

Come Let Us Worship and Bow Down, III

How did the worship of the early church reflect the teaching of Romans 12:1-2?

We bring our lives as a daily offering of worship to the Servant King. That's what one of our opening songs said; and that's what Christian worship is. And as we saw last week, what we do together on a Sunday morning in our Church services is *part* of that worship, and it is designed to *help* us in that worship. This morning we're going to be reflecting, then, on Sunday morning worship itself. We're going to be using the practice of the early church as our lens; because we are of course the inheritors of a great worship tradition. We didn't just make up the stuff we do on Sunday mornings; we have inherited it from the past. And it will do us good, I think, to examine that past and see what we can learn from it.

The best way into that past is probably through one of the writings of a man named Justin Martyr. Justin lived in ancient Rome, where he taught as a Christian philosopher; and among other things, he wrote a book in which he tried to explain Christian worship practices to people outside the Christian community. It's Justin who gives us our earliest relatively complete description of a regular Christian worship service, dating from around A.D. 155. I've reproduced this for you in your bulletin, and you can read the whole thing later. Let me just summarize it here.

The regular Christian Sunday worship service, says Justin, has various elements to it. First of all, the Gospels or the Prophets are read "as long as time allows." Following this there is a sermon based on the reading, which concludes when everyone present stands up and prays. Then communion bread and wine are brought and the person in charge offers prayers of

thanksgiving, to which the congregation responds, “Amen!” The bread and wine are then distributed and taken by the deacons to those who are not at the service. A collection is then taken up for distribution for those in need, i.e., widows, orphans, the sick, prisoners, and visitors. That’s the order of things in a regular worship service in Rome in the middle of the second century AD.

Now what is really striking to me about this description of it is the strong emphasis we find in Justin on *remembering* – remembering the past as a way of understanding the present. The very choice of the day of worship is important to Justin for this reason. Why do we meet on a Sunday? We meet on a Sunday, he says, because Sunday is the day that commemorates both the creation of the world and the resurrection of Jesus. It is a day, in other words, that – above all other days – reminds you about which story you find yourself in. It reminds you about your identity as a Christian. You live in the true story of a God who has made all things and who has redeemed all things in Jesus Christ, who died and rose again from the dead. And meeting on a Sunday with your fellow believers reminds you of that. The importance of *remembering* in this way is emphasized again and again in the Bible – it is regarded, in fact, as one of the foundation stones of biblical spirituality, as we’ll hear just in a moment. Remembering is central to the business of living in God’s kingdom; and having worship services on a Sunday is intended to *help* us to remember.

- ❖ We easily lose the plot of the story we are in, as individual Christians;
- ❖ We forget;
- ❖ We live as if God had not created the world, and as if Jesus had not risen from the dead.

And our Sunday worship gatherings help us to remember.

Beyond the mere fact of meeting on a Sunday, how else did the early Christians help each other to remember who they were, as they gathered together? Justin tells us that a lot of their time was spent **reading Scripture** together. Here is a central way of remembering: having God speak to us through the Scripture. And this goes right back to apostolic times – to texts like 1 Tim 4:13, where the apostle Paul says this: “*Give heed to the public reading of scripture, to preaching, to teaching.*” It goes back to the very earliest chapters of the book of Acts, where right at the centre of the earliest Christian worship gatherings we find “the teaching of the apostles” (Acts 2:42). All of this lies behind Justin’s attestation of a *regular practice* of reading from the Gospels and the Prophets: *the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits.* Clearly this was a central and lengthy part of the worship service. It was considered to be important. Why? It’s important because we cannot *live* in the biblical story if we do not *know* the biblical story.

So following this early Christian example, we’re now also going to have a Scripture reading that will last “as long as time permits” ... although in the context of our service this morning that won’t be very long. Our Scripture reading this morning is actually a digest of different Scriptures on the theme of remembering that I mentioned just a moment ago; and a number of people will now come and read these Scriptures for us.

SCRIPTURE READINGS (from *The Message*)

When a foreigner lives with you in your land, don't take advantage of him. Treat the foreigner the same as a native. Love him like one of your own. **Remember** that you were once foreigners in Egypt. I am GOD, your God. Don't cheat when measuring length, weight, or quantity. Use honest scales and weights and measures. I am GOD, your God. I brought you out of Egypt. "Keep all my decrees and all my laws. Yes, *do* them. I am GOD.

You're going to think to yourselves, "Oh! We're outnumbered ten to one by these nations! We'll never even make a dent in them!" But I'm telling you, Don't be afraid. **Remember**, yes, **remember** in detail what GOD, your God, did to Pharaoh and all Egypt. **Remember** the great contests to which you were eyewitnesses: the miracle-signs, the wonders, GOD's mighty hand as he stretched out his arm and took you out of there. GOD, your God, is going to do the same thing to these people you're now so afraid of.

Keep and live out the entire commandment that I'm commanding you today so that you'll live and prosper and enter and own the land that GOD promised to your ancestors. **Remember** every road that GOD led you on for those forty years in the wilderness, pushing you to your limits, testing you so that he would know what you were made of, whether you would keep his commandments or not.

If you start thinking to yourselves, "I did all this. And all by myself. I'm rich. It's all mine!"—well, think again. **Remember** that *GOD, your God*, gave you the strength to produce all this wealth so as to confirm the covenant that he promised to your ancestors—as it is today. If

you forget, forget GOD, your God, and start taking up with other gods, serving and worshipping them, I'm on record right now as giving you firm warning: that will be the end of you.

Thank GOD! Call out his Name! Tell the whole world who he is and what he's done!

Sing to him! Play songs for him! Broadcast all his wonders!

Revel in his holy Name, GOD-seekers, be jubilant!

Study GOD and his strength, seek his presence day and night;

Remember all the wonders he performed, the miracles and judgments that came out of his mouth.

“Do you have any idea how powerful God is?

Have you ever heard of a teacher like him?

Has anyone ever had to tell him what to do, or correct him, saying, ‘You did that all wrong!’?

Remember, then, to praise his workmanship, which is so often celebrated in song.

Thank GOD! Pray to him by name! Tell everyone you meet what he has done!

Sing him songs, belt out hymns, translate his wonders into music!

Honor his holy name with Hallelujahs, you who seek GOD. Live a happy life!

Keep your eyes open for GOD, watch for his works; be alert for signs of his presence.

Remember the world of wonders he has made.

You who serve GOD, praise GOD! Just to speak his name is praise!

Just to **remember** GOD is a blessing—now and tomorrow and always.

From east to west, from dawn to dusk, keep lifting all your praises to GOD!

Remember these things, O Jacob. Take it seriously, Israel, that you're my servant.

I made you, *shaped* you: You're my servant. O Israel, I'll never forget you.

I've wiped the slate of all your wrongdoings. There's nothing left of your sins.

Come back to me, come back. I've redeemed you."

Remember your history, your long and rich history.

I am GOD, the only God you've had or ever will have—incomparable, irreplaceable.

My people were lost sheep. Their shepherds led them astray.

They abandoned them in the mountains where they wandered aimless through the hills.

They lost track of home, couldn't **remember** where they came from.

Everyone who met them took advantage of them. Their enemies had no qualms:

'Fair game,' they said. 'They walked out on GOD.

They abandoned the True Pasture, the hope of their parents.'

Meanwhile, the disciples were finding fault with each other because they had forgotten to bring bread. Jesus overheard and said, "Why are you fussing because you forgot bread? Don't you see the point of all this? Don't you get it at all? **Remember** the five loaves I broke for the five thousand? How many baskets of leftovers did you pick up?" They said, "Twelve." "And the seven loaves for the four thousand—how many bags full of leftovers did you get?" "Seven." He said, "Do you still not get it?"

When the Day arrives and you're out working in the yard, don't run into the house to get anything. And if you're out in the field, don't go back and get your coat. **Remember** what happened to Lot's wife! If you grasp and cling to life on your terms, you'll lose it, but if you let that life go, you'll get life on God's terms.

Jesus answered, "Tear down this Temple and in three days I'll put it back together." They were indignant: "It took forty-six years to build this Temple, and you're going to rebuild it in three days?" But Jesus was talking about his body as the Temple. Later, after he was raised from the dead, his disciples **remembered** he had said this. They then put two and two together and believed both what was written in Scripture and what Jesus had said.

You didn't choose me, **remember**; I chose you, and put you in the world to bear fruit, fruit that won't spoil. As fruit bearers, whatever you ask the Father in relation to me, he gives you. "But **remember** the root command: Love one another. If you find the godless world is hating you, **remember** it got its start hating me. If you lived on the world's terms, the world would love you as one of its own. But since I picked you to live on God's terms and no longer on the world's terms, the world is going to hate you. When that happens, **remember** this: Servants don't get better treatment than their masters. If they beat on me, they will certainly beat on you. If they did what I told them, they will do what you tell them.

At the crack of dawn on Sunday, the women came to the tomb carrying the burial spices they had prepared. They found the entrance stone rolled back from the tomb, so they

walked in. But once inside, they couldn't find the body of the Master Jesus. They were puzzled, wondering what to make of this. Then, out of nowhere it seemed, two men, light cascading over them, stood there. The women were awestruck and bowed down in worship. The men said, "Why are you looking for the Living One in a cemetery? He is not here, but raised up. **Remember** how he told you when you were still back in Galilee that he had to be handed over to sinners, be killed on a cross, and in three days rise up?" Then they **remembered** Jesus' words.

You must not give sin a vote in the way you conduct your lives. Don't give it the time of day. Don't even run little errands that are connected with that old way of life. Throw yourselves wholeheartedly and full-time—**remember**, you've been raised from the dead!—into God's way of doing things. Sin can't tell you how to live. After all, you're not living under that old tyranny any longer. You're living in the freedom of God.

You are God's house. Using the gift God gave me as a good architect, I designed blueprints; Apollos is putting up the walls. Let each carpenter who comes on the job take care to build on the foundation! **Remember**, there is only one foundation, the one already laid: Jesus Christ.

Remember our history, friends, and be warned. All our ancestors were led by the providential Cloud and taken miraculously through the Sea. They went through the waters, in a baptism like ours, as Moses led them from enslaving death to salvation life. They all ate and drank identical food and drink, meals provided daily by God. They drank from the Rock, God's fountain for them that stayed with them wherever they were. And the Rock was

Christ. But just experiencing God's wonder and grace didn't seem to mean much—most of them were defeated by temptation during the hard times in the desert, and God was not pleased.

No test or temptation that comes your way is beyond the course of what others have had to face. All you need to **remember** is that God will never let you down; he'll never let you be pushed past your limit; he'll always be there to help you come through it.

Remember, our Message is not about ourselves; we're proclaiming Jesus Christ, the Master. All we are is messengers, errand runners from Jesus for you. It started when God said, "Light up the darkness!" and our lives filled up with light as we saw and understood God in the face of Christ, all bright and beautiful.

This is my body, broken for you. Do this to **remember** me ... This cup is my blood, my new covenant with you. Each time you drink this cup, **remember** me.

Remember, remember ... that's the central focus of Sunday morning worship. And the public reading of Scripture has always been an important part of that remembering. Another way of being reminded of the great Christian story is in the **sermon**. Justin tells us that in the early church, after the Scripture reading was done, the person in charge "in a discourse urges and invites the imitation of these noble things." A sermon is delivered. And the purpose of the sermon is to invite those who have heard the Scriptures being read to *participate* in the story they have just heard. To get involved in it. In our church bulletin for today, Mike tells us that our goal for in this current series of services is "to explore and expand our authentic worship responses to God when we are gathered. We want to set a tone of community involvement and engagement in worship to counter the cultural trend to be spectators."

- ❖ There is always a danger in our worship services that we come to think of them as *events* that we *attend* rather than as *gatherings* we *participate* in.
- ❖ There's a danger that we *spectate* at these gatherings, rather than getting *involved* in and *engaged* in them.

Well of course worship as we've been thinking about it so far is *never* a matter of observation or attendance. It is a matter of offering our whole selves to the living God; at its very *core* it a matter of participation, of involvement, of engagement. And that should also be true of our worship *services*. And the purpose of sermons in the early church was, and should be also now, to encourage that participatory, involved, engaged worship, both in worship services and in our everyday lives. The purpose of the sermon was and should be to encourage not only a *hearing* of Scripture, but also a *doing* of Scripture. As Justin puts it: preachers need to "to urge and invite the imitation of these noble things."

We still have many of these sermons of the early church – over 1,000 from Saint Augustine alone; and what is striking about them is both their comprehensiveness and their seriousness. They contained both pastoral exhortation and theological instruction; they dealt with both important moral issues and also complicated doctrinal points; and they did it all at a very serious level. Those early Christians really wanted to help each other understand that the Scriptures had to say about life, the universe and everything; and they urged each other in uncompromising terms to live that Christian story out in their everyday lives.

That's not always been true of worship services through the ages. By the time we get to the 13th century, we find a man called Roger Bacon complaining to the Pope about many aspects of church life, including preaching. Bacon is fed up, he tells the Pope, with badly educated preachers preaching wordy and abstract sermons which “stimulate the hearers to all curiosity of mind, but do not elevate the affection towards good.” That's the 13th century. In the Reformation we find Christians once again putting the *education* of preachers back at the top of their agenda; and the sermon becomes once again the partner of the public reading of Scripture, dedicated to explaining Scripture further and exhorting people to obey it. So it has been in Protestant church history down into relatively modern times. But in more recent times, we have once again seen a decline in the sermon's importance in churches – a move to the visual over against the spoken word; a massive move to the topical sermon over the text-based sermon; in some cases, a complete break in the connection between the sermon and the Scriptures, where the sermon becomes little more than a motivational talk, and the Bible becomes little more than a convenient resource from which to plunder one-liners wrenched out of context. If you watch certain types of television or spend too much time on YouTube, you will know what I mean. It's no longer so much about the preacher

“urging and inviting the imitation of the noble things” in Scripture; it’s more about the preacher urging and inviting the people to do what *he* wants, and using what *he says* the Bible says to get his own way. And it’s not got much to do with real, historic Christian faith. So much for the sermon.

In the early church the sermon concludes, says Justin, when “all present stand up and pray.”

Prayer was obviously a really important part of early Christian worship – it’s already described numerous times in the book of Acts, right at the beginning of the Church. What kind of prayers did those early Christians pray? Well, once again they prayed prayers that helped them to remember – prayers that recalled the mighty works of God, in which God was blessed for what he had already accomplished for his people. The best NT example of such a prayer comes from Acts chapter 4:

“Strong God, you made heaven and earth and sea and everything in them. By the Holy Spirit you spoke through the mouth of your servant and our father, David:

Why the big noise, nations? Why the mean plots, peoples?

Earth’s leaders push for position, Potentates meet for summit talks,

The God-deniers, the Messiah-defiers!

“For in fact they did meet—Herod and Pontius Pilate with nations and peoples, even Israel itself—met in this very city to plot against your holy Son Jesus, the One you made Messiah, to carry out the plans you long ago set in motion. And now they’re at it again! Take care of their threats and give your servants fearless confidence in preaching your Message, as you stretch out your hand to us in healings and miracles and wonders done in the name of your holy servant Jesus.”

What a great prayer! These early Christians remind themselves about who God is; and then they ask God for things. And we are told that “the place where they were meeting trembled and shook. They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak God’s Word with fearless confidence.” The early Christians prayed prayers like these, to remember; they also prayed prayers of “thanksgiving,” *based* on what they remembered; and they prayed prayers of petition and intercession, in which they asked God for things, sometimes at the same time lamenting over difficult circumstances and sometime confessing their sin.

Kim is now going to come and lead *us* in a prayer of remembering, and thanksgiving, and confession and petition and intercession, as we continue in *our* worship of God this morning. And as she comes up, I’d also like to teach you a little congregational response to her prayer which will draw *us* into the prayer and help to make it not just *Kim’s* prayer but also *our* prayer. It will help us not to be *spectators*, but to be *participants*, in the prayer. It goes like this:

O Lord bear my prayer, O Lord bear my prayer

When I call, answer me.

O Lord bear my prayer, O Lord bear my prayer

Come and listen to me.

PRAYER: Kim Pierrot

And all of God’s people said “Amen.”

What does “Amen” mean? It means “that’s right!” “It’s true.” “I want to say that too.” So we need to say it LOUDLY and ENTHUSIASTICALLY. Otherwise the person doing the praying will wonder if she has done something wrong, and will become insecure and will worry about it, and be unhappy.

So we’ve thought a little bit about Scripture-reading, and sermons and prayers. Right in the middle of the prayers of the early church, Justin Martyr describes **communion**: the breaking of bread and the drinking of wine. I’m not going to say anything about that today, because we’re not going to share communion today in this service. But it is of course itself a form of remembering. “Do this in remembrance of me,” says Jesus. We *participate*, and we *remember*.

The only thing that Justin Martyr himself mentions AFTER communion in the early Christian worship service is the **collection** for distribution to those in need: widows, orphans, the sick, prisoners, and visitors. That’s very much *doing* the Christian story, isn’t it? We *participate* in the comforting and the healing of the world through our financial, material giving in worship services. And in fact we ourselves do this every week at Cap, as we take what we call our “offering”; but of course it’s really on a small part of our “offering,” isn’t it?; for we are to offer our whole selves as living sacrifices to God. So Justin himself mentions this *part* of our life-offering way as something that goes way back to the very beginning of the Christian Church.

Now of course Justin himself does not mention everything that went on in Christian worship services back then. There are two other important things still to talk about.

The first is the recitation of **creeds**. You find creed-like statements right back at the beginning of our Christian tradition in the NT. The shortest confessional formula in the NT is simply ‘Jesus is Lord!’ In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul writes that, “no one can say ‘Jesus is Lord!’ except by the Holy Spirit”; and since Paul is primarily concerned in this section of his letter with *worship* services, it’s likely he has in mind here not a private, individual statement, but a public, communal statement. It’s something that the whole Christian community would say out loud, during worship services – a kind of shorthand for “Jesus who was rejected and crucified is risen from the dead and exalted to the right hand of God, and therefore he is Lord.” It is out of such confessional statements in the NT that the later Christian creeds developed, such as the Nicene Creed. These creeds were formulated for a very practical reason.

- ❖ The Bible is big ... you may have noticed that.
- ❖ It is complicated ...
- ❖ It’s not immediately clear to the ordinary reader how it all hangs together and what it’s all about.

So you need a kind of summary of the gist of it just to keep you right in your reading of it and in your living. What’s the Christian story basically about, when you strip it right down to its essentials? Well, that’s what the creeds give you. They try to capture the central teachings of Scripture in a short and distilled form. And in due course these creeds came to be repeated regularly in worship services. People needed help in believing the right things and then in living those things out; and they needed it in shorthand. So they recited the creeds. The worshippers themselves *participated* in the telling of the Christian story by shouting out the creed together, to God and to each other.

We've occasionally recited the *Nicene Creed* together here at Cap, and we've even had a few sermons on it, you may remember. Today we're going to recite the early Christian creed again, in a slightly shorter form and also in musical form.

SUNG CREED: We believe in God the Father (*Mission Praise* 720)

We *participate* in telling out the Christian story by saying the creed together. And that brings me to the final thing I want to talk about this morning, and that is our *singing* in Church. Singing in church is something else that Justin Martyr does not explicitly mention, but which is once again rooted in our NT texts. Many of our NT texts suggest that the singing or chanting of hymns of praise was an important part of Christian worship right from the beginning. Colossians 3:16 refers to singing “psalms, hymns, and songs, all inspired by the Spirit, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.” And it is from these beginnings that the widespread custom of singing in worship services eventually evolved, although it is clear that it was not a widespread custom early on (which may be why Justin does not mention it). St. Augustine tells us in AD 386 that the church in Milan had only *recently* begun the custom of singing, for the purpose (he tells us) of “mutual comfort and exhortation.” Notice once again his emphasis on exhortation. This reveals to us that the purpose of the singing was not in fact very different from the purpose of the readings, the sermons and the recitation of the creed.

- ❖ These Christian songs were designed to impart true teaching about the Christian faith, and to exhort people to believe it and to live it.
- ❖ They were designed, not to have a *preacher* do this, but to have the *congregation* do it – so that we can exhort each *other* to believe and to live faithfully;

- ❖ Because singing is of course a community exercise. We do it as a group.

Listen to how one modern author explains this: “Christian leaders of the early centuries found that worship was a good opportunity to supply believers with the concrete foundations of how to think and live Christianly ... Like homilies [sermons], early hymns and theological poetry were constructive exercises in conveying the tradition.”¹

And this was a smart strategy, of course, because most early Christians were illiterate; and so learning the faith by reciting it, especially in musical rhyme, was very helpful. Repeated speech and action, in hymns and prayers and creeds –

- ❖ These were the means by which Christian truth would sink in deeply to the heart and the soul and the mind.
- ❖ These were the means by which it would become real in the worshippers’ lives.
- ❖ Real in their minds and their imaginations, and real in their everyday actions.

By singing, we *participate* in proclaiming the Christian story to each other and we *participate* in encouraging each other to believe it and to live it.

And the *beauty* of that story has also been communicated all through the ages by way of singing, especially through *harmony* in singing. The voices of God’s gathered people combine together, not just in unison, but also in harmony, each one singing their different part so that the whole thing becomes a wonderful mosaic that reflects the beauty of God and the beauty and diversity of the world that God has made.

¹ D. H. Williams, *Evangelicals and Tradition: The Formative Influence of the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 165.

That's the theory, anyway, about singing in worship services. Let me now give you two reasons, though, why it has not always worked out that way.

The first reason is that God's people have not always been *allowed* to sing. In the mediaeval period, singing in worship services was often done by choirs – not by the people as a whole.

- ❖ The people as a whole were spectators;
- ❖ They were observers;
- ❖ They were not participants.

The Reformation set out to put this right, by getting whole congregations singing. To accomplish this they created really an *explosion* of hymn writing – hymns like Martin Luther's own wonderful hymn "A mighty fortress is our God," which is based on Psalm 46 and which proclaims the nature and character of God and tells us what this means for the believer. So the Reformers themselves composed songs. They were songs that everyone could sing; and they were songs that were *worth* singing because they had something to say. The Reformers also put a lot of effort into *teaching people* to sing. They wanted each Christian to read the Bible; so they *taught* them first to *read*. They wanted each Christian to sing; so they *taught* them first to *sing*.

And this Reformation emphasis on both good content and singability, often with simple harmonies built in to the songs, has continued then in the song-writing of people like Charles Wesley and Fanny Crosby and Ira Sankey, right down to people like Graham Kendrick, whose song "The Servant King" we sang at the beginning of the service. God's people are now *allowed* to sing; and many of the songs they are allowed to sing are quite singable and worth singing.

But here's a second problem we have. For a long time God's people *have* been *allowed* to sing. But it's not always clear that they have *wanted* to sing. Let me explain what I mean by that. Like others who get to speak up front here at Cap, I have visited many churches over the years to speak there too. And as I add up my experiences of all sorts of worship services, I am struck by one thing in particular. I am struck by just how *passive* many Western Christians gathered for worship services often are – how much passivity there is in churches in relation to the music that is being played and in relation to the songs that are being sung. Mike comments in the church bulletin for today on a “cultural trend to be spectators.” I think you see that cultural trend not just in society but in churches. In fact, if you actually pay attention to what is going on in many worship services, you will find that the songs are quite often not being sung at all by the worshippers, or that they are being sung by only by a few people, including the worship band – most, or many of the worshippers, are not singing at all. The model for what is happening is more of a “concert,” in fact, rather than “community singing.” There is a *passive attending* to the “performance” that's going on up front. There's no *real engagement* with it as God's gathered people who are offering themselves to God as living sacrifices.

Now there's more than one reason for this in modern church life, and I think that we have to share out the responsibility fairly for what is going on. On the one hand those of us who lead worship have a responsibility to lead the singing well.

Part of that is about **content**. If singing in worship services is about “rhyming out our faith and driving it deeper into our hearts,” then we have to be sure that the *whole* faith is in fact

being represented in our songs, and that everything that's said in our songs is in fact *true* to our Christian faith. There needs to be breadth, and there needs to be accuracy.

- ❖ A *narrow* canon of songs certainly cannot capture the length and breadth and depth of the great Christian story that we are caught up in, just *because* it is too narrow to do the job.
- ❖ Things are bound to be left out.
- ❖ Quite a *lot* of things might end up being left out.

We need *old* songs and *new* songs, and above all we need *true* songs, that catch us up into the whole glorious truth of God and His creation.

- ❖ We need songs designed to teach us things,
- ❖ We need songs of adoration and thanksgiving, and songs of personal faith and devotion.
- ❖ We need songs of lament.

We don't just need *one* kind of song; we need *lots* of different kinds of song. And we need *long* songs, which have a lot to say, as well as short ones, which *don't* have as much to say. Many modern songs, in particular, are incredibly brief. This typically means that we feel obliged, simply out of politeness, to sing them more than once. Or maybe many times.

- ❖ But typically, precisely because they are brief, the songs don't have much content.
- ❖ They don't say much more than one thing.
- ❖ So we find ourselves singing, more than once, a song that did not have very much to say to begin with.

We need long songs as well as short ones. Part of leading singing well, then, is about **content**; trying to *engage* the worshipper with a vision that is at least as broad as the life that

he or she is trying to offer to God, so that the worshipper *wants* to sing out that wonderful vision.

Part of leading singing well is also about **style**. It's about *personal* style: resisting the temptation well-known to all preachers and all worship leaders – the temptation to become a *performer* with an *audience*, rather than a *leader of worshippers*. It's about personal style; and it's about *musical* style. It's about striving to capture, as much as we can, the length and breadth and depth of the Christian story, in which there's more than one musical idiom given to us for worship. It's also about giving God's people the actual space in which to *participate* in worship through singing. In many worship services I've taken part in throughout my life, that space for participation has not actually existed; so it's no surprise that people don't participate. Listen to what one modern Christian musician has to say about this: "I am troubled by many amplified worship services. Next time you're in one of these settings, watch and listen to the congregation. Get ready for the sound of silence. If the sheer volume of amplified worship is like a sonic cathedral, it can also trump the most forbidding medieval liturgy in its capacity to stun churchgoers into a passive stupor ... when you can't hear yourself singing, why even try?"² I think that's very perceptive.

So those of us who lead worship in worship services have a responsibility to lead the singing well. That's part of trying to make sure that there is genuine participation on all sides. But WE ALL need to play OUR parts also.

- ❖ We *ourselves* need to try hard to overcome a tendency that WE might have, because of our cultural conditioning, to become *spectators* at worship services.

²T. A. Dearborn and S. Coil, *Worship at the Next Level: Insight from Contemporary Voices* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 128-130.

- ❖ We *ourselves* need to try hard to overcome any *passivity* we may feel, and to abandon ourselves to *participation*.
- ❖ We *ourselves* must endeavour to move from watching to taking part.

And to do that, many of us will need to come to overcome our fears.

Let me explain what I mean here by doing a little live statistical research with you.

- ❖ Put your hand up, please, if you like the sound of your own singing voice?
- ❖ Put your hand up now, please, if you would say, honestly, that you just can't sing.
- ❖ And finally put your hand up, please, if you would say that you would feel confident here at Cap singing out loudly at the top of your voice in our community singing?

My general experience is that MANY Christians will tell you that

- ❖ they CAN'T really sing, and that
- ❖ they DON'T like the sound of their own voice, and that
- ❖ they certainly DON'T feel confident singing in public.

So if we're going to *participate* fully in singing as part of our worship of God, we're obviously going to have to overcome quite a lot of hesitation and fear, and we're going to have to try to launch ourselves beyond these things into a new place.

Now in fact I actually think that it's *not true* that most people "can't sing." I don't think it's true at all. It's just that we don't get enough practice, because singing has dropped out of our modern lives at all sorts of levels. I actually think that most people can sing a lot better than they *think* they can. And I'm going to try to prove it to you.

I'd like to teach you a song. We're going to sing this song without any *musical* accompaniment. We're going to have to fill this space just with our voices. And we're going to sing this song in *parts*, so that there is harmony – just like ancient Christians before us.

The song is really simple, and it's right on our theme of worship as laying our lives down before God:

Father we adore you, lay our lives before you, how we love you

Jesus we adore you, lay our lives before you, how we love you

Spirit we adore you, lay our lives before you, how we love you

So what should we learn from the early Christians about worship services? We should learn to *participate*. We called to offer our lives to God. In our worship services we should also offer our lives to God,

- ❖ Through attending to Scripture readings and listening to sermons and obeying God's word when you hear it there,
- ❖ Through our taking of communion, and our financial offerings,
- ❖ Through our prayers, and our saying of the creeds
- ❖ Through our confident songs, and our loud "Amen."

We should learn to *participate* in the great story of our faith; and thereby to *remember* each Sunday who we are and how we should live. That's how Sunday worship services fit into our worshipping lives. Let's be doers of God's Word, and not hearers only.