform spectacular tricks to impress people. Many of the things which God's power achieves in us, such as overcoming great hardships, enduring pain and illness, forgiving those who harm us, selflessly helping those in the community with no expectation of thanks or reward, becoming people of

prayer – remain hidden from the world and even, sometimes, from other Christians.

So, if you are struggling today. Struggling to understand your place in God's big story, know that if you are in Christ, then you are a new creation. One man – Jesus – died for everyone, putting everyone in the same boat. He included everyone in his death, so that everyone could also be included in his life, a resurrection life, a far better life than we could ever live on our own. Anyone united in Christ gets that fresh start, is created new.

As a church with a focus on the future as much as the present, I read these words yesterday. *'The spiritual vitality of the church depends, not on complicated organisation or creative administration, important as these are; not on eloquent preaching or adequate theology, valuable as they are; not on unlimited resources or cultural maturity, helpful though they be. What the church primarily needs now, as always, is the presence within it of God-conscious, God-centred souls. Even a few here and there would mean very much to a church confronted by the chaos of this age.'*

So, as you leave today, take encouragement from Paul's words to the church, as relevant today as they were then.

Allow God's big story, woven through our worship today, to bring you fresh insight. Fresh insight into how God sees you and how he might be calling you. But, above all, become friends with God; as he's already a friend with you. And do your best to become a God-centred soul.

Let us pray:

Heavenly Father, may the eyes of our hearts be opened today, with wisdom and revelation from your Holy Spirit, to really know the hope to which you have called us, and the glorious plans you have for each and every one of us. In Jesus' name, Amen.