

Prayer

Bless this day of worship and praise, O Lord. Bless Your people who worship You; whether in small congregations or large, whether in great cities, suburbs, towns or villages, whether young, old, rich or poor, whether new congregations or established churches, and whether in public or in private. Unite Your people in one great chorus of praise, transcending earth and heaven. All glory is Yours, O Lord most High. ALLELUIA!

Other Prayer Suggestions

- *Pray for Almighty God to send His Spirit in renewal*
- *Pray that God's love will be demonstrated by His people*
- *Pray for God's liberating power to change people's lives*
- *Pray that the witness of the church will grow strong*
- *Pray for the Good News of Jesus to engulf the world*
- *Pray that the Word of God will be read and understood*

Meditation

Brothers and Sisters in Christ; the Lord is waiting;

To listen to your troubles and set you free;
To open up your world and call you higher;
To forgive your sins and restore your souls;
To explain your faith and defeat the enemy;
To touch your wounds and heal your bodies;
To ignite your joy and light up your happiness;
To give you gifts and help you become fruitful;
To speak to your hearts and free up your minds;
To brighten your life and inspire your relationships;

Let Him do His work in you; and liberate you by His Spirit!

Bible Study - Psalm 96

¹ Come, let us sing for joy to the LORD;
let us shout aloud to the Rock of our
salvation.
² Let us come before him with thanksgiving
and extol him with music and song.
³ For the LORD is the great God,
the great King above all gods.
⁴ In his hand are the depths of the earth,
and the mountain peaks belong to him.
⁵ The sea is his, for he made it,
and his hands formed the dry land.
⁶ Come, let us bow down in worship,
let us kneel before the LORD our Maker;
⁷ for he is our God and we are the people of
his pasture,

the flock under his care.
Today, if you hear his voice,
⁸ do not harden your hearts as you did at
Meribah,
as you did that day at Massah in the desert,
⁹ where your fathers tested and tried me,
though they had seen what I did.
¹⁰ For forty years I was angry with that
generation;
I said, "They are a people whose hearts
go astray,
and they have not known my ways."
¹¹ So I declared on oath in my anger,
"They shall never enter my rest."

Reflections

Psalm 96 is a wonderful psalm of praise, and it conveys a certain liberty of spirit in the presence of God. Now for some time, I have longed for God's people to be released in their worship and set free from the dominating models of worship that are found in some places today. Worship is the physical expression of our spiritual desire to honour the God who has made us and redeemed us, and this absolute focus on God is everything. Without it, all the things we do to worship God degenerate into so much performance, manipulation and mere 'experience', whatever is done.

Please do not misunderstand me, I love to worship the Lord in a large congregation just like everyone else, but over the years, I have come to value a different approach to worship. I first came across this in Zimbabwe when I was chaplain to Thekwane High School in Matabeleland in Zimbabwe (1985), and the pupils there held their own services. On Sunday afternoons, after the formal School service, they gathered for worship in a free African manner.

At first, their services felt both familiar and strange. People stood around or sat, sometimes joining in the worship at the centre of the hall, and sometimes standing back or sitting down to pray. Songs were sung unaccompanied, and this meant that anyone could start them up, or sing the last verse again, repeat a chorus or similar. The drive of the music lay in the heart of those who sang, and not a group of musicians or a leader. Yes, there was a worship leader as I will shortly describe, but once a song was started, it seemed to have a life of its own, becoming a spiritual experience of praise from the heart of the worshippers. It is my impression that the sound of one hundred or more teenagers singing at the tops of their voices was louder than any worship band I ever heard since, and the harmonies of free singing seemed richer than any product of written music!

Between songs, people prayed or read from a passage of Scripture, but I first thought that the whole worship was unstructured and disorderly. However, I soon discovered that the student leaders were enabling the worship to proceed not by standing at the front and telling people what was happening next. No, there was no one standing anywhere telling people what to do, the leaders were mingling with the worshipping students, most of whom were standing, suggesting that this one say a prayer next, or asking another to be ready with a reading when it was right to speak. Long before these youngsters ever heard about non-directive leadership they exercised in quite naturally in the expression of worship. Moreover, this was done mostly out of a sense of humility before God, and their example has humbled me ever since!

Yes, someone would indeed be assigned to preach from God's Word before the meeting. I remember that it was only after I had attended a few of these meetings that I was asked to speak; I was Chaplain to these youngsters, but this did not mean that I was entitled to lecture them or stand on my privileges! I recall a number of services at which the sharing of the Word was far freer than a traditional sermon. Thoughts were shared and people responded to what was said, not with any sense of threat, but with a sense of eagerness that God might reveal something of His will.

Then, within these services of worship, wonderful things would sometimes happen. I remember one lad coming into the service with a broken leg in plaster. While the worship continued, others gathered around him to pray, and they laid hands on him and prayed for his healing for some time. On another occasion the whole school was waiting for rain. It was dry, and without rain the crops in the fields would not produce a harvest. Then quite suddenly, the rains came during the service, gradually pouring down on us with increasing density. The entire congregation suddenly started to praise the Lord, and one person started dancing; before long, everyone had placed their hands on someone else's hips and all were dancing in a long line, singing praise to God for the coming rain! We danced out of the hall into the warm rain and back again, but it did not matter that we were wet. The rains had come and everyone praised God!

I have told this story many times. Each time I have described this to English people I have been quickly told that this could never work in England. Even the most evangelical and charismatic of church leaders have responded to me with great caution at this description of this worship, citing its lack of proper leadership and control, the unsuitability of such things in a Western context, and more. What are people threatened by this? Why are we so scared of worship or song without using electricity? Why must the Word of God be spoken only by a preacher? Why be cautious about God and the work of the Spirit?

So despite pushing, I have never been able to move English congregations towards being free in worship as I now know is possible, and I am sad about that. Sometimes, because of my illness I am not well enough to attend church on Sundays. I do not like this, but it does give my wife and I some time to worship on our own, or with any members of the family who are with us at the time, and in a simple way, we try to do what the students at Thekwane did. We sing freely as we are led, for we are not embarrassed about our voices, even though my wife cannot hold a tune well! We pray in worship, confession and intercession and also pray for our own concerns. We read the word of God from the Bible using readings from the common lectionary, and we share God's Word through talking to each other about the texts we have read. The Lord has never failed

to inspire us or speak to us. But above all, we know that God is present with us in our home as we worship, and we are blessed.

Will the Lord ever change the heart of His people to practice their worship with such simplicity? Are we ready to abandon the props of our cultures in order to stand at liberty before our God? Are we willing to be led by the Spirit so that we might rediscover godly models of leadership again? I pray so.

God bless you

Paul H Ashby