

Some words from Isaiah 6.

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple.

2 Above him were seraphs, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying.

3 And they were calling to one another: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory."

Our Heavenly Father, we thank you for the privilege of leading your people to appreciate how glorious is the glory of God. Please help us in these sessions to deeply benefit from what we hear and share together, and to make the applications and connections with our own lives and situations. And this we ask in Jesus' name. Amen

Let me give you the map for the next fifteen minutes or so. The overall theme of the session which Huw and I are sharing is "Music in 21st Century London". I am going to talk about theology and practice, and Huw will move us on to 21st Century London. So here are the three headings that I want to explore with you.

What worship is.

What worship isn't.

What worship requires.

Each I hope will become clear as we go along. So let's begin with the theology of worship. WHAT WORSHIP IS.

The letter to the Hebrews begins: "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe."

So when we speak of worship, we, being Christians, mean worship whose subject is Jesus Christ. He is the heir to all things. He is the one through whom God has spoken, finally and definitively. He is the crucified and risen messiah.

But since as the Hebrews writer says, God also spoke to and through our forefathers, then it's right to say that Christian worship is in a sense Jewish as well as Christian. It includes that rich body of knowledge revealed through the prophets, about the wisdom, ways and truth of God. Worship is a response to God. And it's primarily for God.

Now the English word "worship" as most of us know comes from an earlier Anglo Saxon word "worth-ship" or more properly, getting the accent right, "weorthship". Weorthship means to ascribe honour, value, appreciation, worth, from one to another. But Anglo Saxon only takes us part of the way. Hebrew gives us more to think about.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, the principle word used for worship is the Hebrew, SHACAH which means to bow down. So in Exodus 4:31, they bowed their heads and worshipped. It's all one word in Hebrew. They bowed down. 1 Sam 15:25, "I beg you, forgive my sin and come back with me, so that I may bow down and worship the LORD." One word in Hebrew. Shachah, bow down. This word comes 95 times in the Old Testament. And it is primarily a recognition of the greatness of God, and sheer awe in his presence.

This is why that sometimes misunderstood opening phrase in Proverbs is so to the point. The fear of the Lord, the Hebrew word is awe, is the beginning of wisdom. You don't get wise in this life unless you learn to enter his courts with praise and bow down with awe before the Lord your maker.

In the New Testament, the word bowdown for worship is still used, and the devil himself tries it on with Jesus in Matt 4:9 "All this I will give you," he says, "if you will bow down and worship me." Then in Philippians 2, at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth and so on. That's SHACHAH

But the New Testament's principal word for Worship has a very different feel. It is the Greek word PROSKUNEO and it literally means to offer a kiss.

Proskuneo is the normal word for worship in the New Testament. It binds the whole idea of worship to affection and love. So for instance John records the incident of the man born blind who is healed by Jesus in John 9:38 John says the healed man worshipped Jesus." It's proskuneo. Not a literal kiss, but a heart engagement of love, affection and gratitude.

So what does our little survey of the Biblical words for worship tell us? They remind us about the greatness of God. That we should literally bow down and worship him. But the New Testament leads us deeper. Now it's not that God has changed. He is still as the Bible, and our American friends would say, truly awesome. So why in the New Testament this move from awe to affection? The answer in a word, is the cross.

It's not that God's love is absent in the Old Testament. Far from it. But the Old Testament is still preparatory to the New. "In the past God spoke through the prophets but in these last days he has spoken by his Son." And in the New Testament, God's love is fully revealed in the death of his son for us - who are frankly and unequivocally, undeserving sinners. "This is love" says 1 John 4:10. "This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins."

So the true object of our affectation in worship is not simply the God who has made us, or even sustains us. But the God who has redeemed us by the cross, which is the New Testament shorthand for the whole work of Jesus in the forgiveness of our sins and fitting us for glory. True biblical worship showcases this love, and loves God back for all his worth.

That was my first heading what worship is. The theology of worship. My second heading is a little briefer, and it's WHAT WORSHIP ISN'T.

Well. If true worship is the call to love God with all your heart soul mind and strength, the Bible is clear that anything that diverts or subverts such worship is idolatry.

We all know what idols are. We can see them at the British Museum in glass cases. Or where we live in Camden Town, you can buy them in the market as souvenirs, if you like to give your friends spooky presents. However, idol worship is still alive in many parts of the world. Bible readers first come across it in the Hebrew Scriptures. For in ancient Israel, Canaanite religion was in direct competition to the twelve tribes of Jacob when they first occupied the promised land.

This was Baal religion with its all Asrerah poles, carved idols, and cast images. But by the time we get to the New Testament we see that idolatry has been defined more widely, or in fact more deeply. In the New Testament idolatry is anything that stands between an individual and the true worship of God. So Colossians 3:5 suggests there are a whole range of preoccupations which do this, among them sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, all of which says the Apostle Paul are idolatry.

So, is this relevant when we come to speak of music and worship today? The answer is yes it must be. Can you imagine a stronger response from God than these words from Amos 5:21-23. "I hate, I despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your assemblies. Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Though you bring choice fellowship offerings, I will have no regard for them. Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps."

What kinds of circumstances could possibly give rise to such a shocking response from the God who positively invites our worship, and cherishes our affection. The answer is that as a consequence of their idolatry Israel had failed to exercise true justice in the land. And justice matters to God.

Here are a couple more New Testament quotes. John 4:23-24 Jesus says "A time is coming and has now come when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshippers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshippers must worship in spirit and in truth."

And here is Paul in Romans 12:1 "I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God — this is your spiritual act of worship."

These are the definitive texts on New Testament worship. That the worship the Father seeks is as much ethical as it could ever be liturgical. It's a whole life approach. Present your bodies as living sacrifices. And it's a response to the love of God in the cross. The key being in that opening phrase "In view of God's mercy..." So to put it simply we cannot separate the lips of the worshipper from the life of the worshipper. Whatever we think we are doing as leaders, instrumentalists, or singers, the worship the Father seeks is the dedication of our hearts and lives. For the worship sought by the Father good music isn't enough. Consecrated lives matter far more.

This raises the question as far as God is concerned when is our worship not really worship at all? Let me say to that excellence is an important ingredient. Musical excellence does glorify God, but not on its own. So how often do we confuse the principles of worship with the principles of aesthetics? And do we sometimes forget that worship is primarily to please God.

If we are choosing music, do we ask if this hymn or anthem will encourage, stimulate, teach and inspire the people of God to draw closer to him in awe, and with ever increasing affection and love? Are we careful about the cultural relevance of what we are offering to different groups of people, especially the young.

And of course it is not just the material or in inverted commas, the performance or presentation, it is the music leaders, the cantors, choir, musicians whose spiritual role is key in this.

In 1 Timothy chapter 2, in the context of directions for worship and prayer, the apostle Paul says, "I want men everywhere to lift up holy hands in prayer, without anger or disputing." 1 Tim 2:8.

I don't know if you have ever seen Holy Hands. This is not referring to Anglo Catholic or Charismatic raising of the hands in the Eucharist or worship. In scripture the hand is the symbol of personal agency. It means what you are doing with your life. And Paul is saying that when you worship or when you pray what you are doing with your life right now, effectively either facilitates or blocks the true worship of God. He's asking that we ensure we and others have holy hands. No anger or disputing.

Well have you ever known choirs where there is a critical spirit, power struggles, backbiting and conflict? What does God say, when we neglect holy hands. "Away with the noise of your songs, says the Lord." Do you think its possible God ever feels like that today?

What worship is. What worship isn't. And finally, and fairly briefly WHAT WORSHIP REQUIRES. This is about the responsibilities of musicians in churches.

I've tried to draw out the New Testament link between worship and life quality. In Matthew 5, Jesus says, "If you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift."

I want to suggest that anyone with responsibility for music in a church situation should exercise some kind of pastoral ministry to the musicians and singers he or she directs.

Clearly, in the Old Testament, the sons of Korah, the Temple musicians, were exactly that: pastoral and spiritual leaders who of course authored a number of the psalms.

Perhaps worship leaders today should have no less a pastoral role towards musicians and singers. And if our Churches and leaders don't permit this, then surely there is something wrong. What worship requires.

So how much do we prepare for worship? According to Psalm 51 "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; A broken and a contrite heart, O God, You will not despise.

This is Eugene Peterson's paraphrase in the Message. "I learned to worship God when my pride was shattered. Heart-shattered lives ready for love, don't for a moment escape God's notice." So if I am leading worship, doesn't this mean I need to have done my spiritual preparation. I need to be in the right with God. Psalm 139 "Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me. See if there is any offensive way in me."

One great way some prepare for worship is to pray through the hymns and songs ourselves and absorb their truths and joys. And then there are the choir and musicians. How much effort do we give to their spiritual growth and encouragement? In my work I go round a lot of our churches and am there with the choir in the vestry at the beginning. Frankly sometimes I ask myself if the vestry prayer means anything at all, it can be sound so casual.

What worship requires. Holiness, spirituality, preparation. Then finally inspiration. Claire and I went to the Proms this summer. We heard the Russian pianists Boris Bereskovsy play the Grieg concerto with the Bergen Philharmonic. It was their first ever visit to London in their 242nd year as an orchestra.

It was one of those performances where everything was right. Brilliant lyrical and dramatic playing from Bereskovsky, and wonderful clean, lush orchestral sound. Exquisite strings and faultless wind and brass. It was a fabulous sound. And at the end the audience went mad. We clapped and hooted, we stamped and cheered. It was one those amazing creation moments. So inspiring, in a sense, truly glorious.

Here's the point. If God has written into the possibilities of music and performance that sense of the truly glorious, then surely we should use our gifts in worship to so honour him that we enrich and truly inspire our worshippers. So at least in our hearts we clap, hoot, stamp and cheer at the deeper sense of the glory of the one true God, the king of heaven, by whom we are ransomed healed restored and forgiven.