

Isaiah 1:10-18 NLT

“Listen to the LORD, you leaders of “Sodom.” Listen to the law of our God, people of “Gomorrah.” “What makes you think I want all your sacrifices?” says the LORD. “I am sick of your burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fattened cattle. I get no pleasure from the blood of bulls and lambs and goats. When you come to worship me, who asked you to parade through my courts with all your ceremony? Stop bringing me your meaningless gifts; the incense of your offerings disgusts me! As for your celebrations of the new moon and the Sabbath and your special days for fasting— they are all sinful and false. I want no more of your pious meetings. I hate your new moon celebrations and your annual festivals. They are a burden to me. I cannot stand them! When you lift up your hands in prayer, I will not look. Though you offer many prayers, I will not listen, for your hands are covered with the blood of innocent victims. Wash yourselves and be clean! Get your sins out of my sight. Give up your evil ways. Learn to do good. Seek justice. Help the oppressed. Defend the cause of orphans. Fight for the rights of widows. “Come now, let’s settle this,” says the LORD. “Though your sins are like scarlet, I will make them as white as snow. Though they are red like crimson, I will make them as white as wool.”

The heart of worship

We have been talking a lot about worship recently. What is it? How do we do it? When do we do it? Where do we do it? I remember being interviewed by Gerry for the Gerry show in a recent youth service and saying that worship is a state of mind. Gerry brought in the poster off the wall outside where I have put a definition of worship which says, 'Worship is the outward expression of the inner feelings of love and adoration for God and for all that God has done, and continues to do for man'

I sometimes hear people say things like I wish there was more worship in church and I realise that for different people that will mean different things. Some will mean more singing, more expression, even more noise. For others it will mean more meditation, more silent, prayerful adoration. And that is fine, we are all different, we are all made in the image of God but it is only natural that an infinite God, will have an infinite number of images. I believe every one of those images is acceptable to God, as long as the focus is right.

In our reading from Isaiah today Israel had lost its focus. The religious ceremonies were being kept up, the sacrifices were continuing, but God was not impressed because He knew their hearts were not truly motivated by love for Him, but out of their own sinful desires.

Remember that definition on the poster on the wall outside, 'Worship is the outward expression of the inner feelings of love and adoration for God, and for all that God has done'

So that when God talks about 'Your' New moon celebration, instead of "My" New moons, He was basically saying, this worship is obviously all for you, because it is doing nothing for Me (vs. 14)

We are in a new dispensation, we have a new understanding of the love and the grace of God, but sometimes we still fall into the trap the people of Israel had fallen into, of thinking that worship is about enjoying ourselves, about doing things the way we would like, and not the way God likes. I sincerely believe that what God likes, what God is looking for is worship coming out of that sense that feeling of what God has done for us but also out of our sense of awe at God's presence in our lives. I also believe that there are

many people today, going to church for all of the wrong reasons, because of guilt, because of fear, because of family or peer pressure, maybe because it's what their friends do, and therefore 'worshipping' with all of the wrong motives.

Sometimes in the church today we become preoccupied with 'our' worship, 'our worship group', and 'our worship style', with little to no emphasis on 'His worship'.

I have been privileged this week to take part in many types of worship. On Wednesday night we had the end of 24/7 celebration, it was led by Bethel and I know that some who went weren't too comfortable with their style, but God was there and He was worshipped. On Friday I went to the 'Enkalma', a flamenco gospel concert in San Roque. I am not as a rule a fan of flamenco but I was blessed and uplifted, because once more God was there and God was glorified. And then last night some of you came and joined us, as we, together with members from other congregations in Gibraltar had a great time of worship and fellowship.

All these events were in conjunction with Christians from other congregations, and I wonder if Paul were to write to the church in the Campo de Gibraltar today whether he would be able to write as he did in 2 Thessalonians 1:3 'Dear brothers and sisters, we can't help but thank God for you, because your faith is flourishing and your love for one another is growing.' Because undoubtedly these things are taking place and we are seeing things happening, and taking part in events, which would have been unthought-of a couple of years ago. And those of you who have heard Norman speak, about his experiences of 24/7 prayer around the world, will know that with Paul in 2 Thessalonians 1:4 he does say, 'We proudly tell God's other churches about your endurance and faithfulness in all the persecutions and hardships you are suffering.' and also about what God is doing to unite his people in prayer in the Campo de Gibraltar, because this is still the only 24/7 prayer event that has been organised and sustained by a group of churches or congregations, working together as one.

So as Keith sometimes asks when we are going up the mountains 'are we there yet?' Have we attained the goal which God has set before us, by no means, there are still many hurdles to jump over, many lessons to learn, many things and attitudes that still need changing. And it is always easy in the church as in any other

organisation to put the blame, when things are not quite right, on the leadership. Listen to what God says through Isaiah 'Listen to the LORD, you leaders of "Sodom." Listen to the law of our God, people of "Gomorrah".

God's appeal went out to everyone from lowest to highest rank God meant to get the attention of both 'prince' and 'pauper'. First God addresses the rulers, or those in charge, and He says to them you have become like the rulers of Sodom and then God then addressed the people, as the people of Gomorrah To say that the people of Israel had become like the people of Sodom and Gomorrah was a scathing condemnation because these cities represented the very epitome of sinfulness. This was God's way of saying, look, I don't care who you are socially or politically, or even how long you have been going to church, none of these things excuse sinful behaviour. And everyone, from the pastor or minister to the convicted criminal, needs to listen to God's word, because no one, whether a pastor, or a church member has the right to ignore God's word. So having put everyone firmly in their place, God explains why he is angry, He says, 'Stop bringing me your meaningless gifts', why meaningless? Because the Israelites were going on with their sacrifices as usual, without any sense of repentance to accompany them and God, who let us never forget is a righteous God, would much rather we be obedient to His Word, than to live a life of sin, and try to buy His forgiveness through sacrifice.

In 1 Samuel 15:22, Samuel addressing this kind of attitude replied, 'What is more pleasing to the LORD: your burnt offerings and sacrifices or your obedience to his voice? Listen! obedience is better than sacrifice, and submission is better than offering the fat of rams. True worship comes when we offer our bodies as a 'living sacrifice', meaning that we worship God both in and out of the church. In our house group we have been looking at Romans 12, this week, having gone right through the chapter we came back to the first two verses, Romans 12:1-2 'And so, dear brothers and sisters, I plead with you to give your bodies to God because of all he has done for you. Let them be a living and holy sacrifice the kind he will find acceptable. This is truly the way to worship him. Don't copy the behaviour and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God's will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect.

A sacrifice of praise given from a disobedient heart is a meaningless sacrifice, a sacrifice of praise which costs us nothing, is a meaningless sacrifice and so Paul reminds us, give your bodies to God because of all he has done for you. Let them be a living and holy sacrifice. God will not endure both sin and worship and the Israelites were being the equivalent of what we could call 'Sunday Christians'. They were worshiping on the day of worship and living any way they wanted to on the other days of the week.

It is impossible to live a sinful life and a worshipful life at the same time, because the two are contradictory, but I believe that we sometimes carry sin into worship with us; because we carry the world with us. Let me ask you, as I ask myself, what was on your mind this morning, when you set out to come to church, what was on your mind this morning when you started singing? Where you really focused, truly and completely on God, or where you maybe thinking of another person, a situation that troubles you, something you have seen that appeals to you, your next high, and not all highs come from drugs, or even the Sunday roast. What is on your mind right now?

Many times we come into the presence of God and think and act as if God did not know our true heart let's turn again to Samuel, 1Samuel 16:7 'But the LORD said to Samuel, don't judge by his appearance or height, for I have rejected him. The LORD doesn't see things the way you see them. People judge by outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.' God doesn't care this morning about whether we know the songs, whether we like the music style, whether we raise our hand when we sing or bow our heads in adoration, God cares about what is in here, in our hearts. What our motivation for doing all these things is? And if our motivation is ever to put on a good show, God will see right through that, if our motivation is just to have a good time, God will see through that, but if our motivation is to acknowledge that God is God, and to thank Him and appreciate Him for all he has done, then God will accept our sacrifice of praise.

But we need to put our minds and hearts on God, not only in worship on Sundays, but in our daily lives and allow Him to make us more like Christ. We can't live our lives whichever way we want and then expect God to accept our offering on Sunday morning. Listen again to what God said to Israel, through Isaiah 'Though

you offer many prayers, I will not listen, for your hands are covered with the blood of innocent victims. Wash yourselves and be clean! Get your sins out of my sight. Give up your evil ways. Learn to do good. Seek justice. Help the oppressed. Defend the cause of orphans. Fight for the rights of widows.

What is God saying? He is saying don't just come into my assembly, to church on Sunday, to worship me, as a stand alone activity. Your worship needs to flow out of lives lived out for me. Your worship needs to be an expression of those lives.

This theme is not just in the Old Testament, James writes, James 4:3 'And even when you ask, you don't get it because your motives are all wrong you want only what will give you pleasure. When the Bible talks about our hands being full of blood it is a metaphor for us being guilty of sin, it is like saying, you've been caught red handed, and let's face it, we may fool everyone in church if we fake our worship; we can be holier than thou, and have our hands up higher than anyone else in praise, with saintly expressions on our faces, but remember God sees us for who we really are and has caught us red handed if our hearts are set on ourselves, or on anything else, and not Him., and if we are honest we must admit we are constantly caught red handed.

Thanks be to God, that like a loving parent, He doesn't leave His people without provision and He offers a solution, He says, 'Come now, let's settle this, though your sins are like scarlet, I will make them as white as snow. Though they are red like crimson, I will make them as white as wool', we can become clean by being washed through repentance. Baptism symbolizes the washing away of our sins through repentance and Peter puts that in context when he wrote in 1 Peter 3:21 'And that water is a picture of baptism, which now saves you, not by removing dirt from your body, but as a response to God from a clean conscience. It is effective because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.' Peter says, it is not what the water does on the outside, but what God does on the inside.

And God offers this washing to all who turn from their sins who repent and come to Him and the result of that is that we can do all the things which God through Isaiah is calling us to do. Learn to do good, in other words, we are not going to automatically be good, but we must be willing to learn. Seek justice, stand for what

is right. Help the oppressed, stand against what is wrong. Defend the cause of orphans, be there for those who do not have. Fight for the rights of widows, be an advocate, a voice for those who have lost, or never had a voice

Then God says, 'come now, let's settle this.' Let's come to a legal decision, let's settle out of court if you want. God is not compromising on sin; He is offering a pardon from judgment to those who would turn from it. He is not denying their sinfulness, or ours, instead He is offering forgiveness, based on the payment which would be made by His Son Jesus. God is saying, if you come to Me in obedience and repentance, My Son will pay for all of your sins and when we do come in obedience, we will receive the promise of eternal life. If we refuse to come and rebel against God, we will receive eternal judgment. This is God's legal contract, come to Him in faith and repentance and He will grant us eternal life in heaven, refuse and reject Him and we will receive eternal death in hell.

Last week I was privileged to visit a fellow believer known to many of you who is suffering the ravages of a very aggressive cancer. We were talking about our faith and his eyes lit up, he is all skin and bones, in pain, can't keep his food in, but his eyes lit up and he told me how exciting he thought it all was to know that soon he would be in the presence of God. Do you have that assurance this morning?

God has appealed to everyone to come to Him in repentance and He has promised to wash away our every sin and grant us the gift of eternal life. And we have His legal contract; His Holy Word, which gives us this promise. And once we have been washed white as snow, we can then offer up our praises and sacrifices with pure hearts, and know that God will accept our worship.

When does God refuse worship? When it is not about Him, but is about us. I hope and pray that our worship in whatever form it takes, will never be about us but about the most high God, who created us and sustains us.

Finally let us remember some words of Jesus, recorded in various places and here we have them in Matthew 22:37 'Jesus replied, You must love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind.' That is our acceptable act of worship

