

## How should we worship – Nehemiah 8:1-10

In John's gospel, Jesus is quoted as saying "But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." (John 4:23-24)

We come to church, as sisters and brothers in Christ, as members of the church, to worship God. And we should be doing that, Jesus says, in spirit and in truth.

But we don't have, in the scriptures, detailed descriptions of what that worship should look like. There is no declaration that there should be four hymns, or two readings or a responsive psalm.

Of course, people have come up with detailed descriptions of what worship should look like – and you've been around church for a while, you've probably encountered or at least heard of different sorts of worship. Traditional worship, family services, messy church, taize services, café church, church in the pub, thanksgiving services, and so on.

And as I have - you've probably been in some church services that were so engaging and the presence of the Holy Spirit was so real that you just didn't want to leave.

And then you've probably also been in some worship services where the Holy Spirit seemed far off, and you just couldn't wait for them to be over.

Often those bad services are more memorable than the good. We remember the excruciating detail, but so often don't remember what the readings were, or a word of what the preacher said. Surely that can't be worshipping in spirit and truth?

I think we must understand that it is not enough for us just to join together and sing some songs, pray some prayers, listen to a sermon

and go home. We don't have detailed descriptions of the structure of our worship, but we do have a clear picture of what God's people should be doing when they worship together - and we have an indication of those things in our reading from Nehemiah today.

The first thing that we will see is that God's people must assemble together (8:1-2).

The assembly we read about in chapter 8 happened because it was the "feast of the 7th month" - (Nehemiah 7:73). This was also a time called "the feast of trumpets," which was a festival celebrated over a two day period. It was the 1st day of the 7th month of the ecclesiastical year.

We read in verse 1 that all the people gathered together into the square before the Water Gate.

Notice that Nehemiah says, "all the people gathered together". All the people. No one was left out. No one was not included. They were together, no cliques, no special interest groups. But they were together. The New Living Translation says that they "assembled with a unified purpose"

This might seem obvious, but it's something that has come to the forefront of our minds over the last two years. We'd been opening the doors of our church buildings and meeting together every Sunday morning for living memory, but suddenly, as Covid struck, we couldn't do that.

I think it's wonderful that churches or congregations who hadn't done things differently for years, suddenly found themselves able to adapt, those who had never embraced technology suddenly found the wonders of websites, Youtube and zoom, those who had not done any follow up to check that people were engaged in worship services, were making sure that everyone had access to worship!

Nehemiah tells us that “all the people came together as one in the square before the Water Gate” – they gathered in the square. Outside. No pews. No seats. No fans or heating. No data projector or PA system. Hardly the ideal place for a church service.

The Gibeonites brought water into the temple through this gate. The people assembled in the square in front of this gate, but the people did not enter the building. It wasn't a beautiful church or cathedral; they weren't even in the temple... they were in the street! But here “one in the square before the Water Gate” the people came together to worship God in a powerful way!

That's not to say we should move outside into the street. Because of the generosity of generations of Christians before us we are truly blessed it comes to the places in which we worship. But we need to remember that the walls and the roof, our seating, and all the conveniences of the modern church building are not the church.

In Sydney – and much of the world - our church buildings stand as monuments to the glory of God, and while that is a great thing, we should remember that even as we meet in “our” building, people are worshipping God in huts, houses, school halls and even in the open air, and their worship is no less worthy than ours.

And when the people gathered together, in the street “They told Ezra the teacher of the Law to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the Lord had commanded for Israel. So on the first day of the seventh month Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, which was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand”. (1-2)

The people didn't just turn up to for a social occasion. They didn't just turn up to sing hymns. They didn't just turn up to hear an interesting talk. They wanted to hear the book of the law of Moses. They wanted to hear from the scriptures – that part of the bible that they had at the time.

The public reading of the Scriptures was required by the Jewish law to be made every 7th year, but while the nation of Israel had been in exile they'd stopped doing that – but now – in Ezra and Nehemiah's time (around 445BC), they were back in Jerusalem – and this reading is the account of this tradition being revived.

Of course, when we gather together to worship God, we need to listen to God. And the main way we hear from God is through the scriptures. And that doesn't mean simply listening to them being read, or even reading along. But we need to understand them – to grow in the knowledge and love of God.

And that's generally the role of the sermon. Or the bible talk or the reflection or whatever people call it.

Sometimes there's the expectation that the preacher should be a comedian or a motivational speaker or a great storyteller or very, very reflective and thoughtful. And all those things have their place... but people often remember the stories or the jokes more than the intended point of the message. So we need to be careful as we preach, to ensure our preaching is focussed and faithful.

Verse 2 tells us that the assembly consisted of "...of men and women and all who were able to understand". They weren't divided. They weren't separated by gender. Women and men heard the same message, the same scriptures. And so did the children – if they were old enough to hear and understand.

And sometimes we do need to cater especially for children separately, because they may not be able to understand, but it shouldn't be just getting them out of the way.

And this verse gives us a picture of a family event. Not just everyone gathered together, but families gathered together. And almost certainly multi-generational and extended families gathered together.

We read that [Ezra] read it aloud from daybreak till noon as he faced the square before the Water Gate in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand. How would you feel about a five or six hour church service?

Ezra read the Law for half a day - and the people remained interested!

They were perhaps a bit closer to the events in the first five books of the bible than we are. And their return from exile was very much like the delivery of the nation from slavery in Egypt.

So they were closer to the events that they were hearing about than we are, perhaps, but the message is the same:

By God's grace we are saved.

We see it even more clearly than the people of Nehemiah's time, because we have the complete bible. We know the ultimate fulfilment of God's plan for the world – that "... God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." (John 3:16-17)

It's good news. People like to hear good news.

But we need to make the time to hear it. That's probably every Sunday morning - and hopefully more often than that - but at least we as a congregation make provision that every Sunday morning we share this good news. This salvation by God's grace in Jesus.

Many people are struggling with life and the world... they are looking for answers – they want good news. But they don't take the time to listen. Some will listen a bit, and drift off, or drift away.

We read in Nehemiah "all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law". They paid attention, they weren't distracted.

“Ezra opened the book. All the people could see him because he was standing above them; and as he opened it, the people all stood up.” (8:5). Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people – so he was clear he wasn’t making this up. And all the people stood up.

Standing up is a mark of respect. If you’re in a courtroom and the judge comes in, everybody stands. I understand that in the Orthodox churches, the whole congregation stands for the whole service – as a mark of reverence, a mark of respect to God.

So what we should be giving to God when we worship is time, attention and reverence.

We read that Ezra praised the Lord, the great God, and all the people lifted their hands and responded “Amen, Amen,” Then they bowed their heads and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground. (8:6)

The people who had long been in exile, had returned to hearing the scriptures, and had returned to worshipping God.

They worshipped out loud. “Amen. Amen.”

They worshiped visibly and together. They lifted up their hands. They bowed their heads.

And they were humble before God.

They weren’t a passive bunch of people listening to some readings, and some prayers, but they were active. They were engaged in worship.

In reading the book of the law – the scriptures – the priests didn’t simply read what was written on the paper (or the vellum, more likely) but Nehemiah tells us they read from the book, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people understood what was being read (8:8)

The bible is not an instruction manual, although there is instruction in it. But to grow in our understanding, to grow in our knowledge and love of God, we do have to read the bible, and we need to read it in context, and paying attention to how others – generations of faithful Christians – have interpreted it, we need to think about it – to apply the logic and sense that God has given us, and we need to consider our own spiritual experience.

When God’s people assemble in unity ...When they give the time, attention, and reverence that God deserves ...When they have a true desire to hear and respond to His Word... Then they – we – grow spiritually. We are changed by the Holy Spirit.

Verse 9 tells us that Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and teacher of the Law, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all, “This day is holy to the Lord your God. Do not mourn or weep.” For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law.

The mourning and weeping that they tell the people not to do, is not about not mourning for people who have died. The people were weeping because they heard the words of the law and realised they didn’t measure up. And it’s easy to become overwhelmed by the things that we’ve done wrong, and the things that others have done wrong.

But remember this: God gave the Israelites the ten commandments after he’d delivered them from Egypt. He didn’t save them because they were good people all keeping his commandments. The saving came first. And the commandments describe how the saved people live.

You might remember the old bumper sticker “Christians aren’t perfect, just forgiven”. And none of us are perfect. All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God as Paul says.

Our tradition is that every time we gather, we confess our sins. But every time we gather, we are also reminded of God's forgiveness. So we shouldn't mourn or weep over them. But give thanks to God, and take joy in the forgiveness that Christ brings.

Finally, Nehemiah said, "Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength."

Enjoy the choice food and the sweet drinks! In non-Covid times, I would translate that to "Morning tea, here we come!". Even though we might not be able to eat and drink together, Nehemiah's message is quite clear: we should celebrate together. We share our joy in what God has done for us. And we should be generous too – send portions of what we have to those who do not, for whom nothing is prepared.

We can think that worship is a duty, our solemn responsibility as faithful followers of Jesus. But it is a joyful celebration: we celebrate what God has done for us in Jesus. We celebrate together, and as we worship together, we ensure that everyone is included in that worship and that celebration.

To the glory of God

Amen.