

PREPARING TO MEET WITH GOD

→ When I was young, it was normal for my mother and my grandmother to wear a hat when we went to church. In fact it's what every woman that went to our church did in those days and maybe some of you will have grown up with the same experience. Whenever I asked questions about why it was necessary to wear a hat, my grandmother would often be quite indignant and point out that if you were going to meet the Queen you would wear a hat so surely it was even more necessary to wear a hat when you were preparing to meet with God! And she continued to wear a hat to church right up until a few days before she died at the age of 97 back in 2008

.....I never did agree with her about the need to wear a hat to church, but nevertheless there was something important for her about getting ready to meet with God. She's absolutely right that if we were preparing to meet the Queen or someone else that we deemed to be important, we would spend some time making appropriate preparation for that meeting, but how many of us really spend time making preparation for the time that we will spend with one another in worshipping God?

.....When you look around any church sanctuary and observe the faces of the people you will inevitably notice some who look very smiley, others who look grumpy but a large proportion who simply look content. Content to be there, content to look straight ahead and receive whatever comes. Content with some nice hymns. Content to leave the same way they came in, unmoved and unchanged and then content to come back again next week.

.....But hopefully there might also be a few who are wide-eyed and full of anticipation that in this time of worship they might actually meet with God; that they will experience worship rather than just endure worship. Solomon, the wisest and richest man in the world, in his day, gave us some wisdom about encountering God in our worship in those words that we heard just a few moments ago from Ecclesiastes. And as we share in this time together this evening we will consider what his words written thousands of years ago now might have to say to us today about preparing for worship. But before we do that we're going to sing a hymn together

GET READY TO MEET GOD

→The opening words of Solomon in this fifth chapter of Ecclesiastes are "Be careful about going to the Temple." Or, in some versions of this scripture, "Guard your steps" or "Watch your feet when you go to the house of God." All of those different versions suggest to me, not that church is a hazardous place and that entering it is a risk that you may or may not want to take, but rather that we should approach God with a sense of reverence, respect, care and dignity. Think of Moses when he encountered God in a burning bush. He took off his shoes because he recognised the presence of God and the holy ground on which he stood.

.....Going back to the days of my youth again I can well remember being told not to run around in the church. And again, even though for some of us those rules of our youth may have been somewhat relaxed there is a sense in which there is some

deeper meaning there for us to find. We may not be physically running when we come to meet God, although perhaps some of us are as we arrive just at the very last minute! But many of us are perhaps running spiritually, emotionally or mentally. We arrive at church with a hundred and one other things racing through our minds. We arrive for worship not having given a moment's thought to what we are coming to or what we are coming for.

.....And of course, the consequence of that is that we haven't even really thought about what might happen whilst we're here. We haven't anticipated that God might just make himself known or his voice heard. And because our minds are racing with so many other things, even when God does show up and speak, we aren't always able to experience his presence which longs to stir us up and change our lives and satisfy the deep needs and hunger that we have for God if only we would take time to become aware of it.

.....So, let us encourage one another to come to worship ready to worship. Perhaps we could take a few moments to pray at home before we arrive here. Pray for those leading our worship. Pray that you might hear God speaking. Pray that you will be all the more ready to pray and worship when you actually arrive here. Come willingly. Come expecting God to meet with you and speak to you. Come anticipating a memorable experience with God himself. Come expecting God to make you whole.

.....And even though we have already begun our time of worship together this evening, let's just be silent together for a few moments so that we can still our racing hearts and minds, catch our breath, acknowledge that we are in God's presence and invite God to meet with us this evening in this place.

LISTEN TO GOD

→ You may have heard the story of a man who told his friends that he and his wife often had words, but that he rarely got chance to use any of his. And sometimes I wonder if God might feel the same way about us, because often when we come to him we are so full of our own words that we don't always have time to listen for his.

.....It's a bit like being on the plane when the flight attendants are about to share the instructions to be followed in the case of an emergency. Before they start we are all encouraged to pay attention, even if we have heard it lots of times before. But as the attendants carefully explain how to use our seat belts and tell us where the exits are; as they tell us about life jackets and oxygen masks, lots of people on the plane continue to talk, read or look out of the window, in fact anything but listen carefully to the flight attendants. They must wonder why they bother sometimes!

.....Ever wondered if God feels like that with us sometimes. We turn up at church after a mad dash from home. There's been World War III with the kids in the car and we weren't too happy with the driver that cut us off at the roundabout on the way here. Eventually we stroll into church and take our seat. And we start looking around to see who else is here. Perhaps we have a good look at the notices, just in case we need to point out any mistakes to the people that have taken time to

prepare them for us. Maybe we even use the blank space at the bottom of the page on the notice sheet to write a list of things to do tomorrow. And before we know it, the sermon is half way through and we haven't a clue what's been going on because our mind has been elsewhere. We haven't been listening!

.....Now that may be a bit extreme, but how often do you find yourself distracted from what is going on. You find your mind wandering to other things and you're not really concentrating on what God might be trying to say through silence or song, through scripture or the spoken word! Solomon says "It's better to go there (that is to church) to learn than to offer sacrifices as foolish people do, people who don't know right from wrong. Think before you speak, and don't make rash promises to God." The New Living Translation puts it wonderfully, "As you enter the house of God, keep your ears open and your mouth shut!"

.....When we come to worship, we come to meet with God, the living God, who amazingly longs to meet with us. When we come to meet with God we would surely be well advised to let him do the talking because he wants to communicate with us.

HUMBLE YOURSELF BEFORE GOD

→ Solomon then goes on to say, "God is in heaven and you are on earth, so don't say any more than you have to!" Now I don't think this statement has much to do with physical distance or separation, but I think it has more to do with our perspective. Solomon is reminding us here that God is God and we aren't! God is in heaven and we are on earth. God hears what we cannot hear and sees what we cannot see. So as we prepare to worship him, then we approach him with a sense of humility and awe.

.....In those few verses that we have just heard, when Isaiah experienced the presence of God, he bowed before him. When we really recognise God in all his power and wisdom and love then there is really only one way to respond, isn't there – in awe and wonder!

.....But one of the great benefits of getting a proper perspective on God is that we not only see God for who he is but we also begin to see things through God's eyes. We begin to see things from where he sees them. And that means that what we thought was a mountain, looks like a molehill. What seemed great and mighty in the world's eyes turns out to be small and insignificant. Whilst on the other hand, when we thought we were weak we become strong because God is with us, or what we thought was foolish actually seems wise from God's view point.

.....So, as we come to worship God we are encouraged to humble ourselves before him so that we get things into perspective. We see God for who he really is but it also helps us to get all our circumstances and difficulties into perspective and that can make all the difference in the world.

MEAN WHAT YOU SAY TO GOD

→Now, as we move on through this passage, we find Solomon saying, "When you make a promise to God, keep it as quickly as possible. He has no use for a fool.

Do what you promise to do.” In other words, keep your word. Words may not mean much to us – we let them pass our lips very quickly sometimes, but they mean a lot to God. To him, a promise is a promise.

.....Maybe you know some people who do make rash promises to God whilst they're in worship, or maybe you've made some yourself! You know the kind of thing – “Oh God, if you'll just get me out of this particular predicament, I'll serve you.” Or, “Just help me with this Lord, and I promise I'll spend more time with you each day!” And then there are all the promises that are made before God in baptism services and marriage services. What promises of time, commitment, money and your very life have you made to God in the past and perhaps not managed to keep?

.....We've all done it I'm sure and when we're sorry about that God will forgive us. But perhaps God would rather we didn't make those rash promises in the first place because we just end up disappointing him when we don't manage to keep them. Far better to admit that we're not very good at all this commitment stuff, but that we'd really like God to help us with the power of his Spirit and then we may be surprised at what we do manage to achieve as we look to God to help us fulfil what we have promised.

TAKE GOD SERIOUSLY

→ And finally, Solomon would encourage us to fear God! “No matter how much you dream,” he says, “how much useless work you do, or how much you talk, you must still fear God.” Now, we're not talking about being frightened of God here, but Solomon is encouraging us to be full of respect for God and to take God seriously.

.....I once saw a church sign that advertised one of its acts of worship with a statement that said, “Casual Worship 9.30 a.m.” Now I know that church was simply trying to communicate the fact that this act of worship was informal and relaxed but what Solomon has to say in this passage and I think what we read elsewhere in scripture would not encourage us to approach worship in a casual manner. Sometimes perhaps we take God too lightly and although he is our friend and companion, we still need to approach him with respect and with reverence. He has made us, he provides for us, he has our future in his hands – he deserves to be taken seriously.

.....There's no doubt that God loves fun and laughter and those with a sense of humour. Those things are a gift to us from God in any case and he delights in those things. But worship is a serious business. Entering God's presence is no joking matter. Our worship provides us with a wonderful adventure as we are drawn into the presence of the God of the universe. And every time we gather, we can never be sure what the adventure will be like. It shouldn't ever be quite like last week or this time last year and neither should it simply be a “nice service” but rather in the words of a child after he had flown on a plane for the first time, may we often be able to say that our worship has been “awesome” because we have been in the presence of our awesome God.