**SUMMER IN THE PSALMS - THE POWER OF WORSHIP - PSALM 149 & 150**

Two years ago, Judy and I were in Switzerland and we travelled up the cable car to Mt Blanc from the picturesque village of Chamonix. I could at this point show you a video of Judy holding on with white knuckles! But right at the top you can get out and walk around and take photos, the air is so thin you get puffed just walking up a short flight of stairs, and the views are indescribable. I was thinking to myself just keep breathing in and out. Breathe in, and the air feeds your lungs and passes into the bloodstream to supply your body. Breathe out and the carbon dioxide is exited. Did you know you have a built-in instrument in your body that is designed to worship God by speaking and singing?

I just love the mountains and the sense of the awesome power of God. Psalm 150 says “Let everything that has breath Praise the Lord!You cannot go far into Psalms before you are confronted with the theme of worship, whether it is crying out to God in desperation or bowing before him in adoration, and everything between those extremes. Worship is the essence of the Psalms. These short pithy writings are reflections of people as they live out their lives while dealing with the harsh realities of life. But towards the end of the book of Psalms comes five ‘Hallelujah Psalms’. Did you know that the word Hallelujah is the only word that translates the same in every language! That tells you something – that its eternal and beyond description and language. Today I want to speak about the topic of worship.

Immediately I say that something happens inside of each of us - most of you have some track that your brain cells have taken you. Some of you have gone to memories of moments when you were perhaps out in mountains or some remote place and you were overcome with the **grandeur** – and you worshipped. Or some powerful moment when you were overcome with a sense of amazement at God’s grace or forgiveness in your life.

Others of you recalled some powerful time when in a **community** of God’s people, God turned up in some special way and you felt like you almost touched heaven. God spoke to you and you remember.

Others of you went to places where you were turned off by **repetitive songs** that seemed to go on and on, or rather messy awkward moments when the power supply failed, or someone did something ‘spirit-led’ that felt more human than divine and called it worship.

*We all have different worship experiences and what worships means to us is very diverse, and it impacts and affects the way we encounter God in our lives.*

Sadly, worship has been divisive in church history, it always has – down through the centuries when God has moved in revival and renewal there has always been an accompanying move of new music, styles of worship - and there has *always been resistance.* If you look into the history of who the Baptists are: we belong to a group of people who originally were called the Anabaptists – and our roots are revolutionary in nature.We broke away from the mainstream because we opposed the abuse of control by clergy especially in matters relating to governance, the participation of spiritual gifts and worship. Our forebears believed we should be able to speak directly to God without a holy man, and receive direction and guidance of Holy Spirit, understand and read the scriptures and exercise spiritual gifts and ministry without the excesses of symbolism, or a human intermediary. This is why our buildings are not filled up with icons. This is why we believe God speaks to us together when we meet without the restriction of a religious hierarchy or rules and regulations that are the hallmark of religion and religious orders. So, our heritage is that we were unafraid to challenge the status quo – and this is especially true when it comes to worship.Worship is not easy for us….especially for us men. People understand teaching and inspirational message. They put up mostly with the relational stuff we do, but when it comes to worship – often discomfort abounds. Yet the experience of worship is one of the key factors why people often choose one church over another when seeking out a church to join. Before we look at the Psalms today, I want to give you ***seven reasons why worship is not easy***, why it is so divisive, why churches are robbed of what should be one of our greatest gifts of God to us, and some of these might resonate with you.

1.Because worship **asks us to unmask.** To be transparent and not hide. Worship usually flies in the face of *private spirituality*. Asks us to *put something out there* before others….Challenges the idea that I *can be spiritual on my own*…*Unmasks* my life because I know myself and feel unworthy.

2.Because worship involves our **emotions and not just our thinking** Here is where some of us get off the bus on the worship thing. You cannot truly worship God with your head only. Your heart is said to be the ‘seat of your emotions’....we feel stuff. Where your treasure is there will your heart be also. Spirituality and worship is a feeling thing, it has to move you. If you were not moved in some way – you probably haven’t worshipped!

3.Because worship decentres our **focus off ourselves and onto God**. Perhaps this is one of the greatest struggles for us…our egos get in the way of our worship. I wonder what other people will think about us. We have this idea that we can come and do it with us controlling it, but there is something about extravagant, inhibited worship that God loves.

4.Because worship involves both the **liturgy and the spontaneous**. Here is something we need to work through. Some of us are more creative, others like order and plan. Whole denominations have been born because of this. To tie worship down to liturgy is to suppress the spontaneity of it. To rely on spontaneity is to deny the depth of prepared worship.

5.Because worship is both **eclectic and popular.** Is the best worship always the newer style?How do we do eclectic but also allow for something new and creative?

6.Because worship is both an **individual and a corporate** experience. Yes, you can worship on your own…but the Bible mostly speaks about corporate worship as something we do *together*. Here is one other challenge. Other people mess it up, musicians play too loud or badly, the sound system or the computer freezes. That obnoxious person you don’t like is just a few rows over from you.

7.Because worship is **both led and generated.** We abdicate contributing because space does not allow, or we feel more comfortable with someone else taking us somewhere....then we can criticise if we don’t like it! You decide you're not going to worship before you step inside the church building.

**Psalm 149 – 150 6,7,8,9**

We are physical beings, thinking beings, emotional beings, but also spiritual beings – created to worship. Worship is where we express each of these capacities and each of them contributes equally to worship.

As I read these two Psalms three things clearly emerged from the text.

**1. WORSHIP IS A CORPORATE EXPERIENCE**

Yes, you can worship alone…in the open air, in the mountains, lakes but overwhelming evidence from the Bible is that we worship well mostly together. It is a corporate experience that finding ourselves with likeminded people we, sing, pray, read the scriptures, receive teaching, and encounter the living God together. But it is a corporate experience that involves our bodies – singing, dancing, music, musical participation, and expression. Creation shouts to God’s praises….and we are part of that – in fact, we are the pinnacle of God’s created order. So, when we worship we are doing what we have been designed for. Or put conversely, if we don’t worship then the hindrances to us doing so are directly related to sin and fallenness. The challenge is that we allow our preferences to dictate rather than the Bible to shape our worship culture.

So what is the climax of worship? Is it the musicians or their instruments? No, it is whatever has breath!!!! You see musical instruments don’t breathe, people do. People take these and express praise and worship to God, *without people nothing happens!* Worship is a corporate experience.

**2. WORSHIP IS A SPIRITUAL ACTIVITY**

A declaration of whose we are and who God is. It’s more than just singing or reading or praying, it is engaging in something spiritual that declares our intent that speaks into the spiritual world of our allegiance and enhances our awareness of God’s presence in us and with us.

*Psalm 149.6 Let the praises of God be in their mouths, and a sharp sword in their hands! To execute vengeance and judgement and to bind their kings with shackles and their leaders with iron chains.* Something happens in the spiritual world when we worship, it happens firstly inside us and then impacts the world and the community around us. So, the song turns now into a battle and the weapon is praise! Some Christians love to sing but won’t fight and others love to fight but won’t sing! You see - the song and sword go hand in hand!

Now let me explain what I mean here by using an illustration from **Americas got Talent!** I saw something very special a couple of weeks ago – Archie Williams walks on stage. But before he sang he told his story of being jailed for 37 years for a crime he did not commit. DNA technology freed him. He said I survived because although my body was in jail – my mind wasn’t. And he sang **Elton John’s song ‘Don’t let the Sun go Down on Me’**…..the lyrics go: *I can't light no more of your darkness. All my pictures seem to fade to black and white.*

*I'm growin' tired, and time stands still before me. Frozen here on the ladder of my life.*

*Don't let the sun go down on me. Although I search myself, it's always someone else I see. But losin' everything is like the sun goin' down on me!*

It’s a great song musically, but when the song is ***connected to the story*** it becomes dynamite! And that’s precisely what this psalm is saying about worship. Its when the music and your/our stories connect that something powerful happens. It’s more than singing a few songs, corporate worship is a *spiritual activity that breaks and frees us*. It’s the reason why some of us struggle with worship, we are bound up and need to be released. It’s the reason why worship calls us to engage the message we are singing with our intent and choice. **Churches** become bound up and need releasing because they resist God in their midst and would rather hold onto their sterile worship than encounter the living God in their midst. Songs are sung with little passion and they are just going through the motions with someone else’s enthusiasm. Don’t drain other people’s enthusiasm, find some of your own!!! People become bound up with their personal preferences about worship and encounter because of fear or some previous experience where they were embarrassed or abused. Never again! **Pastors and worship leaders** become bound up with doing the same thing week after week because they are afraid of what might happen if they released leadership controls in worship more. And God asks of us…. simply to ‘keep it real’….do it together. Because when we break out from some of these restrictions, our worship breaks through in the spiritual world – and our declarations become powerful statements of our intent.

**3. WORSHIP IS A COSTLY OFFERING –** that God delights in. The whole Old Testament was based around bringing an offering when you worshipped. You bought something to give to God.

**Hebrews 13:15-16** speaks of us *bringing a sacrifice of praise, the fruit of our lips*.

Often, we find ourselves asking – did you enjoy the worship today…but it’s the wrong question. The better question is did God enjoy it? When you worship you give - *Your self - Your focus – and your declaration. For the Lord delights in his people and he crowns the humble with victory. Psalm 149:4* You give God what is already his (you). You choose to focus on Him and set aside other things. It’s a costly thing to do that. You could be out doing so much else. But God crowns you with favour and victory in your life.If you withhold it – Jesus said even the stones will cry out. But you go – but my life is not in shape, or ordered right. But you don’t know me. I’m not ready or fit to give myself to God yet! He says to you today – you let me have your life, I will sort it out. Worship is a costly offering.

My message today is called – the Power of Worship. There is power in corporate worship, there is power is declaring, singing and speaking out our praise and intents, and there is power when we bring our lives together as an offering to God. Maybe like I felt as I stood on top of the Swizz Alps all God is asking for is for us to breathe in and out – Praise Ye the Lord, How Great Thou Art – Hallelujah! And in doing that we have done what we were always designed to do….to be an instrument of worship!