

We are now in our period of vacancy, otherwise known not as Brexit but Dexit. Legal responsibility has devolved to the two church wardens and encouraged by the Bishop, Archdeacon, Area Dean, Uncle Tom Cobbly and all, a vacancy team have been appointed.

The team is currently analyzing the survey responses and I shall tell you more about the progress towards the new vicar's appointment, including the timescale agreed with Bishop Andrew on 30th October.

I have been tasked with overseeing, amongst other things, the worship ministry in this church during the vacancy. This morning I'm going to tell you about the tweaks we have made to the running order of the services and share with you an exciting initiative being held later this month.

But first I would like to place those tweaks in the context of the biblical building block we heard about in our first reading.

In verse 5 Peter uses the term 'living stones' as a metaphor to illustrate the secure and intimate relationship we as believers have with Jesus. In the preceding verse Jesus is also referred to as a 'living stone' who has a similar secure and intimate relationship with God the Father. Together these two verses picture how Christ and we, his believers, are joined to God himself. And Peter tells us that we as living stones are being built into a spiritual house.

In every building there is a cornerstone, which determines the design and orientation of the building. It is the most significant stone in the structure. The picture that Peter creates is that of a structure made up of believers – a church made up of living stones - with the cornerstone being Jesus Christ.

We acknowledged this in our last song – “Christ alone, Cornerstone”.

And as we heard in verse 9 Peter goes on to describe the function of the living stones is to “declare the praises of God”.

Praising God is a basic, but incomplete, definition of worship.

But here's the tricky part; unfortunately the bible doesn't give a formal definition of worship; but it does define love. Fortunately, in 1 John 4 it is revealed that God is love.

And in our second bible we heard that we should love the Lord our God with all our heart, all our soul, all our strength, and with all our mind.

Worship is always a response to what God has revealed and the primary way we respond to the revelation that God is love is through worship.

So as our opening song said “Come, now is the time to worship”

Our response to God's love is through worship and involves our entire relationship with God through our heart, soul, mind and strength.

Our response may be in private. Traditionally this was called daily devotion or spiritual discipline; times specifically set aside to speak to God, to listen to God or simply to be with God.

But on Sundays we come together; to bring our private devotion in a collective expression of worship. Simply by gathering together we are responding to God's love; Jesus said where two or three gather in his name, he will be present in a special way. When we gather, we gather in the presence of God.

As the song says, Come now is the time to worship.

In our services we should be of one mind, *wanting* God to be present. We specifically *ask* him to be present. He *promises* to be present. And if we are sincere about worship, we should *expect* him to be present.

And when we sing in God's presence, we are singing *to* him; he is the audience; we are the choir. So if anybody ever asks if we have a choir, the answer is yes! Collectively *we* are the choir singing both hymns and songs to God.

Currently we tend to sing either traditional hymns written over the past five centuries or so or contemporary songs of worship.

Often they express positive emotions such as adoration, praise, thanksgiving, confidence, faith, joy and excitement. They are expressions of happiness that God is active in our lives, each and every day.

Some Old Testament psalms did just the same; and like other psalms our hymns and songs may also express sorrow, anguish or fear; whilst some ask questions.

So as the song says, come now is the time to worship.

But singing is not the sole facet of worship; there is also prayer, indeed there are a number of different prayers in each of our services. And when we say 'Amen' at the end of a prayer said by the service leader we are saying... Yes, God, that's my prayer too.

We worship whenever we say prayers, whether it is just saying Amen when the leader finishes or when we say a prayer out loud together.

When we express our dependence on God or give requests to him we are acknowledging his presence in our lives.

When we confess our sins to him, it confirms we are submitting to his greatness.

When we give him thanks and praise, it exalts and glorifies him.

As the song says, come now is the time to worship.

The sermon is another facet of worship. If I get it right today it will be because God will have spoken through his word by inspiring me what to say and you will have been listening intently for what God is saying.

Part of our worship, part of our respectful response to God is listening for what he wants to teach us and how he wants to change us.

This means not just sitting and merely listening. We should actively think about the scriptures read and think about what is being said. We should listen with the expectation that the sermon contains something God wants to tell us.

It may well be different from person to person, but as we listen we should be ready to respond to the message.

In the context of this sermon it might be simply hearing that we should sing more confidently or praying more sincerely after understanding that singing and prayer are integral parts of worship.

Or it might nudge a thought totally unrelated to what I have said; Oh there's so and so – I really ought to say sorry for how I last spoke to them.

As the song says, come now is the time to worship.

The final aspect of worship is silence.

Silence to let God's word sink in; silence to marshal our thoughts coherently It's often said silence is golden, but no more so than in an act of worship.

So, now let's look at our own services of worship.

We have been encouraged by Bishop Andrew to sustain or even enhance where possible and in small ways our ministries and services, ready for the new vicar to then lead us onwards and upwards in our journey of faith.

Making significant changes to our service structures or by reverting to 3 Sunday morning services is, to put it simply, beyond our pay grade.

With this in mind we have looked at what you said in the survey and you clearly said that you want our services to be authentic.

The format of our 8.30 service of Holy Communion remains unaltered because all who attend sense its authenticity.

Our resources are currently too overstretched to hold the 6.30 service, but if you enjoy the authenticity of a relaxed, laid back service then the barista style café service planned for later this month may be for you.

It is so laid back as to be almost horizontal. Rogan will tell you more in church family news.

Unsurprisingly the survey also revealed that many of you prefer either a traditional or modern style of service whilst the majority are reasonably happy with either. So over the past couple of months I've been looking to see if there was a way we could tweak our 10.00 services to maximize the authenticity of worship, regardless of the its style.

Over the past four weeks we have trialed a slightly different style and we feel very encouraged by the many unsolicited positive comments offered. So, we plan to retain the new structure for the foreseeable future.

That is not to say there won't be further changes or that sometimes, like last week, we might get the balance wrong.

But our hope is that every service will have two distinct halves; one reflecting an authentic traditional style and the other an authentic contemporary style.

Let's take today's order of service by way of example.

The first half of every service of Morning Worship up to the talk will be in the modern style with a minimum of two songs led by the band on the stage here. After the talk the style will become traditional with a minimum of two hymns being sung accompanied by the organ. The church family news comes towards the end of the service and we will finish by saying together the Grace.

The screen will remain in place throughout with the individual section headings, prayers and Grace being shown. The modern song lyrics will also be shown on the screen, but we will use hymn books for the hymns.

We picked up that many of you have difficulty seeing the screen, particularly when standing, so we have positioned the wording in the top half of the screen and also increased the font size whilst reducing the number of song lines on each slide. We will continue to refine these.

We shall offer two types of Communion service.

1. Holy Communion, with more traditional liturgy following the red books but with a minimum of two contemporary songs and the church family news prior to the peace. During the peace the screen will be raised to allow the high table and East windows to be seen. Thereafter there will be a minimum of two hymns accompanied by the organ. Communion will be taken from the high table and the presiding minister will usually be robed.

2. Family Communion, with more contemporary liturgy shown on the screen and on a card up to the Peace with a minimum of two songs. Communion will be taken at the stage front and the clergy will not be robed except when visiting clergy insist. The screen will again be raised during the peace and a minimum of two hymns accompanied by organ will be sung during the second half with the liturgy being printed on a card.

The aim is to have two services of Morning Worship and two Communion services each month, but this is not set in stone because some months contain a fifth Sunday and we need to observe special events such as Remembrance Day next month.

You will also know in advance what type of service you are coming to; watch out in the church family news for what I mean.

Finally, we can print off in advance the words shown on the screen, so if your eyesight demands it, if you let us know by a Thursday we will have a printed copy ready for you.

Our hope, indeed our prayer, is that this format will enable you to worship authentically each and every week. It may be that there are certain parts of a service which you do not fully connect with because you

prefer the other style of worship, but all the more reason then for you to worship without restraint and with all your heart, soul, strength and mind in the part you do connect with.

We are after all is said and done, the living stones whose function is to praise and worship the Lord our God.

We have done our best to get it right, but part of being right is admitting that we aren't always right. So the last word on worship is that we must look to Jesus as the one who is doing it right for us; he is the cornerstone of our faith and he is constantly inviting us to join him in getting it right.

Hopefully we call all say Amen, to that.