

I wonder what you expect when you come to worship God either here on Sunday as part of our service, or during the course of your week. Worship of God at one level can be quite subjective and personal, and yet for us as Christians worship is solidly communal – either as a church or with our family and friends.

I wonder when you feel closest to God – which experiences of worship help you to feel this closeness. I wonder if it is to do with the style of worship, or the location or maybe just how are feeling that day.

I often feel closest to God, not in church but when I am walking in the bush or by the sea. In fact, I remember even as a teenager going to sit on a rock in the bottom paddock of our farm and looking up to the hills and talking to God. I sometimes wonder if the sheep and cows thought I was mad! It seemed to me that away from a house filled with children and teenagers and expectations that the bottom paddock was the place to find God!

In the bottom paddock I used to sing to God. I like to do it when I am gardening too – though have learnt to do it more quietly since I have lived in a city. Singing loudly with neighbours doesn't always bring the best outcome. Some of my strongest connections to worship have been outside. I suspect this is because as I was growing up many of the larger worship events were outside. From Carols by candlelight, to youth rallies and celebrations – we often seem to sing our praises to God outside. The joy of this, in the right setting, is that we are reminded of our connection with our God who is the God of all creation.

I have to say that one of the joys of worship for me in this building is that it does celebrate the God of all creation. Each Sunday we worship with these wonderful windows which look out onto the trees and sky and green – it is a gift. It hopefully focuses our mind and our spirit to worship of God.

The reading which we heard from Hebrews today the writer is drawing the community of the Hebrews to consider where and who they are worshipping.

The reading today compares the worship at Mount Sinai (though the actual place is unnamed in the text) with that of Mount Zion. The arrival to the celestial *City of God*, much anticipated earlier in this longer section of Hebrews is described in some detail.

Hebrews description of the City of God itself anticipates the reflection on the Jesus who suffered outside the city to bring transformation to this world. It invites the reader to go with Christ outside the gates and endure what Jesus endured. The point of this passage seems to be, not creating a religious distinction between heaven and earth, but rather that divine service goes outside the city gate. That is, heavenly

worship and responding to the needs of our neighbour are one and the same thing. Our worship then is not just about our connection with God, but also our worship is the work of our lives. How we respond to the poor and those in need is equally part of our worship as our transcendent moments in church, or sitting on a rock in the bottom paddock.

This isn't a new message but it is a hard message to live. Our worship of God and our relationship with those who help us to worship can be very personal and it can be a challenge to allow it to merge with our everyday life.

That is why in the lectionary, the planned readings which are set down by the universal church which we follow each week, this reading from Hebrews is paired with the reading from Isaiah and the Gospel of Luke.

Hebrews challenges us to consider that our worship is more than what we offer at the mountain, at the holy place. While Isaiah and Luke challenge the very nature of what the day of worship, that is what does the Sabbath, mean!

We ring fence parts of our lives for different reasons, sometimes to give us structure, other times to ensure that as a community we can share together, and this can be to good effect. The danger occurs when the fencing of parts of our lives actually limits both our relationship with God, and also our ability to live out our full potential, or respond to the needs of others.

This Gospel story is about the role and function of our religious traditions, our claims about what could and should be practiced on the "Sabbath" or who is allowed within the walls of our synagogues and religious communities. Special religious practices may become hindrances to inclusion. We must be diligent to recognize what theological ideas we hold dear that disallow full participation from others.

And, Luke's Jesus could not be clearer or more consistent on this point. He's no Sabbath breaker! He operates well within Jewish tradition of the day. But he is also not one to allow the tradition to exclude people from access to the community and the potential for their healing. Many in the crowd agree.

The danger of all structures which we put in place for practices which support and nurture us, or even the structures we put in place to ensure our worship of God, and even structures we put in place to help us respond to the needs of others, is that we allow the structures dictate the practice rather than seeing it as a tool for that practice.

I was recently talking with some medical professionals who were talking about the challenge of being required to 'tick box' processes when they see a patient, rather

than being able to take the time to get to know the person sitting in front of them to respond to their individual need, rather than a set of symptoms. I often hear teachers and social workers say the same thing, the so-called safety steps and structures which have been put in place can limit the ability of a professional to use their own judgement and respond to the person sitting in front of them. The structures designed to help, are in many cases now hindering the ability to bring the best outcomes for individuals or communities.

In a sense, this is the situation which Jesus has encountered with the practice of the Sabbath. The law about the sabbath had become a hinderance to the practice of the sabbath.

Jesus is not saying the Sabbath is not important, it is central to our worship of God, and to our wholeness as a person – but keeping this practice should not stop others being healed or welcomed into the community.

Without healing this woman could not come into the temple. Without healing this woman would not encounter God. Surely her welcome, surely her wholeness and then her desire to worship is what is at stake.

But it is even more than this. Jesus is making it clear that our worship is not just about pray and song and fellowship – our worship is about responding to the needs of those who are in our midst and around us.

This is a story about community, and the type of community we seek to be.

We like Jesus want to be a community that says Sabbath is important – that we value a balanced life where we take respite from our daily task and focus and re-focus our lives each week on Christ.

We like Jesus want our worship to not only be inside these walls but in the way we respond to the sick and the needy, the lonely and the lost.

But we like Jesus do not want to be so stuck in the rules of our Sabbath that we exclude others from encountering the healing power of God.

In our society we seem to sit lightly to the practice of Sabbath – we say our lives are too busy and complicated to always have consistent time off from work – but actually we know this isn't healthy – doesn't lead to a good and balanced life. When we do get time off we often say we need to rest rather than pray because our lives are so hectic prayer can feel like another task. Sabbath rest is important, it s space to take rest, to take care of ourselves and our faith.

The message which these readings bring to us is that if we dare to focus our lives around the life giving worship of God – on that heavenly city. If we allow ourselves a balanced life where worship is part of our lifestyle – part of that which nurtures us. If we recognise the importance of Sabbath rest in our lives and allow it to shape us. And if we also recognise that this Sabbath is something which may need to move and respond to the needs of those around us. If we dare to see our worship, then our lives will be transformed.

I think Leunig sums up this hope in a prayer, better than I can:

*Dear God,*

*We pray for another way of being:  
another way of knowing.*

*Across the difficult terrain of our existence  
we have attempted to build a highway  
and in so doing have lost our footpath.*

*God lead us to our footpath:*

*Lead us there where in simplicity  
we may move at the speed of natural creatures  
and feel the earth's love beneath our feet.*

*Lead us there where step-by-step we may feel  
the movement of creation in our hearts.*

*And lead us there where side-by-side  
we may feel the embrace of the common soul.*

*Nothing can be loved at speed.*

*God lead us to the slow path; to the joyous insights of the pilgrim; another way of knowing:  
another way of being.*

*Amen.<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.leunig.com.au/works/prayers>