

Reflection for Sunday 6 October 2019 WORLD COMMUNION DAY
Also Celebrations Sunday, and Thanksgiving Offering for future ministry,

Call to Worship from Psalm 96.

Congregational Story Time about Worshipping and Serving God around the world

With reference to Jeremiah 1: 4 – 9 and Romans 12: 1 – 18
“I am the church, you are the church, we are the church together.”

Readings: Matthew 28: 16 – 20 1 Chronicles 16: 23 – 29 2 Chronicles 31: 2 – 10

Reflection: WHAT IS WORSHIP?

- *Leviticus 27: 30, Numbers 18: 25 – 29, Deuteronomy 12: 17, Malachi 3:10 – about tithing*
- *all one in Christ Jesus, called with a task*
- *Honouring God in the way that we live*
- *inspired, encouraged, re-energised for life by worship*

I wonder why you have come to worship today – or why you come on any day? Some of you are here every week. I wonder what it means to you and why you have made a habit of coming? For some of you it may be a very significant habit you have deliberately fostered and made a foundational part of your life. Maybe it is a time when you realise that you gain strength for the week ahead. For some there may be a deep inner yearning to meet with the people of God and worship together. Corporate worship is different from connecting with God on your own. We need both aspects in our lives. The opportunity to worship God with others does not require us to all agree in our theology or understanding of God, but it does mean that we are focused on God together.

For the ancient Hebrews worship was about acknowledging all that God had done for them and giving honour to God as a result. They did that by obeying the laws that Moses had given them which included keeping religious festivals and honouring special places where they were to worship God. The laws included tithing. In the book of laws, Leviticus, in chapter 27 verse 30, Moses told the people that they were to give a tithe, which means a tenth, of everything from the land, whether grain from the soil or fruit from the trees. He said ‘it belongs to the Lord; it is holy to the Lord.’

In giving their tithes, the Hebrew people were doing something practical, something physical – and that meant they would remember, through that practical action, that this was about worshipping God. What they gave became sanctified, set apart for a special purpose, holy. Some of the tithes would be given to the Levites, who were also set apart but in order to work for God, so they did not grow their own crops. The Levites were expected to tithe what they were given too and give their tithe, a tenth of what they received, to the priest so he too would be fed. We find out about that in Numbers 18: 25 – 29.

In Deuteronomy 12: 17 there is another instruction about tithing that offers us a deeper insight into what this was about. This was after the episode in the desert with the golden calf when the people had stopped trusting God. When Moses came down from the mountain the second time to bring back the tablets of stone from God, he spoke at length to the people about walking in God’s ways, loving and serving the Lord with all their heart and soul and not turning away to worship other gods. To reinforce how important this was Moses told them that when they came into the land that God had promised them, God would choose for them one place of worship. It was to that one place that they were to take all their tithes – and when there they could eat some of the tithes together. There were dire consequences if people set apart their tithe and then ate some of it at home or on the way - because it was to become a shared feast, as well as feeding those who were set apart to work for God. Sharing food together brought the people together and cemented their relationship with each other and with God. Sharing food together is a very significant part of church life too.

Singing is also a significant part of church life and in worship. In the time of King David, the role of the Levites was to minister before the ark of the Lord, to pray and lead the people in song and praise. You may have recognised in the reading from 1 Chronicles an echo of the psalm which we used as a call to worship. This was a psalm of thanks from King David to God but he taught it to the Levites so they could lead the people in singing praise to God.

King Solomon, son of David, built the Temple in Jerusalem and sacrifice became a very significant part of temple worship. Solomon’s sons however divided the kingdom and the northern tribes went with one king and the tribe of Judah formed the southern kingdom. Judah was to have 11 kings, all but one of whom worshipped other gods, before Hezekiah became king, hundreds of years later. Hezekiah re-established worship in the temple and reorganised the priests and Levites. As we heard in the reading from 2nd Chronicles, when Hezekiah was King of Judah, the tenets of Jewish religion included emphasis on sacrifice as well as singing and tithing. In turning back to the one true God, the Hebrew people had obviously learned how important tithing was and they kept bringing their tithes – over a period of four months. As the tithes came in, there was a surplus - because the people had finally obeyed God and God had blessed them. Everybody praised God.

Several generations later, Cyrus King of Persia invaded Judah, destroyed the temple and took the leaders of the people into exile in Babylon. When the people eventually returned, the temple was rebuilt under Ezra and Nehemiah. Malachi the prophet called priests and people to renew their faithfulness in their covenant with God. He gave them God's message which said "Do not cheat God. Bring the full amount of your tithes and offerings to the Temple, so that there will be plenty of food there. Put me to the test and I will open the windows of heaven and pour out on you in abundance all kinds of good things. There will be showers of blessing." Worship for the Jewish people was about doing what God expected of them, sharing what they had, and honouring God in praise and prayer and reflecting on who God was. All those elements are in worship now for us too – but there is something more.

In the story we heard, from Matthew 28, of Jesus' last meeting with his disciples, did you notice the words that told us that 'when they saw Jesus they worshipped him'? Worship was reserved for God but here the disciples are at last recognising that Jesus has shown God to them, has lived in such a way that they have seen the divine light, the holy way, in all that he did and taught. They honoured and worshipped him, even though some of them doubted. In spite of that doubt, Jesus trusted them. He gave them a special task – "go to all peoples everywhere and make them my disciples – and I will be with you always." Jesus was telling them to go spread the good news, tell people about the God who loves them and help them to trust God too and to live the Jesus way. We are all one in Christ Jesus and are all called with that task. We can show God's love by the way we live – it does not have to be with words. We honour God and worship God by living God's way. Worship is about the whole of life.

When we come together to worship God, we are also acknowledging that we are followers of Jesus, those who choose to try to live the Jesus Way, and we acknowledge that the power of the Spirit of God is with us wherever we are, whatever is happening to us. The Church is the Body of Christ in the world today. We thought about that two weeks ago on our Annual Meeting Day and how we are all needed to be that body. Every one of us is important. Every one is needed. Being faithful in our covenant with God means that we continue the tradition of coming together to worship God and serving God in our every day lives. That is a tradition that has spread faith in God and the Jesus way of living throughout the world. Because faithful followers of Jesus made disciples of others, the church spread throughout the world and we have a World Communion Sunday, when we remember all the millions of people now and in the past who share our faith.

Worship is the opportunity to unite with others to thank God together, to honour God together, and to remind ourselves that we have a spiritual connection not only with God but with each other. Singing, praying, reflecting together, bringing thanksgiving offerings together, is all part of shared worship. We focus on God who calls us and gives us each a part to play. We are all one in Christ Jesus, called to be part of God's family.

Worship also prepares us to go back into the world, into our every day lives, feeling inspired, encouraged and re-energised for life by that experience. Worship is about connecting with the energy we call God – the mystery, the Spirit, the ground of our being, the rock, the light. Whoever God is for you, however you understand God, I hope that worship energises you, inspires you and gives you the opportunity to reflect. Perhaps a time of sitting and thinking may be very precious in our busy inter-active world.

When I was preparing this reflection and thinking about worship, the weekly Presbytery newsletter arrived in my email inbox. In that newsletter, Peter McKenzie, the Executive Officer of Presbytery Central, was musing about whether worship is our spiritual pacemaker. So there is another image for you to ponder on. Peter wrote 'the life-blood of faith sometimes moves sluggishly through our veins. In worship there is an opportunity to have your spiritual rhythm restored and to create a regular rhythm of spirituality'.

May worship be for you a restoring of your spiritual rhythm, a re-energising and a source of inspiration. May the mystery of God surround you and be the firm ground of your being. May you be inspired, encouraged, re-energised for life by being in worship today. God bless you. Amen.

May the words the choir sings encourage and inspire you to live your response to God:

*Women and men of God, come as one church to serve, bring all the skills we have, sharpen our every nerve:
To save a world in bitter need the rule of love must come in deed.*

*We are the Body now – our feet must mark the Way, our speech declare the Word and live it day by day,
The resurrection story ours, disciples gifted with new powers.*