

What habits do you have? What habits do you have that are good, bad, indifferent, annoying (you might need to ask someone else to answer that part of the question)? Do you ever feel the need to break habits or work on developing some better habits? Some people, especially people outside the church think that coming to church is nothing but a habit. You go religiously every week at 9am or 10.30am to do your 'churchy thing' – *to play at being church* but really it should be *to be church*. To celebrate a way of life that is righteous before God (not in your own strength) but we should be making righteous offerings, to be worshipping.

To worship means to give honour to someone or something. When we worship God, we give him honour and praise that is rightly his anyway. We have rituals that are there to help us: set words, movements, patterns to our service (it doesn't matter what they are), the purpose of them is only to channel your heart and mind, to focus your thoughts on God. But if you lose the heart of worship, the real meaning of it, you can start to just play at church and it becomes boring. For some it may eventually morph into shopping or a lie-in, or golf, children's sport or music, gardening. You learn a routine, you do the same thing every Sunday and it can become dry and stale. We need to make sure we keep the heart of worship alive and vibrant; we may need to rediscover it, to make it real so that we meet with God and offer worship that is righteous.

Worship is not just confined to Sundays. Worship should be a way of life. Do you ever stand out from the crowd, like Moses did when he came down from Mount Sinai or like John the Baptist? At their heart was God-centred worship and it showed. God-centred worship is where we put God in his place. Now that phrase, 'to put someone in their place' has very negative connotations but that's not what I mean. To put God in his place means putting him first; to give him glory and honour and praise that are rightly his in the first place. To truly worship him means *to be church* not just to play at it.

When you worship, you come face to face with God, we have no hidden inner sanctuary. When you worship, do you glow? When others think about you, what do they remember about you, what do they call to mind? Are you remembered with joy? Do your words and deeds lift them up? Do they see the light of Christ in you? 'Does your love overflow more and more ... to produce a harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God' (Phil 1 v9-11)?

The story behind Malachi's address is that he was almost the last Old Testament prophet. He spoke to the Jews just over 600 years BC and he has the final words recorded in the Old Testament. The Jews were established back in Israel, the temple had been rebuilt and temple worship of God was re-established BUT (there's always a but), the worship was 2<sup>nd</sup>-rate. Worship was no longer at the heart of the nation. They were *playing at worship* rather than *living it*. In fact, God was fed up with their complacency. Immediately before today's reading we hear Malachi saying 'You have wearied the Lord with your words' – what kind of worship was that? It was hollow and ritualistic, it was twisted and 2<sup>nd</sup>-rate. Their worship didn't give God the honour due to him and *it infected the whole of their lifestyle not just their Sabbath practices!*

*Complacent worship, flippant, 2<sup>nd</sup>-rate, indifferent, sloppy* – playing at worship rather than living it out. Can you imagine any of these words being used to describe John the Baptist? Did he play at

worship? He was chosen in spite of his lowly origins, and his distinctly weird way of life spoke to all who would hear him. I suspect if you met John the Baptist or at least saw or heard him in action, you would have walked away knowing, *absolutely knowing* that this man glowed with the presence of God. Not through worldly wealth or power or beauty because Christian greatness is not defined by what you own or how you look but by your walk with God.

In the imagery that Malachi uses of refining metals, the metal with all its impurities is heated until it melts and during this heating all the impurities mixed up with it rise to the surface and are skimmed off and removed. This is the picture Malachi uses for the day of judgement when our worship will be perfected and wholly righteous. As the impurities are removed, the surface of the pure, molten metal becomes smooth so that it reflects the faces of the workers. Similarly, in true worship, God refines us. This won't make us beautiful in the world's way of thinking (we might even end up like John the Baptist) but it means that God's reflection in our lives becomes clearer and clearer to those around us.

*Complacent, flippant, 2<sup>nd</sup>-rate, indifferent, sloppy* - can you imagine any of these words being used to describe your worship? Where is the glow, the intimacy, the heart of your worship?

Have you ever left a service and thought, 'well, what did I get out of that?' If you're thinking that, how do you think God is feeling? As with all things Christian, we need to turn that viewpoint upside-down. In worship, we are ministering to God, not him to us. We should really be asking, 'Was my service good enough today; was it an offering of righteousness?' You must bring to God the very best that you have.

*We must live our worship: we must live to worship* not just act it out on a Sunday. One commentator has said that worship is not part of the Christian life, it is the Christian life. We cannot play at being Christians. We have the gift of eternal life through Jesus and our worship must be given completely and wholly with every fibre of our being knowing that 'he who began a good work in (us) will carry it on until the day of Christ Jesus.'

In Advent, we have the chance to prepare for the celebration of the most amazing gift ever made. How big does this make your heart feel? How does this excite your spirit? How does this make you glow with unsurpassed wonder, joy and gratitude? How does this feed your worship of a wholly gracious, generous and loving God? *Worship is not part of the Christian life, it is the Christian life.*