

18<sup>th</sup> August 2024

**John 4:21-24**

**True Worship**

As people we have many varied and diverse opinions on different matters and issues, don't we? Different views on things like how to do it right, while at the same time disagreeing about what 'right' actually is. This came very much to the fore during the COVID pandemic a few years ago, when debate raged over measures like social isolation, lockdowns, border closures, immunisation, mask wearing. There were opinions ranging from, 'are these things really necessary, let's go for herd immunity', to, 'they aren't strong enough, we need to be tougher to stop the spread'. I really felt for our leaders at that time; no matter how genuine and sincere they were in what they did they were always going to cop criticism from somewhere. I'm currently re-reading the great novel *War and Peace* by Leo Tolstoy, and near the beginning of the book there is a quote which reminded me of why I love this book. I can't remember it word for word but to paraphrase it went; 'no two people will ever look at the same issue or event and have exactly the same view or opinion regarding it'. That's what we see and experience in life, isn't it? Whether it's about things relating to health, education, lifestyle, climate change, current world events, as people we all have different views and opinions about what is happening, what should be happening, and how to move things along from one to the other. In many ways that's a good thing as it keeps things going and moving around, but in other ways it means that opposition and disagreement can stall things and make it difficult to move forward together.

No doubt some of you have already been thinking about how this happens in the Church, on a variety of issues. One of these is in regard to worship. Because our faith is so important to us, and worship is a central part of that, this can be an issue we get emotional and passionate

about. It amazes me that in the church my family was in 35 years ago the pastor was running worship services in the contemporary style we use today in our 9am services, but back then it was a big deal, and generated great debate. Now it is accepted and done by a lot of congregations. I guess that's how change happens. So, whether it's about how long the service is, the style of worship that is used, that the pastor talks too much or not enough, or the style of music doesn't suit me, we continue to have these debates, and always will. No two people will ever look at these things in the same way. In one of my confirmation classes the other day we were talking about worship. I asked the students if they thought everyone who comes to worship with us each Sunday has the same taste in music. The answer of course was, 'no'. How then, I asked, can we have music and worship which suits everyone's own personal preferences and tastes? 'But', one of them replied, 'isn't worship all about God, not us?'

All about God, not us. True worship. What a great lead into the teaching Jesus gives us in this Gospel reading from John 4. The context of this reading is that Jesus has been talking to a Samaritan woman about her many marriages; a subject that was obviously a bit uncomfortable for her because she quickly changes the subject by saying, "Sir, I can see that you are a prophet. My ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews say Jerusalem is the only place to worship." (19b-20 CEV). Get Him onto talking about worship that will distract Him from talking about my personal life. And if you think about how passionate we can get about worship issues, there is no doubt that whether the true place of worship was on that mountain or in the temple in Jerusalem really got things fired up between the Jews and the Samaritans. In her statement she is saying that true worship is about the place where the worship happens.

Jesus' answer, both in what He says here and in His whole discussion with this lady in John 4, is that true worship is not about the where and how, but it's about the who and the why. The place, whether it's about Mount Gerizim or the temple back then, or the buildings we worship in today, are important for the way they give us shelter and comfort, as well as for how

what is in them give us focus and direction in our worship. As we celebrate that the building we call the Little Chapel has been the place of worship for Christians for 130 years, in three different locations, we think about all the worship services, teaching of God's Word, baptisms, weddings, and funerals which have been held in there. But in all of those things, in whatever we do in our worship, it's not the building or place which is important, but what we do there both in how God comes to us and we respond to Him.

In true worship, the way Jesus talks about it here, we come to worship God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; that's why we start our services in the name of our Triune God. Our focus is on remembering who He is for us, remembering what He has done for us. The building and everything in it are important, to us, because they give us comfort and shelter, and again, they give us focus and aids in our worship. The same can be said about the service order, the songs and hymns. It is good to have those things, and good that we want our buildings and worship spaces to enhance our worship, and for our worship services, songs and hymns we sing, how things are presented, to be done in a way that helps us in our worship focus.

But true worship is all about focusing on God. As Jesus says here, 'those who worship God must be led by the Spirit to worship him according to the truth.' (24b) An important part of this comes from the overall context of this discussion between Jesus and the Samaritan woman. Jesus tells her that He is the Living Water, and that if she drinks the water He gives she will never be thirsty again. We know what this Living Water is we receive in Jesus. It is the water of God's grace as we receive God's forgiveness for us by what Jesus has done for us and as we receive it in faith. It is the water of hope as we know that whatever we go through God is with us, guiding us, comforting us, strengthening us; there is nothing we go through alone in our lives as we can now hand everything over to Him. It's the water of peace, both within ourselves as we know the love we live in, and also between us and others as we share the forgiveness God gives us, the forgiveness which heals relationships. Jesus' point to this lady is that in all her relationships she was looking for these things in her life but couldn't find

them. In Him, He says, she can find all she needs. Stop looking at worship as just something which happens in a particular time at a particular place in a particular way. See true worship as being a real relationship with the Father through Jesus by the work of the Spirit; a relationship which is in and comes through your life in all ways.

True worship: being led by the Spirit to worship the Father in the name of Jesus. As we remember not just our Little Chapel building, but all the places we worship and everything in them, the hymns and songs we sing, the people who lead us, everything which gives us both guidance and comfort, we are thankful for them. But we know also, that while we might have different opinions and views on these things, ultimately our true worship is about us being centred and focusing on God; receiving from Him, responding to Him. Come to drink the Living Water Jesus offers to us all, and in worship, at all times, in all places, in all ways, both give thanks to Him and share this with others also. Amen.

### **FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION/REFLECTION**

- Can you think of any issues or events which people have very divergent and conflicting views about? How do we go working through them together? Are we very good at accepting and working with people's different opinions?
- What are your own views and preferences regarding public worship? Do you have a preferred style? Any songs or hymns you really like? How can you both hold on to these things you really like but also be focused on worship as being all about God and for the good of all who gather?
- As Jesus talks about True Worship here He is talking about much more than worshipping in a particular place, at a particular time, in a particular way. It is worship which is open to receiving God at all times in all parts of our lives, and responding to Him? How can/does that look for you? Are there things you can do or change so you are more open to your life being one of true worship?

Pray: thank God for all the gifts He gives us, including the gifts of Jesus and the Spirit which draw us into worship of Him. Ask Him to help us to always be open to the blessings He gives us and to showing our worship out in our lives.

*Pastor Andrew R. Koehler*

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