

# Disciples on the Way

## 'Questioning Worship'



Spring Sessions 2008

~ a course summary ~

## Introduction

During the early spring, in various ways, people met to talk about worship, both in its theology – what do we believe about worship – and in its practice at Bloomsbury, Sunday by Sunday. We met in various different fora, but even so, not everybody could come. And those who came to one series did not hear the conversations in the others. Therefore, we have prepared a summary of some of the discussions to help others hear what was talked about.

There were basically four areas covered;

### 1 *What are we doing in worship*

We started by examining what definitions we might use of worship

Several formal, academic definitions were offered, and these ones proved most popular among all those who took part (though all groups recognised that the definitions both said not enough and too much);

*“an encounter with God experienced in the midst of the community, which transforms and empowers members of Christ’s body for loving witness and service in the world”*

*“a gathering of the church in the name of Jesus Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit in order to meet God through Scripture, prayer, proclamation, and sacraments and to seek God’s Kingdom”*

We also found words for ourselves to try to say something about what worship means for us;

- \* Encountering God in community,
- \* Affecting daily life
- \* Building relationships with God, each other, the wider world
- \* Creating encounter through prayer
- \* Meeting others’ experience
- \* Encountering God’s word
- \* Staying in touch with our tradition
- \* Deliberately stepping out of our normality
- \* Developing an attitude to the wider world
- \* Changing us and the wider world
- \* Meeting God

One of the reflections that this led to was that worship meant many different things to different people – and that each of us wanted to describe it in various ways, not in only one.

We did find some common strands;

- \* Meeting with God, each other and the wider world – and being changed as a result of that meeting
- \* Because worship makes us different, we can make the world different.

We reflected on the different emphases in definition in different part of Christian traditions, recognising that these were simplistic summaries

- \* **Orthodox** entering into the on-going worship of heaven
- \* **Catholic** re-presenting the sacrifice of Calvary
- \* **Protestant** hearing the Word of God to us here and now, and so being changed
- \* **Pentecostal** meeting God in present power.

These characterisations helped us into thinking about the impact of the way we think about worship on all sorts of aspects of our life and practice; on architecture, on timing, on who can do what; on the image of God; on what is considered the most important part of the communal practice of worship

## **2 Who comes to worship, who are we worshipping with**

We thought about who comes to worship at Bloomsbury. Each group listed those whom they had seen present on a previous Sunday. The number of nationalities when the lists were combined came to 28.

We considered “life-stages”, and identified an age-range of 3 months to late 90s. Within that, we identified;

- \* Pre-school, nursery school, primary school, secondary school, further education, higher education, left school and young working/training, mature students.
- \* Young adults working, young adults training; young adults non-working
- \* Middle aged single
- \* Middle aged married
- \* Middle aged widowed
- \* Middle-aged divorced/separated
- \* Middle aged with children away from home
- \* Middle aged with children at home,
- \* Middle aged without children – voluntary, involuntary
- \* Retired
- \* Early active retired
- \* Old elderly – housebound
- \* Non-working
- \* Part-time working
- \* Voluntary working
- \* Fulltime working
- \* Living alone
- \* Living on the streets/ in hostel
- \* Living with family
- \* Living with friends/flatmates
- \* Living in their own culture
- \* Living away from their own culture
- \* Male
- \* Female
- \* Children who come alone
- \* Children who come with parents
- \* Children who come with friends
- \* Wealthy
- \* Middling
- \* Poor
- \* Temporary
- \* Permanent
- \* Physically disabled
- \* Learning difficulties

One group spent a lot of time thinking about the different ways in which people are accustomed to communicate

- \* Linguistically, identifying the main language groups in the congregation – English, Tagalog, Spanish, Portuguese

but also types of communication

- \* letter, email, text, face-to-face, phone, computer, esp Facebook, images, readers, musicians, doers

We recognised the impact that this variety had on the ways in which we worship, leading to different reactions to different activities; reading, singing, talking, silence, moving, drawing

and to different reactions to our surroundings

needing/appreciating visual stimulation, musical stimulation, silence, colour, austerity, scent, touch.

All groups considered Jesus’ instruction to “love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength.”

We identified heart with intuition and emotions, soul with creativity and symbolism, mind with ideas and structure, and strength with doing and engaging. We looked at each person who has the capacity for each aspect to be present in worship, and also recognised that for each person one or two aspects will be particularly comfortable and particularly well-developed. The impact of this on worship was considered in different ways in the different groups. One group looked at what each of the individuals present found helpful in enabling them to worship, and thought about it in terms of

the different aspects, another group thought about the way in which different aspects of what we do together draws out different aspects of each of us.

All the groups recognised that part of what it means to worship together is the gift we get from those whose strength lies in a different aspect from our own in discovering other parts of ourselves.

We also thought about how we might describe the “corporate personality” of Bloomsbury, and all the groups identified Bloomsbury’s “preferred” aspects as mind and strength; thinking and doing. The space this left for the development of heart and soul – and the need to find ways of doing that led to reflection on how we do things, and how we can help each other explore wider possibilities while not losing what is important and strong in our current practice.

Other words that were also used to describe Bloomsbury at our best were

- \* Aware of God at work in the world,
- \* Balancing the personal and corporate
- \* Extrovert rather than introvert
- \* Open-minded, aware, engaged, accepting of diversity,
- \* Committed to solidarity
- \* Non-judgemental
- \* Caring for our neighbour
- \* Diverse

We also recognised the tendency to be

- \* Hyperactive in our doing
- \* Over-friendly
- \* Highly-educated and therefore sometimes appearing exclusive

One group, which had more time than the others, also looked at some of the questions raised by being as wide a range of people as we are.

- \* how do we begin to learn to worship
- \* do people come to worship with us, in the patterns that we explore because they feel at home with this, or despite some strangeness
- \* how do we relate to and allow for different styles and contexts reflected among us
- \* how can we speak to and with such a wide variety of people
- \* what sustains accessibility
- \* how do we recognise – and take further – the fact of our diversity
- \* how do we achieve consensus as well as the acceptance of difference

### **3 *Worship as political***

The groups considered the political implications of worship. This happened differently in the different groups. In one group there was consideration of the political meanings of baptism and communion;

**baptism** enables us to celebrate each person because they exist, and acknowledges God’s welcome of each person in and of themselves. It is also to do with the joining of a “different” community, with different values and attitudes, which therefore has moral and social implications

**communion** reflects the celebration of the community and enfolds each person in that celebration. It also raises questions about the other tables that we share, and in the context of worship at Bloomsbury makes a real connection with the lunch that we share on a Sunday, and its very mixed community.

Another group considered the issues in this way: that worship describes the way that we value people and things, whereas politics describes the way that we arrange our lives around those things. In this light, both worship and politics are already part of everyone’s daily life. This group explored the values that we treasure at Bloomsbury, and how values are fleshed out in our daily living.

### **4 *The way that we do it***

Groups then considered the actual make-up of our practice when we gather on a Sunday. The various “ingredients” were identified, and it was recognised that different parts had varying importance for different people, though the place of music, of meeting, of reading Scripture and the sermon, were recognised as being important to almost everybody.

One group considered whether there are some elements of worship which need to be present each week, whereas there are others which – though necessary – are not necessary every week or even every month. For instance, hearing stories of people's daily life, sharing the peace before communion, extended periods of silence, or the invitation to receive prayer support after a service.

The shape of what we do – and the way in which putting certain things together in a particular order affected their meaning was discussed. The current shape of a service: gathering; listening, responding, leaving was examined, and the best places to put certain activities – such as receiving the offering or welcoming visitors was considered, and different ideas reflected on and different conclusions reached. Again, we had to talk together about the ways in which different people respond differently to things – and to take into account the wide variety of people with whom we worship.

All groups also thought about what it would mean to involve more voices in leading worship – there was a fair consensus that this was a good idea, and together with that was a very clear recognition that for those who were going to take part, good training and practice was important.

## ***Conclusion***

These summaries are only that – rough summarising of wide-ranging and creative conversations. The main points that came from the whole exercise insofar as the ministry team are concerned are these;

- \* Worship is not easily defined, but we know it when we do it
- \* We are very diverse community – not only in nationality, age and background, but also in how we meet the world, act in the world, the values we attach to certain things, and our instinctive way of encountering the world – and therefore God.
- \* There is a strong commitment to being together, and a recognition that that means listening to each others' needs and preferences as well as our own.
- \* The connection between worship and how we live to change the world, and therefore between the practices of worship and the kind of people we are should not be underestimated, and could well be explored further.

All of these are questions that cannot be answered once and for all. They are part of what we are doing when we meet in worship, and things we must keep exploring and experimenting with.

***Ministry Team***  
***July 08***