

Worthy Worship?*

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“Worthy is the Lamb that was Slain!” (Rev 5:12). These words of heavenly worship according to the Seer of the Apocalypse symbolise for me much of the paradox and power of worship. I cannot read them without Handel’s great chorus taking me beyond mere words to music. They engage far more than my intellect. Their very sound, then, apart from their content, moves me, and that, in a particular direction. They become for me a vehicle of the inarticulate response of awe and gratitude to the one I still call “God”, who emerges above all the busy qualifications which my mind rightly insists belong to such a word. My mind is not thereby disengaged. It knows the background of the paradox embodied in the acclamation, that this is not about sweet little lambs, but about a figure of human brokenness in compassion and ultimate vulnerability right at the heart of God. In the tokens of the eucharist this nourishes my soul and grounds my humanity. My experience is mirrored by many in similar terms and by many others whose cultural indulgences take them far from Handel, not just in Australia but across the continents.

To worship is to enter the discourse of worth. “I am not worthy even to gather the crumbs from under your table” recites itself in my heart before I even ponder a response and like much good liturgy I embrace its gesture spontaneously without further reflection. It is one of the many ways I want to say, “Yes.” I am grateful nevertheless for the opportunity to reflect, not least because of the power of such experiences. In this essay I want to explore worth and what we do with it in worship. My comments reflect what I have observed both in Australia and abroad, though I acknowledge that the broad Australian experience of needing to challenge and expose hierarchies of grandeur and to view all on equal terms when confronted by issues of survival also informs my stance.

At the heart of the biblical tradition is the issue of worth. While some of it is about the worth of God compared with the worth of other gods, an issue morphed into the modern issues of the idolatry of wealth and greed, much of it is about the worth of creation and people. At its heart is a story about God attributing worth not only in creation but also in liberation, not least in the foundational myth of God the redeemer of Israel from Egypt. As it extrapolates the myth, Deuteronomy has Moses declare that Israel’s worth lay not in its own goodness or superiority to other peoples, but in the fact the God loved Israel and kept covenant (7:7-8). That covenant asserted the worth of Israel within the framework also of warnings about wickedness and exhortations to sustain the covenant relationship.

During the ministry of Jesus conflict erupted over worth. Against those who disqualified their fellows because of sin and neglect of covenant stipulations, cultic and ritual, Jesus asserted their worth. His invitation was not that they might receive instruction from him about how to attain worth, but that they embrace the worth God placed on them and enter into a renewed relationship which expressed it. This goes beyond the sense of solidarity with the “underdog”, which is so characteristic of Australian values, to embrace not only the marginalised, but also blatant sinners and exploiters. Issues of determining worth were just as much alive in disputes among the first Christians as they were between Jesus and his contemporaries. They erupted over the circumcision of Gentiles and then over food laws. Luke has Peter receive a vision (Acts 10:9-16) which convinced him that no Gentile is to be deemed unclean (Acts 10:28). At the heart of the good news was the message that God

affirmed worth. God deemed people to be of worth, to be worthy of loving, to be worth loving. Such love then opened transformative opportunities.

The conflict which surrounds the gospel of attributing worth was about more than who might or might not qualify. It was, and became more subtle, because notions of worth play a major role in most human societies, often associated with assumptions about honour and shame. As worship evolved over the centuries, such notions came inevitably to play a major role in Christian worship. This comes into stark relief in many prayers of confession. This might be effectively addressed by imagining the divine response to such prayers. Thus, in response to worshippers who declare, "I am unworthy" and then plea that despite that, God might show mercy, we might hear God reply: "I have a spent a lot of time trying to tell you that you are worthy, worthy of my love. I don't respond to you in mercy despite your being unworthy. I respond to you in mercy because I consider you worthy – I tried to make this point a long time ago at great cost!"

We have here a conflict of value systems, God's and ours. If we insist on our value system over against God's, we are not only calling God's into question; we are also projecting a different image of God. It is not difficult to see how our assumptions would then require that God has to depart from the norm in loving us. God would have to act out of character. Accordingly, something has to happen to produce in God this exceptional behaviour, at times imagined crudely as a transaction to bring us up to the level of being of worth, such as by having Jesus' death settle the debt which disqualifies us or imagining that he can in some way cover for his with his own worthiness. The matter becomes even more complicated where God then is seen to take the initiative to make us worthy in this way and that taking the initiative is now what we hail as God's love, indeed as the good news. Then, effectively, we proclaim that the good news consists in the fact that God chose not to apply the normal standards of worth but made an exception for us by bringing us up to standard. So normally God would not love people, because they are unworthy – we keep telling "God" that! This is not, however, the impression we gain from much of the biblical tradition and the ministry of Jesus, in particular. If we have to explain away such generous love or make it accountable within our systems of worth, we appear intent on disbelief and we join those who were in conflict with Jesus.

Issues of worth come to expression in a very challenging form in the Gospel of Mark, where those targeted are the disciples and, by implication, all of us who are their successors. In three neatly paralleled instances Mark shows that the disciples are out of step with Jesus. In the first, Jesus asks his disciples who people were saying Jesus is (8:27). Having heard their report (8:28), Jesus asks what they thought and Peter, the leading disciple, replied: "You are the Messiah" (8:29). This is an ascription of worth. Jesus accepts it, asks them to remain silent about it (8:30), almost certainly because of its dangerous ambiguity, and announces that he, the Son of Man, would face suffering, death and then rise to life (8:31-32). The dangerous ambiguity is apparent in Peter's rebuke of Jesus and Jesus' rebuking him in turn as an agent of Satan (8:33). The values collision is about more than the particular connotations of the word, "Messiah". It is about who Jesus is and ultimately who God is. Peter's value system identifies Jesus' worth and status as assuring him victory, not dragging him through defeat. In the instructions which follow (8:34-37), Jesus espouses his own system of worth and requires it of his followers. They will profit and find life only if they abandon the path of wanting to build themselves up (usually at the expense of others) and build their own wealth (inevitably at the expense of others). The way to life is to be engaged with Jesus in giving life to the point of vulnerability.

The second instance is again associated with an announcement by Jesus of his vulnerable path (9:31). Mark tells us that the disciples still did not grasp it, but instead had been arguing who among them was the greatest (9:34). What is true greatness? Jesus' response is to insist that true greatness is to be a serving, loving person, not the opposite, and confronts their images of worth with a little child (9:35-37). The third instance again brings the announcement of vulnerability (10:33-34), but this time James and John approach Jesus wanting the top positions in his coming kingdom (10:35-40). Mark's composition engages in a very confronting irony. Again Jesus gives instruction to his disciples (10:42-45), this time explicitly identifying the alternative value system. "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them" (10:42). In that system greatness consists in having power and wealth and exercising control over others at will. Instead among the disciples greatness is to be measured by serving others in love and compassion. Jesus pits a little child, a servant, a slave over against the might kings and rulers. Mark's hearers would have no difficulty imagining the trappings of power, not least in their gross imperial manifestations.

According to Mark, Jesus is not simply telling the disciples what should be of worth among them. He has set the conversation in the context of the story of Jesus, and, in particular, Jesus' journey "on the way", towards Jerusalem and suffering (8:27; 9:30; 10:32). Jesus was "going ahead" of his disciples on the way not only in a literal sense (10:32)! So, in 10:45, Mark reports Jesus as saying: "For the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for man". In other words, the system of worth which Jesus says should apply among them also applies to himself. He is not one of the lords, the lord Messiah, telling servants what *they* should do. He, himself, embodies the worth he espouses. Mark's story will go on to acclaim Jesus as the Messiah, but not in the gloriously triumphant sense that Peter hoped for and the disciples secretly espoused for themselves. This Messiah will be enthroned on a cross and wear a crown of thorns. Mark is confronting a competing value system about worth.

The disciples' stance has a chance to win in the long run, if we interpret the resurrection and enthronement as somehow a return to their value system. Jesus got to where they wanted him to reach, but just took a long way round. In the end honour and power and glory do matter most – so they were right after all! This would reduce the ministry of Jesus to an exception in his life, at worst, a tear-jerking stunt. Those traditions are more coherent with Mark's theology which see the resurrection not as God sighing a sigh of relief that that is all over and done with and now it's back to business as usual, but as God saying, "Yes". This was and remains true greatness.

The disciples have a second chance to win, however, if they can show that while Jesus and they are to espouse such values, God does not. Indeed God may instruct them to operate like that but God's own greatness might consist in precisely what Jesus alleged of the rulers of this world: namely, enjoying glory and power over others. We may recognise here the expression of an infantile fantasy, wanting to be the centre of everything for your own sake. We can also recognise the consequences as people inevitably take "God" as their model. The implication of seeing God like this – which is very common - would also be that we would have to say that Jesus does not truly represent the way God is. Instead Jesus reflects an exception to God's way of being. God made an exception in order to bring humankind back on track. On this model of thinking Jesus is, as such, an exception in the life of God. Fortunately we have strong traditions which resist that construction. God was in Christ, not

acting out of character, but acting in character, confronting us with love and challenging our obsessions with false systems of worth. To a little child's question: Is God like Jesus? We have learned to say, "Yes!"

The matter becomes especially complicated because in many cultural traditions, including our own, greatness has indeed been identified with having wealth, power, and control, whether in the form of the rulers (mostly male) of whom Jesus spoke or in the family context in the role of the father. For Jesus the issue was not power as such or even glory. He had plenty of both. It was about what mattered most. His image of father in relation to God meets us in a story of a compassionate parent who sees worth in his returning son before he knows his mind or his exploits (Luke 15:11-32). His image of king in God's kingdom is one where good news for the poor, feeding the hungry, reaching out to the alienated, inviting the sinner, are central.

The ancient traditions of rulers and their courts have been enormously powerful and have sustained their claim to represent what is great. We have made some progress, at least in the public mind, in deconstructing such claims in relation to political leaders. Those ancient traditions have also lent their structures to patterns and behaviours of worship. It was almost unavoidable that people would envisage God as like such a king, surrounded by a similar, but heavenly, court, expecting similar accolades and responses. Such discourse about God is all but inescapable. Even Jesus could not avoid it, though he did his best to reorient it. It was part of his biblical tradition and is no less part of ours. As bearers of those traditions and successors to the disciples we cannot escape having to deal with them. In a place like Australia they also symbolise our colonial past and its remaining vestiges. Our different indigenous cultures are suggestive of alternative expressions of the sacred, though they, too, have competing systems of worth.

One of the tests to raise awareness of how we fare is to ask what it is that we say we admire about God in our prayers, hymns, and liturgies, because what we value about God tells us what we value, and, by the very nature of who God is, we are likely to espouse such values for ourselves. It is a profound truth that people become like their (image of) God, which can be good news or bad news. I have sometimes been struck by what appear to be images of a "god" who is not creative and generous, but self-obsessed, needing accolades, engaged in wanting to be the centre of everything for "his" own sake, and very resentful and violent when crossed. The behaviours of such a "god" distilled from such projections would warrant recommendations of therapy in the human realm, if not prosecution on grounds of abuse of human rights. Mostly such projections are naïve and innocent of thoughtful intent. They regularly reflect narrow preoccupation with happiness and self-fulfilment. Frequently their devotees refuse to believe that God is loving or construe love not as God's eternal being but as extra effort or something earned by Jesus paying off a great debt. The visions of future happiness and self-fulfilment are often typically self-indulgent and lacking in concern for others.

As a preacher and teacher, I have noticed that liturgy is often much more powerful than teaching and preaching. I remember once occasionally teaching in an institution with colleagues, all with a strong focus on a life-giving theology which was majorly transformative, only to find that in daily worship most songs and prayers taught pretty much the opposite. Our teaching was being regularly undone by our worship. What we worship we value. When we worship we usually engage at many levels of our being, so that worship has the potential to be strongly transformative. If I keep telling God I am not worthy (and, by implication that you are not worthy) and insist, contrary to the gospel, that I am right and God

is wrong in attributing worth to us, then I am very likely to carry that stance into all my relationships. If I conduct liturgies where that is the reading, I spread the bad news of people's unworthiness, which can be reversed only if someone pays for it. If I keep insisting that the thing to admire about God is power and glory, then you should expect that those will be very closely related to my own ambitions. That is not good news for me nor for my world.

I will, however, not cease singing, "Worthy is the Lamb that was Slain", even in Australia, and even though I know its author espoused revenge for martyrs (cf. Rev 6:9-10) and embraced notions of power and might. I will continue to declare, "I am not worthy to gather up the crumbs," though I would never freshly formulate such a thing. I still want to "do" liturgy, that is, give expression to the response of awe and gratitude in ways with which I am familiar. The slain lamb is the author's way of addressing Mark's theme, at least, in part. My praying the prayer of humble access, "I am not worthy ...", is like a lover's game to which I know the response is: "Yes, you are!" My willingness to embrace such traditions, rather than excise them, is something about respecting what in the tradition they *do* more than what they say.

On the other hand, such accommodations, which, I acknowledge, will go too far for some, must be minimised and disciplined theologically if our worship is to celebrate good news and proclaim it. The message of most Christian worship remains, in my assessment, still very ambiguous. It is so very easy to find oneself promoting and perpetuating the very opposite of what Jesus was about. The informed liturgist, conscious of such issues, can frame settings which celebrate and mediate life and will develop the skills and perception to see where value systems which compete with the gospel have won or are winning. Such "worthy worship" embodies the good news we all still need.

Creating space where people are enabled to give expression to their sense of awe and gratitude and connect to the life and being of God in the world is not an easy undertaking. This is one of the reasons why we value established liturgies, which have "worked" for people. The combination of words, music, movement, and style have made this possible. Much of what we then "do" within those established settings goes way ahead of what we may think. In praying the Lord's Prayer, I am *doing* it, mostly without stopping to ponder individual phrases and formulations, any more than I check the identification of each stop on the route as the bus takes me on my journey. The same is true of my singing, "Worthy is the lamb". In exercising liturgical leadership, however, I need to sit back and reflect on what messages these activities convey directly and indirectly. If the journey is to reach its goal, I need also to engage in creation of new settings.

Ultimately, in enhancing a sense of awe, we are engaged in an undertaking which needs to inform all our relationships: recognising the holiness and difference of the other, allowing ourselves to be exposed to their reality as it presents itself. Such moments of holiness between persons rarely come to expression these days within the ideological framework of royal courts or even esteeming fathers for their authority. Indeed, the holiness to which we give expression within family relations can be instructive for the way we engage God's holiness. What is it that we most want from our children? It is surely not subservience and a distancing esteem based on fear or authority. It is rather to be taken seriously for who we are, which in our case will include our strengths and our blemishes. There are indications that Jesus appealed to the familial in articulating his understanding of God and that, while it occurred within the complex patriarchal framework of his time, the God he espouses is not

primarily seeking a relationship based on distance and fear, reflecting court adulation, but partnership and love.

The alternative to the court adulation model, which has informed and still informs much Christian worship, is not, therefore, the abandonment of worship or its reduction to a superficial “pallyness”, a phenomenon all too common, but embracing the holiness of the other. We probably best know what that means in analogy to relations with other human beings, giving rise to our discourse about God in personal terms. This is, of course, not the only way. As we are needing to appreciate that reality must be viewed and valued as something bigger than the human species, so our language and imagery of God needs to reflect that wider reality. Australia is a rich source for such reflection, from the wonders of its stark yet beautiful inland to the vast sea which surrounds its shores. Celtic spirituality grows well on such a continent. The discipline of the liturgist as bearer of the tradition and shaper of God-spaces is to examine what makes for “worthy worship”, discerning the values it embodies, gospel and otherwise, and, ultimately, to frame a setting where people encounter the God of Jesus and not the projection of infantile fantasy.

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