

## **“WHAT ARE WE DOING?”**

### *Psalms 122,123*

Well, here we are again. Starting to get back to some sort of normality and getting together for the part of our church life together that so many people say they've missed. There has been all kinds of reaction to the lack of opportunities for Sunday worship over the past months, from some people still being anxious about meeting together to those who have eagerly rushed back and (according to the many comments we had last week) really enjoyed it and found it helpful, to the odd (in every sense of the word) articles that try to convince us that government have banned Christian worship. And across the churches – even just in this small city – different approaches are being taken to meeting together again.

It is very interesting, though, hearing what it is that people say they've missed – and the extent to which that is actually what Christian worship is all about. For some, it is the physical presence of other worshippers on a Sunday morning that they have missed. For others, it is the opportunity to chat over coffee afterwards. Some of that has been available through housegroups and other midweek groups, it has to be said. Other people have missed singing together – and the idea of Sunday worship as an hour's sing-along is what has been most important. Each of us will have a slightly different view about what it is that is so good about getting together in a particular place at a particular time (or within a few minutes of it, in some cases), and what we actually mean by worship.

So let's take a few moments this morning to think about what we mean by “Sunday worship”. What are we here for today? As we've been looking into the Psalms recently for our inspiration on a Sunday morning, we'll dip in there again and look at this issue in the light of the two Psalms we've read this morning – *Psalms 122 & 123*.

Those two psalms are what are known as “Songs of Ascents”. You'll see that as the heading for several of the psalms in this section. Some people think this refers to the ascent of the stairs at the entrance to the Temple in Jerusalem, but the main view is that they are about the annual pilgrimages when the people of God went up to Jerusalem – set high on a rocky outcrop – to worship. Whichever is the right interpretation, these psalms are used in the liturgy of temple worship and express something of the joy and praise of God's people.

Both of these psalms demonstrate an attitude towards worship which is clearly very positive. *Psalms 122* begins with words that express joy and enthusiasm. The very suggestion of going up to worship leads to rejoicing for the writer – and what he says here would be echoed by the many pilgrims who thronged the Temple to meet with their God. There's also a sense of anticipation. It's the invitation to worship that

causes him to rejoice. There's a real eagerness in this psalm (as in many others) to be with God's people in God's presence.

And these psalms – which were used as part of the service when they arrived at the Temple – include several aspects of worship which we include in our liturgy (written or unwritten) still today. There are prayers for the city, thanks for God's help (particularly in the face of opposition), expressions of total reliance of God (123:2) and pleas for God's mercy. Of course, if we'd read through some of the other psalms, or looked in other parts of the Bible (Old and New Testaments), we would have discovered many other aspects of worship that could or should be part of what we do today. What really comes over in these words, however, is the enthusiasm and eagerness of the worshippers.

Now that confronts us with some important challenges. I'm sure that even these people did not always turn up for worship with quite the same sense of occasion or single-mindedness of purpose, but the ideal is set out for us here. How do we measure up to it? In particular, how are our regular Sunday services viewed by those of us who attend? Over the years, the attendance at regular Sunday services has gone up and down and however many people are actually here, we'd still love to see more, I'm sure. In a way, you are the ones who are convinced of its worth, or you wouldn't be here. We often discuss – formally and informally – what goes on in our services and why those who are part of the church are not necessarily here every week (as they might have been, say, thirty years ago). There are sociological as well as spiritual reasons for patterns of attendance at Sunday worship: family life has changed; people are under increasing pressure at work; we live in a “low-commitment” society; and now, of course, there are issues to do with health. And I am also acutely aware that answering the challenges that arise is perhaps more the responsibility of the person at the front – the leader or minister – than of the people in the congregation. But it doesn't do any harm every now and then to ask questions of ourselves about the things that we do so regularly - and that's what I want to do this morning.

We have the example of a psalm written by someone for whom worshipping God was something really to look forward to, someone who approached worship with a keen sense of anticipation, whose enthusiasm for meeting with God in the presence of his fellow worshippers was overwhelming. So how do we match up to that? You may feel you want to respond at some point – you might want to take the opportunity of re-examining your own attitude to worship in the light of what we say this morning.

The basic question is the one that gives our sermon its title this morning – *What are we doing?* – but that leads on to all kinds of other questions as well. So let's ask them, even if the answers might be a little uncomfortable. (And, if you are involved with a housegroup and you're going to be reflecting on what is

said this morning, there are plenty of questions in the actual sermon, so I haven't prepared any extra ones. If you're not involved in a housegroup, this might be a good time to think about joining one.)

**Why are we here?** That's not a metaphysical question about our existence on this earth, but a question about why we've come here this morning. We all (presumably) have a reason for turning up at Wade Street Church at 11am today. What is that reason? Did you actually think about coming here this morning, or was it Sunday morning autopilot that got you here? (It was interesting to hear of the chaos that some people experience if we make any changes to our usual routine – as well as seeing those people who are always late, whatever time we meet!.) Are you here out of a sense of habit? – It's what you've always done at this time on Sunday and you can't really contemplate doing anything else. Are you here out of a sense of duty? – for myself, the musicians and the elder on duty, as well as the people on other rotas or whatever, that may be the explanation; for others you may feel that you somehow ought to be here, you come “to support the work”, so that the preacher doesn't feel lonely (I actually heard that said on occasions about the evening services, when we had them). Are you here just to meet with your friends and have a chat with them before or after (or sometimes during) the service? Perhaps it's even a sense of religious duty, a kind of legalism that says church on Sunday morning, or you're not a proper Christian!

The Bible has some interesting things to say about people whose reasons for worship are not entirely sorted out – well, I say “interesting”, “damning” would be a better word, perhaps. Listen to this from *Isaiah 29:13*: “*These people come near to me with their mouth and honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is based on merely human rules they have been taught.*” Or these words of Jesus from *Matthew 6:7*: “*And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words.*” Stop and think for a moment: where is your heart when you come to worship here on a Sunday morning? What are you really thinking about?

So the next question must be, I suppose: **What are we expecting to happen?** Which is linked to **What are we expecting to do?** Probably we turn up expecting the same things to happen as always happen – the same words and the same notes as usual: hymns, songs, prayers, a reading, a sermon. Do you actually expect to meet with God? Of course you do: but how will you know? What do you expect that meeting to be like? Do you expect to participate, except in singing along with the hymns and songs? Do you come prepared to offer something to God as well as to receive? Indeed, do you come prepared to receive from God? Is it just an opportunity to sing some favourite songs and be entertained by the preacher – or is it more than that? Many people bow their heads in prayer as they arrive – praying for what? Maybe you're praying silently what a fellow student prayed aloud at the beginning of a lecture at theological college. (Bernie Furlong – “Lord, please don't let Harry be boring again today!”)

And let's ask ourselves: **What benefit there is for the church and the community?** Does our meeting together at this time in this place actually achieve anything for the Kingdom of God? How are we helping to build up the church here? Should we be meeting with other Christians in a more united and effective way? How are we fulfilling Christ's call to be witnesses? For example, here was a time when the evening service was often called the "Gospel Service", and we still sometimes talk about outreach services and the like, but there's little point preaching evangelistically when everyone here is already one of the converted. Could this hour or so be more effectively used in the proclamation of the gospel (or in the building up of God's people) in some other way?

Along with that question, we need to ask: **How is this glorifying to God?** Does what we do here week by week actually glorify God? If our attitudes are wrong, our worship will be dull and lifeless and will not bring any glory to God. If we are holding back from worship for any reason, then we are short-changing God, who has given everything for us. If we are not giving our best for God, then our worship is unacceptable. Listen to these words from the prophet Malachi (*Malachi 1:6-14*) – the priests here in this passage are those who offer worship on behalf of the people. As Christians we all offer worship to God as part of the priesthood of all believers.

*'A son honours his father, and a slave his master. If I am a father, where is the honour due to me? If I am a master, where is the respect due to me?'* says the Lord Almighty.

*'It is you priests who show contempt for my name.*

*'But you ask, "How have we shown contempt for your name?"'*

*'By offering defiled food on my altar.*

*'But you ask, "How have we defiled you?"'*

*'By saying that the Lord's table is contemptible. When you offer blind animals for sacrifice, is that not wrong? When you sacrifice lame or diseased animals, is that not wrong? Try offering them to your governor! Would he be pleased with you? Would he accept you?'* says the Lord Almighty.

*'Now plead with God to be gracious to us. With such offerings from your hands, will he accept you?'* – says the Lord Almighty.

*'Oh, that one of you would shut the temple doors, so that you would not light useless fires on my altar! I am not pleased with you,'* says the Lord Almighty, *'and I will accept no offering from your hands. My name will be great among the nations, from where the sun rises to where it sets. In every place incense and pure offerings will be brought to me, because my name will be great among the nations,'* says the Lord Almighty.

*'But you profane it by saying, "The Lord's table is defiled," and, "Its food is contemptible." And you say, "What a burden!" and you sniff at it contemptuously,'* says the Lord Almighty.

*'When you bring injured, lame or diseased animals and offer them as sacrifices, should I accept them from your hands?'* says the Lord. *'Cursed is the cheat who has an acceptable male in his flock and vows to give it, but then sacrifices a blemished animal to the Lord. For I am a great king,'* says the Lord Almighty, *'and my name is to be feared among the nations.'*

Now, you may have answered those questions in ways that you feel are quite satisfactory. It may be that we feel that what goes on here on Sundays is exactly what's required and just what we want. I suspect not. So the final question is: **What would you like to happen?** (apart from having a "Songs of Praise" every

week!). If you wanted to be able to say every week, “*I rejoiced with those who said to me ‘Let us go to the house of the Lord’*”, what would need to happen? What would you want to look forward to? How would things have to change? We’ve gradually changed several things over the last few years, but maybe you have other things. What we do here on Sunday mornings may be on a template on the church computer, but it’s not therefore written on tablets of stone. As we reconvene after the long gap that we’ve had, this may be the time to move in a new direction. Talk about it amongst yourselves (as I’m sure you already do), and think about it in your housegroups.

Whatever happens, my concern is that we should truly be worshipping God and using the time and resources which he has given us in order to offer something acceptable to him, something that encourages us as his people and empowers our witness as a church. We shouldn’t just be coming along here without really thinking about it, offering God the same as last week, last year, last century (indeed, the century before last, now!), and assuming we’ve done all that is required of us.

There’s an opportunity to reflect on that for a few moments now as we listen to/sing a song by Matt Redman. Matt Redman is a British worship leader (although I think he’s now based in the USA) whose ministry is widely acknowledged. He’s known first and foremost for his songs – we sing quite a few of them here in our services. But in the words of this song he is saying that just singing isn’t enough. Worship is worship – and it needs to come from the heart, which only God can really see. When all the music fades away, when the things that make up what we like to think of as worship are stripped away, what’s left? What’s all about? Think hard as you listen to/sing this song.