

THE UNITED REFORMED CHURCH
EASTERN SYNOD
WORSHIP MINI-SESSIONS - SESSION 1:
A BRIEF INTROCUCTION TO WORSHIP AND THE THEOLOGY OF WORSHIP
PAUL WHITTLE

Hello, and welcome to this, the first of a series of nine mini-sessions on the theme of worship, what it is, what it means, but, most especially, something of what is involved in leading it, when we are called to do that. This replaces a series of roadshows that are not now possible because of the Coronavirus lockdown. One aspect of the roadshows that we can't replicate is the meeting with each other, but we hope that what we are offering in this way will still be useful. Also, we are not in the same room for you to be able to ask questions. However, if you have any comments or questions, do email or contact, in some other way, any of us. These worship mini-sessions come from the United Reformed Church in the United Kingdom's Eastern Synod, and, in case of any visitors, my name is Paul Whittle and I am the Synod Moderator. I am sharing leading these nine sessions, as would have been the case with the roadshows scheduled to be in locations around the Synod, with Lindsey Brown, the Mission and Training Officer, and Nicola Grieves, the Children's and Youth Development Officer. You will meet Lindsey in the next session, and Nicola at the following, and then we will each have a couple more, though not in the same order.

This first session takes the title 'A Brief Introduction to Worship and the Theology of Worship', so that is what I will try and offer within the space of about fifteen minutes. Tom Wright says of worship: *"Worship is not an optional extra for the Christian, a self-indulgent religious activity. It is the basic Christian stance, and indeed (so Christians claim) the truly human stance. 'Worship' derives from 'worth-ship' it means giving God all God's worth."* The point is that our faith calls us to engage with God, and how we do that is through worship. As we lead worship, it is good that we think about what it is in which we are engaging. Here is something that is so special, and that points us beyond ourselves, something that points us to God. Wright goes on to say: *"Worship is humble and glad; worship forgets itself in remembering God; worship celebrates the truth as God's truth, not its own. True worship doesn't put on a show or make a fuss; true worship isn't forced, isn't half-hearted, doesn't keep looking at its watch, doesn't worry what the person in the next pew may be doing. True worship is open to God, adoring God, waiting for God, trusting God even in the dark."*

Now, on one level, that is quite daunting when I think that, in leading worship I am trying to enable an atmosphere, a set of circumstances, in which all of that can happen. But then, on the other hand, when I realise that in this, as in all things, God is with me, God enables me, and God even can make something good shine through when I mess up, then it all becomes much more manageable.

However, I do come back to wanting to remind myself that in leading worship I am trying to help people, who are there in the congregation, to connect with God. Graham Standish, an American Presbyterian writer, says four things that I find helpful. First, he asks about our approach to worship. He writes: *"Few churches seem to ask the key questions: does our worship help people experience God? Does our worship open people to the presence of Christ? Does our worship encourage people to become available to the Holy Spirit?"* I think it important for us to consider what we are trying to do in worship because that, in the end, takes us to a theology of worship. Standish goes on to say three further things which really help me with that. The first of these three is perhaps the most important. It is certainly the most positive. He says this: *"Worship has the power to engage people in an experience of the Holy in a way that helps them become both whole and healthy."* There is so much in that

brief sentence, but the word that I most want to latch on to is the word 'holy'. Worship links us to the God who is holy. That is key – and, if it doesn't, it isn't functioning as it should.

This leads me to the next thing I want to quote from Standish, because he also says: *"The truth is that worship in many churches is boring. Too often it is uninspiring."* Now that could be rather disheartening – because we might be fearful that the worship we lead deserves that description. I have certainly been at boring and uninspiring worship; and I need to be honest and go further, and say that I have also led some worship that is in that category. Now, one remarkable to think to note here is that, even if we think that we have done a rubbish job today, then God can still bless and use what we've done. How wonderful is that! But it doesn't mean that it doesn't matter. We can never do more than our best. God doesn't ask that of us. But, really, the aim should be to never do less than our best. One of the questions we ought constantly to have in the back of our minds when preparing worship is as to how it can speak to, and inspire, those who are going to form the congregation.

But there is one more thought that I want to share from Graham Standish, one that gets us thinking in a slightly, different, interesting direction. He says this: *"Worship is threatening because it is potentially transforming. The truth is that many people don't want to be transformed. They want to remain the same, to find that place in life where no changes are required and they can feel safe. So, they resist the transforming power of worship."* That is worth quite a bit of reflection. I remember someone – but I can't remember who the 'someone' was – saying that we should never come out of worship without having been surprised. I wonder what surprises God has in store for you at the next service you attend?

Unsurprisingly, the Bible has many expressions of worship, particularly, though not exclusively, in the book of Psalms. Psalm 92 begins: *It is good to give thanks to the Lord, to sing praises to your name, O Most high.* Psalm 95 – *O come, let us sing to the Lord; let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation.* Psalm 103 – *Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name.* Just three among many possible examples. But I want to look a little further, albeit briefly, at three Biblical examples of worship to see what they may say to us.

First, in Exodus 3 we have a moment of worship as Moses encounters God in the burning bush and, indeed, is called by God to a task of somewhat reluctant leadership. Verses 5 and 6 - *⁵ Then God said, 'Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.'* *⁶ He said further, 'I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.'* *And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.* I think there are three things that I want to note here. The first is that we can worship anywhere. Moses was out doing his job as a shepherd, when he found himself caught up in a moment of worship. It is good to go to a church building and worship with others but, as we are very much discovering now, it is not the only way. The second thing links to the first, and picks up that comment I made earlier about surprise. Moses was certainly surprised to find himself worshipping at all, indeed so surprised that he hid his face. Encountering God makes its mark. And the third thing is something about respect, or reverence. One commentator on this passage says: "To remove the sandals is a sign of respect shown on entering someone else's home or territory. The Lord had marked out his presence and territory through the burning bush; Moses must respect this presence by taking off his sandals." Of course, it is not what we would do. It's not our culture. Or perhaps I might also say – it's not our climate. When I was in India last August, visiting friends and colleagues in the Diocese of Vellore, as we entered homes and churches, we invariably took off our shoes, well sandals too, actually. It was sensible and convenient to wear sandals. God is our great friend, and cares deeply for us, but it is right to approach God with an attitude of reverence.

That brings me to our second quick look at a Biblical passage, which happens to be another moment of call, in this instance the call of Isaiah, a description of which we have in Isaiah 6. This was at the identified holy place. Isaiah went to the temple and there he testifies, as recorded in verse 1: *I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple.* This is a very different picture from that of Moses beside the burning bush – but it is the one that is right for the time, and the difference between the two reminds us that we should not try and limit God. God is bigger than we can understand, and we need to let a little bit of that mystery creep into our worship. But what is particularly interesting about this account is that it provides us with a quick run through some of the key elements of worship. I say ‘some’ because there are other aspects that can be included in worship, but there are four key things here. First, praise. The first four verses reflect the awesome greatness of God. *Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts, the whole earth is full of his glory.* Secondly, there is confession. Isaiah recognises that he is not good enough. *Woe is me!* But, thirdly, there is forgiveness. His mouth is symbolically touched by God’s messenger. *Your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.* Then, fourthly, there is a commissioning. Worship is great, opportunities for worship are important, but we need to go out from them to be the church. Someone once said that the holiest moment of the church service is the blessing, when God’s people are sent out into the world. Isaiah is here commissioned to the role of a prophet.

Then, just one more, as I close – Paul and Silas in prison. Acts 16, verse 25 - *About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them.* Despite having been flogged and put in the stocks, Paul and Silas are still worshipping, and maybe that’s a word for today, reminding us that worship in innovative and creative ways, and in different and difficult circumstances, is nothing new. Let me end with some more words penned by Tom Wright: *“Worship is nothing more nor less than love on its knees before the beloved; just as mission is love on its feet to serve the beloved — and just as the Eucharist, as the climax of worship, is love embracing the beloved and so being strengthened for service.”*