

How to Honour God

John 4:19-26

Holy places. Every 12 years, Hindus celebrate the *Purna Kumbh Mela* – a great religious festival. The last one was in 2001. It was also a *Maha Kumbh Mela* – which happens every 144 years. Millions of Hindus flock to Allahabad, to the meeting place of the Ganges and Yamuna (or Jumna) Rivers. It's the greatest festival in the Hindu religious calendar. It's the most sacred site for Hindus. At the meeting of the two holy rivers, Hindus dunk themselves in the water, hoping to purify themselves and break the cycle of reincarnation. They can't just do it in any old river. This is a holy place. The purification must be here to have any chance of working.

One of the five fundamental duties of Islamic worship is the *Hajj* – the pilgrimage to Mecca. If at all possible, Muslims must fulfil this pilgrimage at least once in their lifetime. It can be done any time of the year, but the 12th month of their year is the time of the Great Pilgrimage. Great crowds flock to Mecca. Why Mecca? It's the most sacred site – the most holy site – in Islam. All sorts of Islamic holy bits and pieces reside in Mecca.

Holy pilgrimages. Holy objects. Holy places. The Jews and Samaritans of the first century also had their holy places. They come up towards the end of this conversation between Jesus and a Samaritan woman. We looked at the first part of the conversation last Sunday morning; we're looking at the conclusion this morning. Flick your eyes over the first bit again.

- Verse 7 – Jesus is sitting at a well and asks a Samaritan woman for a drink.

- Verse 9 – she's fairly surprised about this because Jews didn't think much of Samaritans – and yet here's this Jewish man asking her (a Samaritan woman) for a drink.
- Verse 10 – Jesus surprises her even further, telling her she should've asked Him for a drink – and she should've asked not just for any water, but living water. Living water was fresh, flowing water. It was also one term the Old Testament used to refer to God's promises of the great salvation He'd bring His people at some future time.
- Verse 11 – the woman picks up on the idea of fresh flowing water and totally misses the idea of God's promises. She interprets Jesus' words at the purely physical level. She's keen to avoid the hard, hot work of going to the well each day.
- They go back and forth on this – Jesus wanting her to see the real nature of the spiritual water he offers and she sticking to the physical level. Then, in verse 16, Jesus tells her to get her husband. This exposes her inner emptiness – her deep spiritual thirst. She's had five husbands and now lives with a sixth man whom she didn't bother to marry. Her life's a mess. She desperately needs this living water Jesus offers.

Holy Places

In verse 19, the woman seems to change the subject. She moves away from the uncomfortable subject of failure with men. She poses a question to Jesus – a question about holy places.

"Sir," the woman said, "I can see that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshipped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must

worship is in Jerusalem."

This was a long-standing issue of dispute between Jews and Samaritans. Both agreed God said there'd be one place where God would put His name. They disagreed about the identity of that place.

- The Jews claimed the proper place for worship was the temple in Jerusalem. God approved that in King David's time. It was built by David's son, King Solomon. It was destroyed and rebuilt by the time of Jesus – but that was the place to worship God.
- The Samaritans claimed the proper place for worship was Mount Gerazim. They got that from the first five books of our Old Testament – the only books they accepted as God's word. They built a temple on Mount Gerazim around 400BC. Some unfriendly Jew destroyed it in 128BC, but they still had sacrifices and other rituals at the site.

From their conversation so far, this Samaritan woman recognised Jesus was more than the average man. He told her things about herself that suggested He had inside knowledge. Not that she thought He'd checked with the village gossips – they certainly would have known the sordid details – but she thought He had divine insight. His knowledge about her showed He was different – she calls Him a prophet. And so she takes the opportunity to ask His opinion on this long-standing theological dispute between the Jews and Samaritans – and to get the focus away from her failed relationships.

Jesus replies in verse 21:

Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will

worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem.

Back in 2:4, Jesus said to His mother: *My time* [or *My hour*] *has not yet come*. Now He says to this Samaritan woman: *a time* [or *an hour*] *is coming*. John keeps drawing our attention to this important coming event – until we get to John 12:23 when Jesus says:

The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.

That time – that hour – is when Jesus is lifted up and enthroned on the cross. It's when Jesus is killed and put in a tomb. It's when Jesus overcomes death and sits at the position of power and authority in God's kingdom.

That hour isn't here when Jesus talks with this woman – but it's not far off. It's not some indefinite event a long way in the future. It's very close. Jesus says something's about to happen that makes all this discussion about holy places irrelevant. There's no point debating the claims of Jerusalem and Mount Gerazim – they'll both be insignificant once Jesus does what He came to do. Jesus Himself is the way to God. He is the living water. He provides access to God for all who come through Him. You don't have to be in some special holy place to get benefit from what Jesus did.

Christians don't have holy temples. We don't have specially sacred sites. A pilgrimage to Jerusalem or any other city won't get you any closer to God. Taking a wash in the Jordan or any other river won't bring you cleansing. Your prayers don't get express delivery because they're said inside a church building. Doing these things won't give you any brownie points towards some special position with God. They won't make you acceptable to God. The only way God will accept you is through Jesus.

Have Christians always got this right? Have they always paid attention to what Jesus says here? No. Some have made pilgrimages to the Holy Land thinking they impress God. Some have claimed to build special holy places thinking to provide better access to God. Some have produced holy relics thinking they provide an inside track to God. Jesus says they're wrong. He gives the living water. He makes the concept of holy places obsolete.

Jesus still says the Samaritans had it wrong. Verse 22:

You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews.

The Samaritans were stuck in the past. Their Bible stopped at the end of Deuteronomy. That's why they went for Mt Gerazim rather than Jerusalem. What they had was true – it was God's word – but they didn't have the whole truth. God hadn't stopped speaking to Israel once Moses died. He'd sent many more prophets after that – but the Samaritans didn't pay attention to them. There's a huge chunk of the Old Testament they rejected. They didn't really know the God they claimed to worship. By their own choice, they limited God's word. By their own choice, they placed themselves outside what God continued to reveal about Himself and His dealings with His people.

The Jews, on the other hand, continued to receive knowledge of God and what He was doing. They had the other books of the Old Testament.

- They weren't good at obeying them.
- They weren't good at staying pure.
- They still needed God to step in and rescue them

from their own wickedness.

- They needed the living water Jesus offers.

But they did have God's true words. They were the vehicle God used to communicate to humanity. They were the vehicle God used to prepare for the coming of Jesus. Through them, God promised to provide the living water – to do something to rescue us from our inner rebellion against Him.

That something now sits before this woman. He's the culmination of God's preparation. He's God's final revelation to us. More than that, He's God come to rescue us. What He's about to do at the cross provides the living water. And it makes debate about holy place irrelevant – because He is the ultimate holy place.

Holy People

Jesus drives this home in verses 23 and 24:

Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshippers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and His worshippers must worship in spirit and truth.

The important phrase is *worship in spirit and truth* – so let's see if we can build up a composite picture of what's involved in this. Four things.

First, true worshippers must drink *the living water* Jesus offers – or, to use Jesus' language with Nicodemus, they must be *born again*. This is the context of Jesus' conversation with this Samaritan woman. This is what He offers her – true life, eternal life, salvation, right relationship with God, the Holy Spirit dwelling within her. Despite the twists and turns of the conversation, that remains

central. It remains the fundamental condition for anyone to be a true worshipper of God.

- Unless you've drunk the *living water*, you aren't even on the right wavelength to truly worship God.
- Unless God's Spirit brings you true spiritual life, you aren't in a position even to relate to God at all.

True worship begins with having a proper relationship with God. That comes about by drinking Jesus' *living water*.

Think through the logic. God says we're rebels. He made us and put us in His world. He told us what we were to do in His world – how to live according to how He made us. We rejected His instructions. We set ourselves up as our own bosses – our own little kings – and did our own thing instead of God's thing. That's why we're in the mess we're in. We're just not capable of running ourselves without reference to God – let alone to try running the world that way.

How can a rebel worship God? They have to stop being a rebel first. You can't pretend to worship God while you still want to run the show your own way. The problem is we don't want to give up the rebellion. That's what God's people found out in the Old Testament.

- God established a relationship with them. God gave them His law. He told them how to give up their rebellion and live on His side.
- But they found they weren't capable of doing it. They kept going astray. They kept doing their own thing.

That's why God made these promises about what He'd do in the future – about how He would save them and give them new hearts and put His Spirit in them and provide

living water. We need to drink the living water so as to be able to change sides. We need to drink the living water so as to stop being rebels and to be able to worship God truly.

Secondly, true worship can only be offered via Jesus. It's *the coming hour* that changes the whole perspective on worship. That *coming hour* has to do with Jesus – His death, His resurrection, His enthronement. John makes that clear in the rest of his narrative. It's Jesus' sacrificial death for us that deals with our past rebellion. It's Jesus' sacrificial death for us that enables us to change sides and enter God's presence. Without that, we'd still be facing God's judgment. We'd have no hope of even approaching God – let alone worshipping Him.

This is why it's a nonsense to suggest all religions get you to God in the long run. That may not be a popular idea – it may not be politically correct. That's not the issue. God's not really into whether something's popular or politically correct. He's more interested in whether it's true. God's provided the gift of living water. The way He provided that gift was by having Jesus die in our place. That's how God dealt with our rebellion against Him. He now offers you the gift of living water. That offer's freely available to all. You either accept it or reject it. The option of a counter-offer isn't open to us. Losing rebels don't determine the terms of surrender. To submit to God – to honour Him, to worship Him – you must accept His terms.

Imagine someone saying to God:

Well, God. It's very nice of You to provide that gift of Your Son, but I'm not really very impressed with that

as a way to get right with You. I think the Muslim way of fasting during Ramadan and going on pilgrimage to Mecca's got more appeal. I tried that. I fasted. I went to Mecca. I've done this great stuff that should impress You. So You've got to let me in.

It just doesn't work that way. The first thing to truly worship God is to get right with Him the way He says. That means coming through Jesus. Jesus is the holy place – He's the Word become flesh. There is no other holy place.

Thirdly, true worship must be on God's terms. It must be based on the truth of who God is – the truth of what He's revealed to us – especially as He's revealed that to us in Jesus.

- You can't truly worship God and reject Jesus.
- You can't truly worship God and not believe Jesus.

To worship God in truth you've got to listen to what He says – to what He says is the right way to worship Him.

Earlier this year I went to Bali to share various things with the pastors in the church there. I have a medical condition that requires me to avoid refined sugars. This was communicated to the people in Bali beforehand. While I was there, I stayed in several different homes.

- One host placed a plate of fruit and chocolate bars in my room.
- Another host sent his brother out to buy iced croissants for breakfast.
- I lost count of how many times sugary cakes were set before me.

If you asked these people if they were trying to please me, what would they say? As a very hospitable people, they tried to honour me as their guest. I don't doubt that

for one second. Most Australians would've loved it. Did they in fact honour me? No. They ignored the knowledge freely available to them – or, they thought they understood it when they didn't.

So with God. You must worship God on His terms. You must find out what He wants – not simply what you want to do or what you think He should want – but what He says He wants. In Old Testament times, some people thought sacrificing their children would please God.

- They were very sincere in the sacrifice.
- They made a very costly sacrifice.

But they were wrong. It didn't please God one bit. Quite the opposite – it made Him angry.

That particular way of worship may never have entered your head – I hope it hasn't. But what have you substituted? What is it you think God should be pleased with? What do you do to try to twist God's arm so He pays attention to you – so He does what you want Him to do? And that's the problem – we keep looking for ways to stay in control. We want to keep calling the shots. We want God to submit to us. True worship submits to God. That means paying careful attention to His words – to His wishes and His desires.

All of God's desires. Some claim to be Christians and pick and choose the bits of God's word they listen to – the bits they like or find convenient.

- Some chop out the bits about God's anger.
- Some get rid of the bits about God being against sexual immorality and homosexuality.
- Some ignore the bits about suffering for Jesus.
- Some disregard God's words about gossip.

- Some think God doesn't care how they use His money.

The Samaritans got rid of everything after Deuteronomy. It doesn't work that way. We must pay attention to all God says. Not to do so is to remain rebellious.

Fourthly, true worship is living in right relationship with God. It's not about holy places and what goes on in holy places. That's gone. Or rather, it's replaced. Jesus is the holy place – and as people believe in Jesus they too become holy places.

The *living water* God supplies is His Spirit to dwell in us – God Himself takes up residence in our lives permanently. It's not that God's Spirit comes and goes. It's not that God's Spirit is tied to a particular place or a particular time – such that His Spirit comes only when I enter church and leaves again once I vacate the building. God's Spirit becomes a spring of living water within the Christian – 24/7. God's Spirit remains. True worshippers offer their whole lives as their worship of God in spirit and truth.

Becoming a Christian's like being the bride at a wedding. The wedding changes her life – all of her life – forever. Suppose at the end of the wedding breakfast she says to her new husband:

Didn't we have a nice wedding? I so enjoy weddings and I've wanted to have one of my own for so long. And it turned out exactly what I wanted. Everything went so well. Thanks for being part of my wedding. Maybe I'll see you around next week sometime.

Not likely, is it? The wedding's the beginning of a whole new way of life for her – a life where she dedicates her-

self to pleasing her new husband. It's not that she's married for a couple of hours here and there – and then can do what she pleases the rest of the time. No. She's now married full-time. It involves all her life. There are no part-time marriages.

So with this living water. It not only satisfies a person's thirst – it becomes a spring bubbling up inside. It speaks of ongoing relationship with God – a relationship that involves all of life. The relationship isn't confined to a particular place or a particular time. It pervades all places and all times. All of life is lived to please God. All of life is lived in submission to King Jesus.

Thus, at one level, true worship isn't primarily physical, because it isn't tied to particular places and particular rituals. But, at another level, true worship is very much physical, because it involves what I do with my physical body 24 hours a day – not just when I'm doing some "spiritual" meditation, but also when I'm driving my car, caring for my family and loving my neighbour.

Conclusion

At any one time, millions of people in our world perform various rituals and say various prayers to any number of gods. Some of those rituals and prayers cost those people a great deal of money and effort and time. But they're meaningless activities. They don't rise any higher than the ceilings of the various temples they occupy. They may be very sincere, but unfortunately, they're sincerely wrong.

The only worship acceptable to the true God of the universe is that offered on His terms. It must centre on

Jesus – for He's the only way into God's presence. He's the pivot on which everything turns – not some holy mountain, not some holy building, not some holy river, not some holy city. Jesus. He alone can bring you into God's presence. He isn't the best way; He's the only way. He's the source of the living water which brings satisfaction to dry and thirsty people. He's the provider of God's Spirit who changes people from the inside out so they can truly worship God in spirit and truth.

Have you come to Jesus for the living water? Have you come to Jesus as the source of true life – eternal life – life in proper relationship with God? Refusal to accept the living water is rejection of God at the deepest level. Such people cannot worship God.