

Article

Worship and justice (2) – Creating an ever-flowing stream

This article is the second part of two articles considering this topic. 'Worship and justice 1 – Why does it matter?' begins this discussion by starting from Amos 5, and considering definitions of 'worship' and 'justice', and the theology of both. You can find it at www.thesanctuarycentre.org/whereworldandworshipmeet-articles)

If we want to offer true worship – the kind that honours God, and generates ever-flowing streams and vast oceans of justice and compassion for God's children (Amos 5:23-24) – we need to prayerfully re-examine and re-frame our approach so that all the different expressions of worship – including acting justly (Micah 6:8) – relate, reinforce and refuel each other.

1. We must live the life

John 4:23-24 tells us that true worshippers are those who 'worship the Father in spirit and in truth'. It's evident in the messages of the Old Testament prophets, the teachings of Jesus, and the writing of early church leaders such as James – we have to have lives that match up to what we say and sing.

Worship is more than a devotional song, an emotion or a feeling; more than a service or a prayer time. It is a decision and a choice. And it is also a whole-life offering which affects our relationships as much as our purity.

If we sing that 'it's all about you, Jesus' then we have to stop making it all about us when the service is over.

If we love God that means honouring him with lives of passionate devotion every day, praising him, seeking his will for our lives and being willing and available to partner in an ongoing transformation to be more like Christ through:

- praying
- fasting
- seeking
- singing, dancing, painting and writing
- reading the Bible
- incorporating God's presence into our lives
- allowing conviction of sin to lead us to purer lives of personal holiness
- offering our finances, time, energy and resources to his kingdom

And recognising that his kingdom is about laying down our lives for others. If we love God, we love others – there is no other way. (1 John 4:7-12) So we have to think about how we're making our money, how and where we're spending it, how much we really need, what we can make available to others, who we should vote for, who we must speak up for, how our time can be made available to those in need as and when God leads...

If not, our songs ring hollow. It turns out they were all about us after all. Us, and perhaps our desire for what we can get from God in the place of encounter.

2. We must engage with God's heart in the sacred place

The presence of God in our midst is an incredible gift. How very like God to bless us even as we try to bless him. It is true that as we encounter God in sung worship and devotion – as we give him our hearts through corporate acts of worship – indeed as we seek to meet him in the midst of our whole-life worship – we have access to incredible gifts of peace and wholeness.

But it's not supposed to stop there. We are missing the point if we think these gifts are just for us or just for the moment. The fruits of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23) shine out from God's filling of our lives and transformation work in our characters so that we can be peace-makers, love-givers and joy-bringers – not simply people awash with these positive feelings in our hearts and spirits.

The goal of spending time in adoration of God – gazing upon his goodness and glory – is to declare the truth, honour him, adore him – and become more like him.

If we are truly encountering God as we offer adoration, then we will be changed. His Spirit is one of transformation. We will begin to care about what he cares about, love who he loves, and do what he does.

We need to seek the truth and fullness of his heart – and that means allowing him to break ours for the poor, the broken, the outcast and the stranger – whoever these people look like in our local, national, and global societies.

Our times of devotion and corporate acts of worship must seek to learn of, and catch, God's heart for the world beyond us. If we are not doing this, we are not worshipping the fullness of God. We have to begin to question whether we are in his presence at all – for he is who he is, not the smallness of who we try to make him into.

Left to ourselves, nearly all of us will return to our default approach of looking inwards, and focussing most on our own lives. And we put this onto our worship too, so that we relate to God only in this context. Therefore, we have to be conscious and deliberate if we want to see him, and ourselves, through God's perspective – which is so much bigger.

3. Relating to God as he is, not in our image

We need to expand our view of God – to allow him to break all our little boxes. We must study his word with a larger context and revelation in mind. If we ask for the truth of how he sees our world, he will answer; if we seek revelation of his heart for people, he will be found as the source of all compassion; if we knock on the door, he will answer, fling it wide, and lead us to where he already is – with the people.

As we begin to change the focus of our corporate acts of worship, and our devotion, we will begin to re-adjust our perspective on God where it has become skewed. Our songs will begin to reflect that he is 'your God' and 'their God' as well as 'my God' and that he is calling me to be part of a mission much wider than 'my story'. And as we mediate on these truths, and sing them, they will descend into the core of us as another tool to rake up the soil of our hearts into more fertile ground for change.

4. Breaking dividing walls

We need to end the separation between sacred and secular that leads us to separate worship from mission. We shouldn't be singing songs of devotion to a loving (solely) personal God, and then going out and doing acts of justice or service for others in worship of a God who suddenly becomes universal.

He is still the God of the poor in the secret place as we pour out our hearts in praise and intercession, and he is always our closest friend on the streets as we reach out to those in need.

He is the God of love and power in miracles, and in mundane acts of service; inside church buildings and on the streets.

If we allow him to break down our walls we will discover a new authenticity in our worship – as it resonates with our lives, and a new joy in mission – as we, like God, become lovers of justice, because we are lovers of him and his people.

We will be caught up in a holy virtuous circle where our lives become more and more connected – to God and to our context, each one fuelling the love of the other which we are designed to feel and express.

5. Listening for a new song

God desires our worship, and we were born to live it out to him. In song, in prayer, and in action. With passion, with authenticity, and with justice.

We need to listen for a new song. It won't be just something to sing at the end of a service to send us out. We're listening for something far more radical than that.

And perhaps the place to start is with humble hearts which prayerfully ask these simple questions of our hearts and our churches:

- Does our sung worship reveal God's character or our image?
- Can people tell that we love a God of justice and mercy by looking at the way we live our lives?
- Is injustice being fought, and defeated in our communities, and at every level where we have any influence as people or consumers?
- Does our devotional worship relate to the world around us?
- Do our lives sound like the songs we sing, and the words we pray?
- Are our acts of service fuelled by our passion for God, and his love and power at work in and through our lives?
- Why are we doing what we're doing? And who is it for?

6. Practical next steps

To ask these questions is not to expect easy answers! But they lead us to the start of a journey towards the place where world and worship meet.

It's an exciting journey, because it brings together people from parts of the church who have sometimes been polarised.

We must remember that it is a journey, and we are not trying to do everything right, and in our own strength. God's Word and his Spirit are full of grace and truth to guide us as we start to really seek what it means to worship in the way he desires. The place to work all this out is prayerfully on our knees before God. And in the secret place as we begin to listen for what God is saying in this area.

But you might also like to look at some or all of our other resources to help you think in a more specific and applied way as you explore where this journey is taking you and your congregation next:

Towards more whole-life worship

Visit www.thesanctuarycentre.org/takeaction and read our article, *Worship in action – how to be part of the answer to your prayers* - it's a great starting point for living justly, pointing you to key issues, more information, and lots of organisations and groups that can help you explore this.

Towards more just devotion

Visit www.thesanctuarycentre.org/whereworldandworshipmeet and

- Perhaps start by reading and trying some of the ideas contained in *Creative ideas – bringing outward focus to personal devotions* at www.thesanctuarycentre.org/whereworldandworshipmeet-prayer
- Also have a look at the how to sheets, which will help you carry out a worship song theological audit, and consider how things like context, media and your own creativity can help you explore different themes in your church's corporate worship. (See www.thesanctuarycentre.org/whereworldandworshipmeet-articles)
- Explore some of the songs we and others are writing to incorporate justice and intercession into sung worship – you can download our songs free, and use our much larger *Outward focussed song index*, and external links, to find more which other people have written. (See www.thesanctuarycentre.org/whereworldandworshipmeet-songs)
- Use some of the prayer stations and liturgical prayers we have made available, and external links to others who are creating, to introduce wider themes, and other nations, into your intercessions, prayer meetings, or services. (See www.thesanctuarycentre.org/whereworldandworshipmeet-prayer)

More thoughts on the relationship between justice and worship

You might also be interested in visiting www.thesanctuarycentre.org/whereworldandworshipmeet-articles to read our articles, *Intimacy and intercession – personal faith and the heart-cry for justice* and *Psalms as our worship school*.