

## **Sermons at the Anglican Church of Luxembourg**

**Preached by Evelyn Sweerts on Sunday 27 October 2019**

**Texts: Joel 2.23-32; Luke 18.9-17**

**Year C: Last after Trinity; Sermon series in/out/up: Up**

In the last few weeks we have been looking at what it means to be the church in three dimensions, which we have called in, out and up. Two weeks ago Geoff talked about the 'In' dimension, which concerns our life together as a community, and how the different gifts and passions we have allow each of us to contribute to the building up of our life together: it's about our relationships with each other. God has given us each gifts which we are probably already using in our Monday to Saturday lives, but which we might also offer to each other in the life of our church.

Last week Geoff talked about the Out dimension, which is our shorthand for mission, or our relationship with the wider world. We saw that in action by having Ellen here to talk about the work of the charity Naledi. Our support for Naledi is one way we express the Out dimension. Geoff talked about the fact that we don't exist for our own sake, but also for the wider community: a closer to home type of 'out'. God is already on a mission in our neighbourhoods, in Luxembourg, indeed in all the world – and we are invited to join him there.

And today I'm going to talk about the 'Up' dimension, which is all about worship, and our relationship with God.

What is worship, actually? It's a slippery term. We each have a tendency to think that what we think it is, is what everyone else thinks it is too – but there are probably as many definitions of worship as there are people here today! And 'what' often gets answered with 'how': it's prayer, it's music, it's praise, it's Holy Communion, it's silent contemplation.

So let's start there: how do we worship God? Our reading from Luke offers humble prayer as the way to go. It's clear we should be like the tax-collector in

our attitude, and not like the Pharisee who was full of himself, instead of asking to be filled by God. But regardless of our imperfections – and we all have a bit of tax collector and a bit of Pharisee in us – we should definitely be praying. According to today’s reading, our instructions for the Up dimension are to worship God humbly and whole-heartedly through prayer.

And prayer of course can be words but can also be singing or silence. In fact, if we take St Paul’s words seriously to ‘pray without ceasing’ it is the whole of life.

The problem with the ‘how’ question – how ought we to worship? – is that is focused on what *we* do. And it’s so easy, isn’t it, to think that we are doing God a big favour by worshipping him, or coming to faith, or getting confirmed, or saying our prayers, or singing enthusiastically, or reading the Bible, or whatever it is we do when we’re worshipping God. And frankly that’s having it back to front. Whatever worship is, and however we do it, it is something that always starts with God. *We are responding.*

Jesus says, *whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.* Notice that the kingdom is something that is *received*: it comes to us – it’s something we respond to. Or, I suppose, choose to ignore.

And by the way, Jesus doesn’t mean that we have to become *like* children, but that we should receive the kingdom in the same way that we receive children: gladly, whole-heartedly, unconditionally. Rather like the way we have received Bella into the church family today – and we will be making that more explicit when we say our welcome at the end of the service.

It’s also clear in Joel’s words to the Israelites:

*God* gives the rain that leads to the harvest.

*God* repays the years the locusts have eaten.

*God* pours out his spirit on everyone.

*God* will call his people.

And the people will RESPOND with praise, with the recognition that God is in their midst.

The Up dimension isn't about earning Jesus points by praying without ceasing, or reading the Bible faithfully, or turning up to church regularly, or bringing your child or yourself for baptism or confirmation, or giving to charity, or leading a home group, or joining a rota – no matter how much it chimes with your God-given spiritual gifts.

By all means do all those things but let us recognize that doing any of them is a response to God first reaching down to us.

When dedicating the first church built for Protestant worship Martin Luther preached, saying that in Christian worship God speaks to us through his word and we in turn speak to him through prayer and songs of praise. In other words, God speaks first, and we reply.

Let's consider the three dimensions of Church again:

IN: God gives us spiritual gifts for the building up of his Community, the church, and we are invited to listen and respond.

OUT: God is on a mission in the world to make his kingdom come – and we are invited to listen and respond.

UP: God reaches *down* to us in tender compassion and love – and we are invited to listen and respond.

And in baptism, we say that faith is the gift of God to his people – and we are invited to respond.

Imagine God's Spirit coming down from heaven – a light that touches the waters of baptism or the bread and wine on the communion table and WHOOSH the rainbow refracts all through the church and touches all the people.

All we can do is open ourselves to receive, and when we receive, say thank you.

The rite of baptism starts with thank you... for the gift of water, for freedom, for life.

Holy Communion starts with thank you – it's what Eucharist means – Let us give thanks to the Lord our God...

The Up dimension is, in the first place, about WHAT GOD DOES and secondly about our response of THANKSGIVING. And our thanksgiving may be said or it may be sung or expressed in action or simply felt in silence. It's all prayer, it's all worship, it's the whole of life – not just what we do together on Sunday morning.

And, you know, we may well want to read the Bible and meet with others to learn more about who God is and how he has related to humankind. But not to earn worship points or do God any favours but in the power of the Spirit to say thank you God, and please may I have more of you Jesus.

As we conclude this sermon series on the in, out and up dimensions of our life as a church – and indeed how these dimensions play out in our individual lives – let's take a moment of quiet to reflect on the ways in which God has reached down to us and let's respond with thanksgiving to God for that.

[Silence followed by extempore prayer]