

How do you worship God?

How do you feel when you worship God?

When you worship are you more distracted by the people around you than you are by God himself?

Three questions that I'm going to focus on today – but three questions which I am not going to try and answer – I just want you to consider them.

[Fowlmere Only]

Our gospel reading, which I am only going to make this very brief reference to today, contains a powerful message for us all. John the Baptist had done one thing, and one thing only, which got him into trouble with Herod. He had seen something, a behaviour, that he could not keep quiet about because in God's eyes it was simply unacceptable, and he said as much. He stood up and stuck to his principles. He did what he believed was right. He criticised Herod's marriage and Herod threw him in jail. Herod's wife despised that criticism even more than Herod and tricked her husband into beheading John the Baptist. Sticking to our convictions is really important. Hopefully by doing so we will not meet the same fate as John the Baptist – but stick to them we must.

Which all brings me to those questions again.

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How we worship God is so important, and our latest story in the life of King David brings this to life for us. But let me say this in case you are getting a little concerned. We don't all have to worship God in the same way.

The story today is all about the Ark of the covenant. We are currently in 2 Samuel chapter 6 and we haven't actually heard anything about the Ark since 1 Samuel chapter 6. The Ark, this most sacred of boxes, was not particularly large – just over a metre long and about 60 cms wide and tall, and was made from Acacia wood and covered in gold. The details are all in Exodus chapter 25. And inside this box there were three deeply holy things. The tablets of stone on which God had written the 10 commandments for Moses, a container holding Manna – that foodstuff God created for the starving, complaining, Israelites in the wilderness, and a budding rod owned by Aaron, Moses brother, used by God to show who had authority – so the contents of the Ark were showing God's law, God's provision and God's leadership.

And that ark was captured in a battle between the Philistines and the Israelites, but whichever Philistine town the ark was in, the people developed plague like symptoms, and ushered the ark out of their town to another, where the pattern repeated until eventually the Philistines put the ark on a cart, tethered the

cart to two cattle, and sent it on its way back to Israel where it ended up in the house of Abinadab on the hill, we are told, in a place called Kiriath-jearim, and the people of that town consecrated Abinadab's son Eleazar to have charge of the ark – which he did for the next 20 years.

Until today's story.

And here David brings the Ark to Jerusalem – but not without making a mistake on the way. That mistake? They placed the Ark on a new cart to bring it to Jerusalem whereas in the book of Numbers it was made very clear that the correct way of transporting the Ark was by putting polls through the rings on the side of the ark and carrying it. So, when a man called Uzzah, as recorded in part of this chapter of 2 Samuel which was not included in the reading, reached out to steady the ark on this cart, the anger of the Lord was kindled against Uzzah, and he died. So even David, who had the best intentions, can make costly mistakes.

In fact David realised he had got this wrong and we are told that he was afraid of the Lord, and the journey of the Ark was paused in the house of a man called Obed-edom the Gittite, who we are told was blessed by the Lord.

But when David was told that Obed-edom and his household had been blessed by the Lord because of Ark, David went to fetch it to complete its journey. This is one of those stories that is told in more than one book of the bible and we are told in the 1 Kings version that David had the Ark carried into Jerusalem using the rings and polls – clearly David had now done his homework properly

So why did David bring the ark to Jerusalem anyway? Well. As we heard previously, David had brought together the kingdoms of Judah and Israel – after they had separated on King Saul's death, and had then captured Jerusalem from the Jebusites – so it could become the spiritual capital of the combined country of Israel. And what better way to show that than to bring this most sacred box, the Ark of the Covenant, or the Ark of the Lord as some bibles call it, to his spiritual capital.

And David, who always believed in leading by example, celebrated the fact that the Ark had arrived. "David danced before the Lord with all his might."

It must have been quite a scene for the Israelites watching their King, stripped down to his ephod – which was a linen undergarment – a bit like a long shirt, dancing as this holy box is brought into Jerusalem. I wonder what they thought? I wonder how many of them joined in? We are certainly told that there was much music played as they entered Jerusalem. It sounds like it would have been an amazingly joyful scene.

Surely, if the people saw their King dancing they would join in wouldn't they? If David lead by example, wouldn't his citizens follow?

Well clearly one wouldn't. His wife Michal was not impressed – indeed the impression we get is she was squirming in the background with embarrassment. Does that matter? Well actually yes, but not actually in the way you may think. Michal was a daughter of King Saul who David had won by killing 100 Philistines – all part of a plan by Saul to get rid of David that went wrong. And we are told that Michal loved David and David at that time was very happy to be Saul's son-in-law. But Saul was David's enemy from that time on. Michal helped David to escape from Saul, but later, as another deal was done, David sent for Michal as part of the deal. And now she clearly resents David – and that went both ways.

So what does all this teach us about our worship. How do we worship God? Well, not by dancing up and down the street in our underclothes I suspect. But it does give us a few pointers:

First the importance of joy in our worship. I was listening to a recording of someone speaking the other day about how, when he became a Christian, the response he got from some of his friends was, "Oh I'm sorry, poor you" as if when you become a Christian all the happiness is sucked out of your life. You are facing a life of austerity and misery, yet for so many people, when they give their lives to Jesus exactly the opposite happens.

There is a feeling of relief from many of the stresses they were feeling; there is a feeling of warmth from the new found friendship of others in a church family, and the deep down feeling that God Loves us in a way that before had simply been missing. And when we feel like that then that joy should be there in our worship – in our connection with God.

We should worship God at every opportunity – I know that anyone just appointed to be rector would say that – but it is important. It's important that over the summer, when we can, we travel on a Sunday morning to the church where the service is held that week. We don't just worship when the service is at our church. Regular worship together is the way that we keep the blood flowing through our church family.

And then I asked, "How do you feel when you worship God?" Actually, let me put that a different way. When you come to worship do you come to give or to receive? Actually I rather hope the answer to that is both. We come to church to give our worship to God because that is exactly what God wants us to do. That is why he made us – to worship him. When we come to church we should recognise that we are pleasing God, and that should please us – so we give and we receive. If you have friends or family round for a meal you want to give them a nice meal, so that they enjoy it – and how much pleasure do you get from the pleasure that they get from the meal you have given them. Our, worshipping God is very much like that.

And then what about that third question that I asked. "When you worship are you more distracted by the people around you than you are by God himself?" When you worship do you allow God to interrupt your thoughts? Do you ever let him tap on your shoulder and say, I'm here. Do you come to church wanting to feel the presence of God as we worship him? Because the answer to all those should be, 'Yes', but it's not easy to achieve.

When we worship we want to focus on God as much as we possibly can. But do we have Michal moments? I'm sure we all do. Oh who is that sitting over there, I should know her name? Is so and so alright – they don't look great today. Can't we do something about the noise those microphones make?

But actually perhaps, if we are not careful, Michal may have a point. She was embarrassed by her husband's dancing. Perhaps she did recognise that he was worshipping God, but perhaps his dancing was stopping her from worshipping because she was focussing on what he was doing rather than on God. I am all in favour of expanding what we do in our worship, to bring a greater variety into the way we worship, to try and ensure that we have the right balance of music in our worship, and perhaps if I bring something slightly gimmiky into our worship it is there for a reason, but that reason has to be to enhance our worship rather than entertain. But we must avoid Michal moments whenever we can.

In many ways I have found this passage extremely challenging this week. Why, because someone hadn't followed the instructions on how to carry the ark, was someone killed for simply stopping it falling off the cart? Were the people of Jerusalem really worshipping God as the Ark was brought in or were they simply worshipping an albeit very special, box? And did Michal have a point?

I think some of those answers come in a song written by Matt Redman with this passage very in mind:

Readings: 2 Samuel 6: 1-5, 12b-19
Mark 6: 14-29

Worship

Foxton and Fowlmere

I will dance I will sing to be mad for my King

Nothing Lord is hindering the passion in my soul

And I'll become even more undignified than this

Some would say its foolishness but

I'll become even more undignified than this