

The Living Worship of the Whole Church  
A sermon By Rev. Dr. Frank Rees

Luke 10. 1 – 12, 17 – 20.

I'm glad to be here with you, and especially glad for opportunity to talk about the worship of the whole church.

No subject is more divisive and more distressing in the churches than the question of worship and the question of focus: what is the centre, what is it really about? Two extremes are unsatisfying: one with songs about me and my Jesus and how I feel, how I love Jesus, and another which uses hymns to speak of God in poetic ways, but the music and form of worship are somehow distant from our everyday living. The arguments always seem to be about music and about what we want to get out of it.

The problem is simply that people are trying to worship God in ways that don't really connect with their lives. Maybe they want to escape, I don't know. But I think I do know this: that the bible is consistently critical of any kind of worship which does not find its grounding and effects in the way we live.

I remember a student pastor telling a story one day about what happened immediately after a church service. People used to stand around outside the church and on this particular day it happened that some other person was across the road unable to start his car. So this stranger had to try to push start his car. The pastor was immediately struck by the fact that no-one from the church huddle went across to help, until he did. He had been in church banging on about how important it is that we care for our neighbours and show the love of God to them, blah blah blah: and the people all loved that. But they couldn't see the connection, right there before their noses. They didn't see that helping someone push their car might be an immediate expression of their worship.

Worship is supposed to be the expression of our lives: of what is central to who we are, as individuals and as a community of faith.

I'd like to suggest that there is a fundamental rhythm to this reality, of worship and life, which I would describe in terms of *discovery* and *witness*.

The rhythm can be seen in the stories we find in Luke chapter 10. After Jesus has been preaching and teaching, he calls or appoints 70 'others', that is, not the disciples already designated earlier. These

people have heard Jesus' message, but are now given a specific commission to go and bear witness to what they have heard.

They are to travel lightly and to bring greetings of peace to those they encounter.

Jesus gives them this summary word of profound encouragement, even for when they do not receive a warm welcome: 'Yet know this, the kingdom of God has come near' (v.11).

So, inexperienced and probably understanding little of what their message really entails, they go.

Now we are not actually told much about what they do or what happens. So what happens to us, when we read a story like this, is that we tend to fill in the gaps with our own ideas of what mission is about. We imagine that they took the good news to these towns and villages: even though they were inexperienced, they had met Jesus, they had heard the gospel, that was enough, and off they went.

But actually what the story tells us is that they came back telling stories of what they learned, what they discovered.

They return with joy, telling stories of amazing things. They may have thought they were bringing the peace of God's reign to these places, but what they found was that God was marvellously at work ahead of them, bringing healing and hope to so many distressed individuals and communities.

Do you see this: they had heard the gospel of Jesus and they went to bear witness. But in those places they discovered more of God, so now they come back to the community and they bear witness to this new insight, a new phase of witness to what they have discovered when dispersed among the towns.

Here then is the rhythm of the living worship in and as the church. The life, the talk, the worship flows both ways. Within the gathered life we hear and discover the power of the gospel and its hope for the world. We move then into lives in which we seek to encounter this hope and respond to its possibilities, and to be active witnesses to the gospel.

But, in all sort of ordinary, everyday situations we discover the depth of human need and the amazing presence of God, in people and situations where they may not have expected it. So from these situations people make new discoveries and bring these to the gathered life of the church, to bear fresh witness there to the ways of God in the world and again to seek insight and inspiration for the continuing engagement with the divine presence in all places.

This is the constant flow of witness and discovery, from the gathered life to the dispersed and the dispersed to the gathered, and this is what makes worship living. And if this is not what we are doing with our lives, then it doesn't matter how we crank up the Sunday thing, it won't be real.

It was interesting to see in the Opening Ceremony of the Athens Olympics the ancient idea of flooding the stadium. I'd like to use this image of the flow, to and fro, of our worship. And in this flow, we are immersed.

This is a good Baptist word, immersed, but we tend to use it for just one thing, for the ritual of baptism. But that ritual is meant to be a metaphor for the way we live from that moment onwards. We are drawn into and immersed in the life of God.

In Baptism what we are acting out is what we have already discovered: we are affirming that this is reality: we are swimming in the ocean of divine life and love. And so we commit ourselves to keep on with this swimming, or at times not so much swimming as treading water, or just floating, trusting the water to carry us on.

This image of immersion relates to our whole life as Christians and as church. It's not just an individual thing. Christians find themselves to be immersed in the life and spirit of God. As we live out the meaning of our baptism, we continue to discover the power of this event. We are immersed in God's word and spirit with us, and we find that this immersion continues wherever we go. We are engaged with God in the many contexts of our dispersed lives: at home, at work, in the school committee or the footy club, or just chatting with a person in the milk bar.

There too we see God raising up the down-trodden and giving hope to those otherwise pushed aside. There too we discover that the seed of God's kingdom has sprung forth in unexpected ways, sometimes demanding more of us than we imagined, sometimes feeding us with the bread of truth and the wine of healing. These sacramental expressions of God's way are not confined to the gathered life. Indeed, as the people of faith bring the stories and insights of God's presence in all the world into the gathered life, their sense of the significance of the church's sacraments is deepened and becomes more real. That is to say, we discover that we, the people of the church, *are* this body and blood: it has become real in us, as a body living in and with Christ, in the world today.

I hope that today we can begin a conversation about what this really means. But let me make a few suggestions. First, it has something to do with who knows God and who can see God.

Here your pastor has a major contribution to make, but it not what many people have thought it is. The Pastor does not know all about God and all about what God is doing in the world. Nor do any of us. If the pastor pretends that she or he does, it's all lost from the beginning. We will have that awful, narrow minded and stultifying idea that the only place we meet God is in the gathered church, and the only things God is interested in is what we do here (God help us) and the only people God is interested in is us.

But if the pastor encourages and helps us to have a vision of who God is and what God is doing in the world at large, and calls us to discover that, and sends us to witness to that and discover that and then come back and witness to those new discoveries, we together become a community who know God and who worship God in living worship: with this rhythm and flow, from gathered to scattered: and we will know that the centre is never is not here, only, but the centre is wherever we are, with God.

One way we did this in Hobart was to have in almost every service a time called 'Insights': this was a three to five minute segment, I was strict about that, when some one was asked to speak about how they were discovering the meaning of faith in their work, or home or local community life. This was then picked up in the community prayers a little later in the service.

I think that if we see our worship and our life as a church in this way, the liturgies and worship of the gathered church may be greatly enriched. It's not so much that the ancient words of the faith need to be changed, or updated; rather, they need to be grounded, ever again, in the lived experience of the people.

Worship is the life of the people with God, brought into focus. In worship, we seek to be intentional in our awareness of who God and who we are, to recognise and respond to what God is doing in the world. In an important sense that we means we shift the focus from ourselves and what we want or think we need to who God is and thus who we are with God. And in fact that is very demanding. But also very liberating and enriching.

If that is what worship is, then all of our life can be worship and all our life can contribute to the gathered worship of the people.

What comes into focus, here, is the presence and life of God with us—not just with Christians, but with all God's creation. People who are alive to God's presence, who have learned to hear God's voice, often questioning and challenging, inviting and evoking new directions of hope, will find themselves drawn into this ongoing rhythm of discovery and witness. So, as we come to the worship services, we bring with us a deep awareness of the anguish and needs of many people and situations, but also some at least will bring stories of new horizons emerging, where justice is being done or healing is emerging.

As a result, the prayers of the church become more deeply real, more engaged with the way of God. In the gathered life of the church, then, giving and receiving, failing and forgiving, praying and praising are parts of the rhythm of all life, not just 'religious' life. Here, the flow of life with God, witness and discovery, makes worship and the fellowship of the church rich and real.

That's not just a responsibility of the pastor, or of the worship leaders: the truth is they can't make it happen. Whatever our worship

is, it flows into and from, and from and into our lives: we are the worshipping people: we are the ones sent to discover that wherever we go, we are with God. We are the ones called to discovery and witness, witness and discovery. This is the worship of our lives and the life of our worship.