

INSPIRING MUSIC in WORSHIP

Session 1

Commentary for Part 2: What the Bible says (page 12)

The readings in Session 1 give a general overview of worship, drawing out different elements and alternative approaches and practices. More can be learned by reading the surrounding chapters to these texts to grasp the wider context.

The Law: Exodus 25.1, 2, 8 NRSV

The Lord said to Moses, "Tell the Israelites to take for me an offering; from all whose hearts prompt them to give you shall receive the offering for me...Then have them make me a sanctuary, so that I may dwell among them."

The book of Exodus records the history of Israel between 1450 and 1400 BC. It describes Israel's miraculous escape from slavery in Egypt and their wanderings in the desert. This book includes not only the Ten Commandments but also detailed instructions for regular worship. Chapters 25–31 contain God's directions for the construction of the 'tabernacle' and chapters 35–40 how these directions were carried out. Why not read the whole block to get a good overview?

Worship was central to the life of God's people. Everyone was invited to participate by bringing precious metals and gems, coloured yarns and fine linen, acacia wood, animal hides, olive oil, spices and incense. Skilled craftsmen offered their practical abilities. The use of high quality precious materials honoured a holy God, present among his people. The tabernacle was a movable 'tent of meeting', which kept the Israelites focused on the one true God as they travelled despite the many pagan Canaanite gods around them.

History: 2 Samuel 6. 14,15, 21 NIV

David, wearing a linen ephod, danced before the Lord with all his might, while he and the entire house of Israel brought up the ark of the Lord (to Jerusalem) with shouts and the sound of trumpets... David told his wife: "I will celebrate before the Lord."

The 'ark of the covenant' was Israel's most sacred object kept in the Most Holy Place in the tabernacle. This sacred wooden box was a symbol of God's promises to his people and contained the stone tablets with the Ten Commandments. The ark had been captured by the Philistines (see 1 Samuel 4. 1-11), but it proved a curse and was soon returned to Israel. The ark had then remained in the house of Abinadab for twenty years, where it had brought blessing to Abinadab. King David now wanted God to bless the whole nation of Israel in the same way, so he brought the ark to Jerusalem with great celebration and rejoicing.

David was prepared to give himself totally and unashamedly to the worship of God, expressing himself physically, leaping and dancing before the Lord with all his might. His wife was not impressed, despising him and treating him with contempt. Her lack of respect, bitterness and resentment destroyed her relationship with David and rendered her childless for the rest of her life.

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The Psalms: Psalm 95. 1 - 3, 6 – 8 NIV

Come, let us sing for joy to the Lord; let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation. Let us come before him with thanksgiving and extol him with music and song. For the Lord is the great God, the great King above all gods...Come, let us bow down in worship, let us kneel before the Lord our Maker; for he is our God and we are the people of his pasture, the flock under his care. Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts...

The one hundred and fifty psalms in the Bible were composed over a period of eight hundred years and formed Israel's hymnbook. As part of an oral tradition, they were handed down from one generation to another and learnt by heart. The psalms were intended to be sung together in corporate worship and some mention musical forms, named tunes or recommended instruments. It is amazing to realize that these are the songs that Jesus would have used for his worship.

Psalm 95 is an invitation to worship God through both loud exuberant praise and quiet humble adoration. The second half of the psalm contains a stern warning about the perils of stubborn disobedience and lack of faith. Known as the Venite (Latin for the first words 'let us come'), this psalm is a regular part of the Morning Prayer service in the Anglican church.

The Prophets: Isaiah 6. 1 -3 NRSV

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings; with two they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory."

In the Old Testament, prophets stood alongside the priests as God's representatives, speaking on behalf of God to his people. Written c. 740 BC, this passage describes Isaiah's vision of God, giving a sense of God's greatness and majesty. God is attended and worshipped by angels as well as human beings. The three-fold 'Holy' underlines God's holiness and purity. It is a phrase which appears frequently within the liturgy to call us to worship, to bring us to confession, and to give praise and thanks to God during Holy Communion.

If you read on further, Isaiah is confronted with his own shortcomings in the presence of a holy God. He cries out in confession and receives not only God's forgiveness but a commission to go as a messenger to God's people. When God asks: 'Whom shall I send? And who will go for us? Isaiah's response is: 'Here am I. Send me!'

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The Gospels: Matthew 26. 26 – 30 NIV

While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take and eat; this is my body." Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins..." When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

The Last Supper – the final meal of Jesus with his disciples – is recorded in all four gospels. This was a celebration of the Passover meal, in which Jewish families would retell the story of Israel's escape from Egypt (see Exodus 12). The meal included lamb, bitter herbs and other symbolic foods as well as unleavened bread and wine. There would also be the singing of psalms, reading of scripture (Old Testament) and prayer.

The Last Supper established a pattern which worshippers have followed in remembrance of Jesus ever since. This act of taking bread and wine is known by different names in different denominations and churches: the Lord's Supper; Holy Communion; Eucharist; Mass; Breaking of Bread; Agapé. Holy Communion is one of the two 'sacraments' commanded by Jesus (together with baptism). It is the most significant part of worship for many believers.

The Epistles: Ephesians 5. 19 – 20 NIV

Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.

These verses come from a letter to the church in Ephesus. This part of the letter is talking about our relationship with God and with one another in the church, encouraging godly behaviour and service. This is one of two New Testament passages which mention the use of psalms, hymns and spiritual songs in worship (see also Colossians 3.16).

Worship is a corporate act; we should come prepared to actively participate in order to honour God and encourage those who worship with us. Music forms an important part of this worship using a wide variety of different genres. In the following verse (v.21), the writer then challenges worshippers to submit to one another in reverence for Christ, a pertinent reminder to be generous in attitude towards those who might have different views or different preferences in worship to us.

Revelation: Revelation 7. 9 - 10; 8.1 NIV

After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no-one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb...And they cried out in a loud voice: "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb." When the Lamb opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour.

Worship is a vital thread woven throughout the Bible from the early chapters of Genesis, the first book, to the final chapters of Revelation, the last book. The apostle John, author of Revelation, communicates several vivid visions of worship in heaven in chapters 4, 5 and 7. Worship is much bigger than the local church, national church or even the worldwide church. We are invited to join together in worship with the angels and the great company of heaven. The church in the East has a much greater awareness of the 'numinous' or spiritual realm and the close connection between the worship of heaven and the worship of earth.

John's visions are full of mystery and awe-inspiring scenes of vibrancy and colour. This great crowd of worshippers, dressed in white and carrying palm branches unite together in worship - sometimes crying out with loud voices, sometimes falling on their faces in adoration before God's throne, sometimes worshipping in profound silence.