

To those being licensed as Readers

I know that as readers you will be doing a variety of things in your parishes, but I think that if there's one role that will be really at the heart of everything else you do it will be leading worship. More and more I think that worship is the most important thing the church does. Worship is acknowledging and rejoicing in the sheer reality of God. It's not one of those things the church does that would still make some sort of sense even if we didn't believe in God. Worship is simply all about the reality of God, as you can feel in those words of Ps 145 that we heard, a psalm in which the psalmist is just completely taken up in celebrating who God is. To a society like ours, much of which is profoundly ignorant of God, worship doesn't make much sense, unless it's the aesthetic beauty of choral evensong. But that's why worship is our essential witness to the reality of God. Nothing else we do in the way of witness will have any value unless it's rooted in the worship of God.

Now it is true that the Bible can be very disparaging about worship when we are not expressing our love of God in practical love of our neighbours. In that case worship is worse than worthless. It becomes just a parody that God hates, the prophets tell us. That's because if we do not reflect the love of God in the lives we lead we cannot really know who this God we think we are worshipping is.

But the other side of the coin, I would say, is that we only learn who God is in worship. For someone who has never had any experience of being part of a worshipping community – and such people are fast becoming the norm, not the exception – it's very hard for such a person to have any real idea of what believers actually mean when they use the word God. The language in which we talk about God has its true home in worship, as words that we actually address to God, rather than just talking about God as though in his absence. Worship is where we learn that language – from the Bible and the liturgy and from hymns and worship songs too – and we learn how to use it – because it's one thing to learn words from a dictionary, it's another thing to learn how to use them in contexts and sentences to mean what they are really for.

It's in worship that we learn that peculiar thing about the language we use of God: that it doesn't pin God down to something we've fully understood, but points us to the God who is always more and better than we have yet been able grasp or can ever actually fully express.

Great is the Lord (says the psalmist) and greatly to be praised
His greatness is unsearchable.

It's in worship that we learn that God is not just an explanation for how things are, a primitive substitute for science (as Richard Dawkins thinks), or a father-Christmas-sort of make-believe figure that we ought to grow out of or a stick that kill-joy believers use to beat people with – these are common secular ideas of

what we are supposed to mean by God. In worship we learn instead that God is the ultimate mystery of the world who embraces all things in love and enters profoundly and transformatively into human experience. I mean that in worship we learn not necessarily to say something like that (those are just my words, trying to sum it up) but to recognize the true God who is so much more than all the idols that masquerade as him.

When we learn that, we may not find it very easy to talk about God, but when someone like Dawkins talks about what he thinks Christians believe in, we will instinctively think: that's not the God I believe in. Mistaking the idols for God is a terrible hazard for us all, but it's by addressing ourselves to the reality of God in worship that we learn to see the idols for silly pretences they are.

So I hope you will see that leading God's people in worship is a tremendous privilege and a special kind of service to God and to them. Some of you, I would guess, may find yourselves sometimes leading small and dwindling congregations. All the more reason to be glad that this essential witness to the reality of God does continue in that place. And in worship, it's important to remember, no congregation is ever alone. We are taking part in the worship of the great choir of creation that never ceases – the universal church of all places and all denominations, and the angels in heaven, and the rest of creation, all God's creatures who, the psalmist tells us, all praise their Creator in their own way, very different from ours.

Now I want to say a word about two ways in which worship may go wrong. First, I think it's rather easy for people who plan worship and lead worship to get into a sort of instrumental attitude to it. I mean we can get entirely focused on what the worship is doing for the worshippers and forget that worship is for God's sake. It does us good, of course, it does us incalculable good, but only because it is primarily about giving God what is due to God. So the best thing you can do for your congregation when you lead worship is to help them to focus on the reality of God.

My second point is that worship must not become a sort of private club for people who make a hobby of it. We are in church for the sake of those who are not in church. We might even say that we worship on behalf of those who don't – not in the sense that it doesn't matter whether they do (we're doing it for them), but in the sense that by worshipping God we are making it possible for others to join us in worshipping God. I see something like that in the way Ps 145 ends:

My mouth will speak the praise of the Lord
and all flesh will bless his holy name forever and ever.

That's an audacious hope, but the psalmist knows the greatness of God. God being who God is, of course it has to be true that all flesh will bless his holy name forever. Our own worship, as the people of God in this or that place, opens the way for others.

There are all sorts of ways of relating our worship to the community we live in. We must bring the community into our worship, in intercession especially, and

our worship should be what empowers us to 'go and serve the Lord' in the rest of our lives.

It's important for the church as the church to be known for its concern and its service in the community, but it's also important to remember that many of those Christians who gather for worship on Sunday are busy the rest of the week with their work or in all kinds of voluntary service in the community or just in being good parents or good neighbours - and in all those things what is happening is the vital connexion between worship and the rest of life and the unbelieving world. All too often I think we don't really know much about what people in our congregations are doing, by way of serving the Lord, when they're not doing anything that we actually label 'church.' We should maybe think more about ways of bringing all that into our worship. I say that particularly because maybe, as readers, as people who are not in full-time paid ministry, you could be better placed than the clergy to keep worship open to that dimension of the whole picture.

But finally I want to say that as well as relating in all these ways to our immediate contexts - the parish, people's places of work and so on - worship should also be broadening our horizons. You may well be exercising your ministry in places where most people are pretty comfortably off. That doesn't mean they don't have problems. But one of those problems is that people who are pretty comfortably off and mix with people who are pretty comfortably off need never really notice - not really take notice of - anything that lies beyond their own comfort zone. But God, says the psalmist,

is good to all

and his compassion is over all that he has made.

We cannot worship *that* God without being drawn, far out of our comfort zone, in the direction of God's compassion for all he has made. True worship must draw us into solidarity with the people who are in desperate need and a world that is heading for disaster. That too must belong to your agenda when you lead worship. It's a high calling and one for which God has equipped you and will continue to equip you.

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