

Sermon: Worship with a Kiwi Accent

Silvia Purdie, for Cashmere Presbyterian Church, 3 July 2016

Readings: Amos 5:21-27

Colossians 1:1-14

Prayer:

Living Lord, speak again your Word to us
in the words we speak and hear
in the stirrings we strain to hear
and in truth beyond sound or tongue. Amen.

What is it to worship in a Kiwi accent?

What is worship, how do we do it? Why would we even want to do it?

This morning I want to briefly set out for you my personal convictions about worship, in particular in relation to the readings from Amos and Colossians, and I want to tell you a little about some of the worship experiences that have most profoundly shaped me.

Let us begin, then, with Amos. I invite you to read all of Amos. It comes from about 750 years before Jesus, as the small Jewish nations of Israel and Judah desperately clung to their land and their identity, facing attack after attack. Unlike Isaiah who was born into the royal family, Amos was a shepherd, a nobody much, an outsider to the political system. Here's how describes himself when accused by the high priest of being a menace and a troublemaker:

7:14-15

He had intense visions from God, mostly visions of fire and destruction - Amos is not the most cheery encouraging of Biblical figures. His revelations were not particularly welcome. He had a keen understanding of international politics at the time, speaking into the nations of both Israel to the north and Judah to the south, as well as their surrounding communities.

Our reading today picks up the theme of worship. Amos is challenging the temple system, confronting the priests head-on with a vision of God rejecting their festivals and sacrifices, their offerings and songs in the harshest possible language - I hate, I despise, they make me SICK, literally 'vomit out' your worship.

What God really longs for, says Amos, is justice, flowing out like a mighty river, and righteousness, like a stream in flood.

The next verse takes us back to our discussion a few weeks ago about which God we worship. Why don't you worship your pet god Sikkuth, says Amos, or your hand-made idol Kaiwan the so-called Star God? You'd have better luck trying to control them, says Amos. But the living God, Yahweh, the Lord of earth and heaven, this God demands more of us than rituals and nice music.

Amos is a dramatic conversation between God and his people, through this intriguing fellow Amos. It's full of vivid imagery, and it is a dynamic story, Amos begging for forgiveness, God relenting, prophecies of destruction but also restoration.

Colossians - I have no time to do justice to this beautiful reading. Go home, open it up, read it for yourself, let it speak to you directly. Paul, like Amos, makes the connection between worship and life, how we grow in faith and how we live in the real world. Paul uses his favourite big words, faith, hope, love, as well as thanks, grace, truth, gospel.

Paul neatly sums up vast complexities of theology in the simplest briefest way:

"In our prayers for you we always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ". .. it's obvious and so familiar to us that we don't grasp the revolutionary shift in thinking and in worship that just happened there ... as I said in my recent series, God, Yahweh the living Lord gets a whole new name and a relational identity when he becomes "the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ". And in verse 8 Paul rounds out the Trinity by saying that their love is "in the Spirit", sharing in the love of Father for Son, Son for Father, Spirit who draws us in.

Worship is not mentioned specifically here, but the effects of faith that Paul describes are the very reason we get out of bed to come into a church on a Sunday morning:

- the love you have for the brothers and sisters
- the good news that bears fruit in your lives and that makes a difference in the world
- the ongoing process of being filled with the knowledge of God, growing in wisdom and understanding

Why? So that you may lead lives worthy of God, bearing fruit in every good work, being made strong in God's power, enduring, patience ...

THEN Paul returns it back to worship ... while joyfully giving thanks to the Father, experiencing forgiveness

So it is not just about what we do or say, but fundamentally who we are -

transferred out of the power of darkness into the kingdom of the beloved Son.

The first few verses of Colossians give no instructions for worship, but they set the framework for all Christian worship in every time and place and tongue ...

Worship is a participation in the very life of the living God, who is in God's-self a dynamic interaction of love and power.

Worship is collective, and it grows love in us for those around us, whether or not we even like them or have anything much in common, we are brothers and sisters, saints together in loving community.

Worship is an ongoing process of learning. Bring your mind to worship, ask, learn, grow, understand. We are not passive sponges or consumers of worship. Worship is transformative, engaging, involving every part of us, including our minds seeking integrity and understanding.

Worship changes how we live, forms and informs our values and decisions, creates in us a 'new normal'.

I have been richly blessed through my life with a wonderful variety of worship experiences and church communities.

I was born into a Methodist Fiji-Indian church in Suva. My earliest memories of worship are Wesleyan hymns sung (loudly!) in intricate harmonies with a rich Fijian accent.

In Kaikohe we went to a small Pakeha Methodist church which I confess I don't remember at all, but I do remember the family of the Minister, who took me in. I was 3 years old in a strange land, and my mother spent a month in hospital giving birth to my sister, so I went to stay with the Watsons. That family has continued to play an important role in our lives. That's part of worship.

My primary school years were spent in the heart of Ngati Porou country, Ruatoria up the East Coast. There worship was the Maori hymns and prayers that rolled on deep and long in the Marae in the evenings after the meal while the kids ran around outside. - like the rumble of the Pacific ocean against the rocks, wave after wave.

I remember family camps, my first taste of relaxed informal worship, acting out Bible stories, feeling I might have a role to play.

And there was a little Anglican church, up on a small hill, which I remember. It later was burned down in the arson attacks that tore Ruatoria apart, but we had gone by then ... to Tonga.

Worship in Tonga, well that was an experience! The small international community in Nukualofa was granted permission by the King to use the private chapel on the Palace grounds. This was a beautiful intimate space for worship, and we sang to the little pump organ and felt a real sense of community and belonging. My father had a passion for theatre, so he'd always have some dramatic project on the go (I wish my boys could have met him). Daniel in the Lion's Den - I can still picture the enormous furry lion's head my mother made, Joseph and the Technicolour Dreamcoat. Song and Story, everyone needed to pull it all off.

After that, the hardest transition, to suburban Lower Hutt, my parents separated, my mother's crisis of faith and identity ... so I biked myself to church, where my grandmother went. Waiwhetu Methodist Church. Back in the 80s in its prime, programmes and groups every day of the week, the heart of the local community. My strongest memory of that church was the day of my Confirmation. I was 20 by then, embarking on professional youth ministry. At my Confirmation my heart was so held in the love of God, so powerfully affirmed, my promises so clearly & profoundly made.

As National Methodist Youth Co-ordinator I experienced the best and the worst of the church. Creative worship at camp, as well as creativity gone too far, stuff that would never be considered appropriate for Christian youth events these days! The 90s were a ferment around me of theological arguments, bicultural, multicultural, feminism, charismatic, sexuality, rebellion, ethics, music.

Then I would go into trad Methodist churches on Sunday mornings and be bored to tears by dreary prayers listing the problems of the world, or endless sermons on being Inclusive but little about God, little joy or hope.

My hunger for worship of substance took me in an unexpected direction - into the ancient traditions of High Church Anglicanism, with candles, and Eucharist, silence in church. I found there a deep well of spirituality. In repeating the same words week after week a space opened up in my soul and when I sipped the port wine from the chalice my whole being was connected in that moment to the life of Christ.

I would love to go on, and tell you about special experiences in Taize, of a Black Gospel church in Washington DC, of chapel at Knox College Dunedin with our fellow students, of Baptist evening services, of Kids Friendly worship at St Heliers in Auckland, of huge charismatic New Wine worship.

I would love to tell you what it is like to experience the Holy Spirit intensely in your body, the warmth and tingle of it.

I would love to share how astonishing it is when a stranger tells you something deeply personal as a direct word from God, just to you.

I would love for you to visit my last church, Milson Combined Church, in its plain little hall, with its tangible sense of fellowship in the deep love of those people for each other, the noise of children's play in the corner, the time we had Lego Church, or when the Girls Brigade do an action song.

But my time is up. Our worship here is nearly over. In a moment we will take up our offering, as a sign of the worship of our lives, and pray.

I fear I have not answered my own question - I have heard many different accents in worship. My biggest frustration with the church today is how blandly similar most of the big pentecostal churches are in their worship, singing the same songs in the same way for the same emotional effect. Perhaps worship in a Kiwi accent honours many voices, many styles.

My own hope for our worship here at Cashmere is that together we will honour the journey of each one who shares in it, while together drawing in a shared journey into the heart of God, who transcends every culture, whose truth is true in every language. True worship honours the challenge of Amos, to share in God's outpouring of justice and righteousness. True worship bears fruit in our lives, as Paul calls us to in Colossians, and binds people together in love. I trust that we will find our own voice, and worship in our own accent.

Our next song honours the first service of Christian worship in Aotearoa. I know, we normally only sing it in December, but it's too good for just once a year!

Te Harinui