

Worshipping in Spirit and in Truth

Sermon preached by Rev. Laurel Barr at Roseville Uniting Church

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Readings: Ephesians 1:1-14, Luke 17:11-19, Psalm 91

One of my personal experiences of the wonder and power of God happened in an unexpected situation. Actually most of our experiences of God's grace catch us when we least expect it.

I was writing an essay as part of my study of the Triune God -a subject I expected to be dry and yet it turned out to be my favourite. The title of my essay was "God and the Concubine" and it came out of a bible study I had done on Judges 19 which is a horrific story of betrayal, gang rape, sexual abuse and murder of a concubine. It's a story of spiralling violence and terror.

I wrote this essay at the time when stories of asylum seekers and the detention centres and the violence of East Timor filled our news, and as I was still processing in my heart and mind the poverty and plight particularly of village women I had seen in Timor as a missionary. It seemed to me that this nameless and used woman represented all those people in the world who find themselves powerless and expendable. And I wondered "How are we to speak of the Triune God in the face of the suffering of such "non-persons"? Indeed, how do we talk of the Triune God when we encounter personal tragedy and our lives and the lives of our loved ones spiral out of control?

Well - what followed in the bulk of a very long essay was the history of how theologians have wrestled with who God is and what God has done for us and is doing for us. But during the course of it I found that the mechanical and hierarchical view of God as Father, Son and Spirit I had grown up with was challenged by a much more dynamic understanding of how the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are an interactive community of self-giving love. ... And I looked at the way this Community of Love - this Triune God - is constantly responding to the suffering and pain of the creation, to us and especially to the "concubines" of this world.

This is not the time to talk about the Trinity but sufficient to say as I wrote that essay I realised in a fresh way that in the very heart of God, death and brokenness is contained and life is given and held: In the centre of the life of the Triune God there is a welcoming life-giving place even **for** the most vulnerable and powerless and abandoned of our world for eternity. And as I finished typing at my desk and tried to take in the breadth and width and the gracious hospitality and inclusiveness of God, I felt wonder and praise well up from within. And it has formed and influenced a large part of my understanding of ministry to this day. I was filled with the wonder of God's love and I found myself automatically typing "to the glory of God!" and as he marked it my lecturer wrote AMEN in capital letters.

In that passage Ephesians 1:3-14 we read earlier, you can literally feel the excitement of Paul as he tells the story of God's plans for us from the beginning of time. It's a story that turned his own life completely around and brought him into a transforming relationship with God through Christ sealed with the gift of God's Spirit within him. It's the incredible story of how God makes us his sons and daughters through Jesus Christ.

And as Paul writes it in the form of a Jewish prayer of blessing, the words tumble out one after the other and not once, but three times he finds himself praising God and glorifying God - How else can he

respond to such love and grace? Paul's words of praise and glorifying God shared with the church at Ephesus is an act of worship - they are his response to God's love - they are Paul's response to who God is, what God has said and for what God is doing.

In the Gospel story of Jesus healing ten lepers, the one who came back to thank Jesus for what Jesus had done for him prostrated himself on the ground in homage and worship.

Worship is our response to God's goodness towards us. As someone said: When we stand before the cross of Jesus, we surrender, we love, we cry, we dream, we give up, we kneel, we confess. We look at God and place him above all else because he's worth it.

The word "worship" in English means "worth-ship". When we worship we are vividly aware of the worthiness, the beauty, majesty, the mystery and holiness of God. * Rick Muchow of the Saddleback Church* comments - "Some people go to church for what they're going to get out of it. But it's not about us". It is a *service* - our response to God.

Have you ever stood out under the night sky in the countryside and gazed at the vastness of the galaxies and the Milky Way? In Psalm 8 the poet looks up at the night sky and says with great wonder:

*"When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
The moon and the stars that you have established;
What are human beings that your are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?.....
O Lord our Sovereign,
How majestic is your name in all the earth!"*

Yet as Dorothy McRae-McMahon** reminds us, while **"good worship is primarily a focus on the Holy God, it is also a gathering up of all that we are and bringing that into authentic relationship with our God."** In other words our response to God has to be a truthful one that involves our whole being and it is about being reconciled where there is any brokenness or estrangement in our relationship with God.

We see something of this if we read the Psalms which include ancient poems and prayers and songs some of which were used in the worship life of the Temple and in devotional life of the Hebrews but and which also have been a very rich part in Christian worship. As Walter Brueggemann,*** the Hebrew Scriptures scholar describes, the psalms help us to give voice to the whole range of our human experience while talking to and engaging with God. There are psalms for example that sing forth or express the good times in our human lives when everything seems "fine and life is confident and buoyant and successful" - psalms of walking with God and wisdom and good harvests and the goodness of fellowship and the joy of family.

But the Psalms also recognise that sometimes life is "the pits". Friday was World Mental Health Day which is held to promote greater community awareness of mental illnesses. One in five Australians will be affected by mental health issues in the next 12 months. That's a frightening statistic.

Gwendoline Smith**** a survivor of depression describes how it "flattens you like a steamroller -on the way through it smashes your self-esteem, your confidence, it smashes you." Her words resonate with these found in the Psalms:

*I am poured out like water,
And all my bones are out of joint;
My heart is like wax.
My mouth is dried up like a potsherd.. (22:14-15)*

My enemies trample upon me all day long... (56:2)

The terrible experience of powerlessness, darkness, forsakenness and feeling cheated of life was very real for the ancient poets as they addressed God.

They also knew what it meant to feel remorse and guilt. For example there is Psalm 51 that we used in our Prayer of Confession. This psalm is traditionally attributed to King David after he had committed adultery with Bathsheba and arranged things so that her husband was killed in battle. We might not have sinned so shockingly yet the words of the Psalm resonate with many of us:

For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against you alone, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight,,,,, Create in me a clean heart O Lord

In many situations and ways *the* psalms addressed to God even in worship remind us to give space to acknowledging that life can be “the pits” and to give voice to our fears - even our personal and corporate fears as the world experiences the financial crisis and there is recrimination and anxiety and calamity and head scratching and hand-wringing and confusion. But notice by telling God the way things really are, we are not cutting ourselves off from God. On the contrary, we are engaging with God with truthfulness and opening our hearts to the love of God.

For the Psalms are also filled with testimonies of how the writers were surprised by hope. The writer of Psalm 40:2 testified how God *drew him up from the desolate pit, out of the miry bog*. And if we read the whole of the Psalm 91 (that Meg led us in singing), we find that beyond the pit, two images speak of “safety and tenderness and nurture”*** - the first is the image of the wings of God sheltering us as a mother bird gathers and shelters her young - and the other is of God being our refuge - our fortress - always with us holding us, rescuing us from that which would harm us - and in the chorus of what we sang there are the other images from Isaiah of God lifting us up to fly like eagles -to soar in the new dawn - the new day. In other words here we experience down God who hears us, the God who loves, heals and restores and whom you and I particularly know in Jesus Christ.

Friends when we come to worship as we have today, God is glorified but also our lives are valued as we bring all that we are and the concerns and joys of our community with truthfulness and authenticity to God. Through the movement and the work of the liturgy all this is brought into relationship with God.

From our gathering together at the beginning of this service where we remembered that Christ is in our midst, through our praise and thanksgiving, through our confessing of who we are and our being forgiven, through our reading of the Bible and hearing what God is saying to us, in our prayer for ourselves and our relationship with God is strengthened and we grow and we are healed and reconciled so that again our only response can be praise and thanksgiving.

We are also called to be co- partners with God ourselves in the ministry of hospitable love and reconciliation.

So finally in the words of another psalm:

“What shall I return to the Lord for all his goodness to me?” (Psalm 116:12)

“What shall we return to the Lord for all his goodness to us?”

For St Paul it was obvious - it simply flowed out in the passage we read today: Paul just could not keep the good news to himself. He has to share it with the people of Ephesus and with all others who would listen and he did it whatever the personal cost. In his letter to the Romans after spending eleven chapters talking about what God has done for us in Jesus Christ, he writes

I appeal to you therefore - then my brothers and sisters to present your bodies - your whole selves - as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. (Romans 12:1,2) What shall I return? Paul says the commitment of your life!

In the same vein, St John finished talking about the love of God in Christ by saying If this is how Christ loved us how then can we not love one another? (1John 4:11)

Amos the Prophet warned his people that “*The Lord God despises their festivals and takes no delight in their solemn ceremonies,,,,,or sacrifices or songs* (in other words their worship) - if *justice does not roll down like the waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream*” (Amos 5: 21-24) Our worship must flow out into our lives and our work.

And as I reflected on my essay there was another question: If God the Trinity is a community of love who reaches out to the concubine then is not that a model for us as Christ's community, the Church? How do we as the church live out the gracious hospitality and reconciliation and inclusion we have experienced in Christ?

For surely in our response to these questions is our true worship!

Let us pray - let us spend a few moments in silent reflection

Let us think about what experiences of the goodness of God do we give thanks for?..... What situations in our lives do we bring to be brought into authentic relationship with God today?What shall I return to God for all his goodness to me?

To the praise and glory of God! Amen.

Resources referred to:

* Ten Core Convictions About Christian Worship - Calvin Institute of Christian Worship, www.calvin.edu/worship

*Rick Muchow *The Heart of Worship*, www.christianitytoday.com

** Dorothy McRae-McMahon, *Echoes of our Journey*, JBCE, p.12

***Walter Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms* , Saint Mary's Press Winona, Minnesota pp.15, 35

**** Gwendoline Smith *Depression Explained*, How you can help when someone you live is depressed, ABC Books, 2005, p.17