

Worship as a Throne Room

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[0 : 00] Again, it's wonderful to be here today to carry on the theme of the weekend, how we worship. And this morning, our theme is worship is a throne room.

If you've ever visited Hampton Court Palace in London, you'll know this to be the case, that you can't just approach the king any which way you want.

So when King William built his throne room at Hampton Court, he did it in a strange way. He built five throne rooms next to each other along a corridor.

And this is why if he thought you were an important guest, he'd send his emissary and say, the king will meet you in the first throne room.

You would only have a few meters to walk. The king himself would come down the long corridor, take the throne in the room closest to the front.

[1 : 07] But if the king thought you were not someone of any great significance, he would take the throne in the fifth throne room. And you would have to walk the walk of shame.

Five throne rooms along so that you'd meet him who had gone nowhere at the furthest point from the door.

How you meet a king is extraordinarily important. The protocols around meeting the monarch are well defined.

I don't know if you remember that moment a few years ago when Paul Keating was prime minister. Queen Elizabeth came and visited Australia and the federal parliament. And in the throng, as the queen was meeting various parliamentarians, Paul Keating did that kind of awful thing.

He touched the queen's waist. You're right. He nudged her in a certain direction.

[2 : 15] But in the meantime, he'd actually touched our sovereign lady. And of course, the London tabloids had a field day.

My favorite headline was describing Paul Keating, the lizard of Oz. How dare he touch our queen like that?

We've lost some of that kind of feeling that there are certain ways of approaching the monarch. Perhaps in a courtroom today when the judge arrives on behalf of the crown, we stand paying him or her, paying the sovereign our respect.

That judge still wears a wig to signify authority. But on the whole in Australia, we don't much pay attention to protocols.

[3 : 15] But that's why being Australian means sometimes it's hard to read the Bible. Because in the Bible, we learn of peoples and cultures that do pay attention to the way you should approach the king.

Or even pay attention to the way you approach the king of kings. Coming into God's presence is not a right that we can demand.

It's a privilege that we have been granted. And a great way of learning about how we approach the king of kings is described for us whenever the tabernacle or temple are pictured.

Not because the tabernacle or temple give us instructions about church architecture. By no means.

Not that the tabernacle or temple gives us instructions about how to do ministry today.

We shouldn't necessarily wear ephods or breastplates or anoint each other with oil. But the tabernacle or temple do help us understand what it means to draw near.

[4 : 40] What it means to draw near as we're doing this morning. The tabernacle and temple certainly explain what it means to have an audience with the king.

The Old Testament is full of instructions about how we should approach, how we should draw near the king of kings.

In the book of Exodus, while Moses goes to the top of the mountain, others remain halfway up and the people are in the valley below.

Not everyone had the right to draw close to the Lord on the mountaintop. In Leviticus, there are instructions about how you should offer sacrifices.

Not any which way you want. In fact, the sons of Aaron, Nadab and Elihu in Leviticus 10 got sloppy and they produced unauthorized fire.

[5 : 50] And they themselves lost their lives. They themselves lost their lives. They themselves lost their lives. Now, God sets the rules about how we approach him, right? We're not the ones who laid down the law.

That's his right. And the most striking thing about drawing close to God, who was seated on the throne in the Holy of Holies above the Ark of the Covenant is you could only get there if you passed by an altar first.

Outside the Holy of Holies, where God's presence dwelled above the Ark of the Covenant containing a copy of the law. To get there, you had to pass in the forecourt an altar on which sacrifices were made.

There's no Ark without an altar. You can't come to God's presence unless you pass by a sacrifice first.

Isaiah knew this. I'm reading from Isaiah chapter 6. In the year that King Uzziah died, Isaiah is writing, I saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne.

[7 : 20] And the train of his robe filled the temple. Whether Isaiah was in the Holy of Holies is probably not the case. It's probably a vision he has of him entering the holy place.

And he sees the Lord. Actually, when you spell it out, he's not actually seeing the Lord. He's seeing the hem of the Lord's garment.

But that's enough for him. He says, I saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne. And the train of his robe filled the temple. All he could see, actually, was the robes of the Lord.

Above him were seraphim, each with six wings. With two wings they covered their faces. With two they covered their feet. With two they were flying. And these seraphim called out to each other. Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty. The whole earth is full of his glory. And at the sound of their voices, the doorposts and thresholds shook.

[8 : 19] And the temple was filled with smoke. Isaiah has entered the throne room.

And the world is shaking. So he can do nothing but verse 5 say, Woe to me. I am ruined.

I am a man of unclean lips. And I live amongst a people of unclean lips. And my eyes have seen the King.

The Lord Almighty. Isaiah knew that you can only come to the ark when you've passed by the altar. He knew that you could only come into the Lord's presence if you'd first offered a sacrifice. So he says, I'm gone. I'm a goner. How can I stand a man of unclean lips in the presence of the Lord Almighty?

[9 : 28] And it wasn't just that Isaiah meant he'd sworn recently and his lips had done wrong. Lips is a picture of what's in your heart. Because out of the overflow of your heart, your mouth speaks, right? He's actually speaking about hearts being wrong.

Not just his, but of his whole nation of which he's contaminated. So he's preparing for his demise. But just then, verse 6, One of the seraphim flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar.

And with it, he touched my mouth and said, See, this has touched your lips. Your guilt is taken away. Your sin is atoned for. Phew.

He can be in God's presence after all, because God provided through the seraphim a coal from the altar to deal with Isaiah's sins.

Then I heard a voice, the voice of the Lord, Isaiah said, saying, Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?

[10 : 47] And Isaiah said, Here am I. Send me. We have been provided a sacrifice.

We have been provided a sacrifice. The Lord Jesus Christ, who permits us, enables us, encourages us to enter the presence of the Lord.

We pass by the altar, Christ's death, to reach God Almighty, who reigns from the heavens.

Yes, it is true that we shouldn't be fearful in approaching God. We have those wonderful words from Hebrews 12, just read for us.

You have not come to a mountain that can be touched, that's burning with fire, to darkness, gloom and storm.

[11:53] We're not like Christians or believers in the Old Testament. To a trumpet blast or to such a voice speaking words that those who heard it beg that no further word be spoken to them, because they could not bear what was commanded.

If even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned to death. The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, I'm trembling with fear. Thank goodness. As Christians, we don't have to fear God. But through the provision of a sacrifice on the altar, the cross, we can be in God's presence. Indeed, more positively, verse 22 of Hebrews 12.

You have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. You've come to thousands upon thousands in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven.

You have come to God, the judge of all, to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

[12:59] Yes, yes, we should not fear. Yes, we have a better covenant. Yes, Christ has provided.

But, read on a few verses, verse 28 of Hebrews 12. He's writing to Christian believers.

Since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken. Let us be thankful and worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire.

Yes, we should not fear. But, yes, our God is a consuming fire. We come to him with reverence and awe. We don't, in terror, run away from him.

We come with tears joyfully to him. That's what it means to treat the Lord with reverence. Worship for Christians is still on his terms.

[14:06] Yes, we've been given full access. But, yes, God still determines how we approach. He is still a consuming fire.

We have no right to come into his presence. Unless Christ cleanses us, we are unworthy to be in his presence.

We come to God through Christ confidently. Recognizing as well that we don't come to the throne room sloppily.

Nonchalantly. Negligently. As if I were the one who decides how I approach the Lord Almighty.

Christ Jesus, the mediator of a better sacrifice, a better covenant, provides the way.

[15:16] For he is the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through him. Except on the Father's terms.

Except recognizing the Father's conditions for access. That just means through repentance and faith.

Friends, Sunday by Sunday. We have here an appointment with the Lord. We have an audience with the Lord himself.

We can come joyously. But we recognize, nonetheless, that it's him who's calling us. We're not doing him any favor.

He is offering himself. Not just to me as an individual. But to us as a fellowship. We're not doing him. We're not doing him. We're not doing him. We're not doing him. We're doing him.

[16:17] So let's make sure that how we begin our church services has been given some attention. That we might understand the conditions of access.

We don't come to God because our singing is robust. It's not like if you reach a certain intensity in your singing, that's then what qualifies you to be here.

It's not like you come to God by the merits of a charismatic leader of the service. It's not like only after five minutes of praying with the right kind of words can you actually gain access.

No, we come on his terms. The Lord Jesus who provides the welcome. But we're so sloppy because we're Australians.

We tend to think it's all about us. We don't recognize authority when we see it. I remember once when I was working at St. Jude's, Kevin Rudd came to church. We'd been told that he'd arrive, that there'd be a security detail.

[17:33] He'd arrive a few minutes after the beginning of the service and he'd leave a few minutes before the end of the service. The staff were briefed, which is all right and fine. The St. Jude's folk just basically ignored him.

One guy went up to him and said, how you doing, Kev? Which you might think that there might be some other kind of signs of respect. As I mentioned yesterday, the average churchgoer now in Australia just turns up one week in three.

And for pastors, that's seen as often doing well. We see church as part of what gives me comfort or it's a function of our convenience.

We think that perhaps if we pray to Mary, we might find our access or have certain kinds of songs. No, you won't get to God through Buddha. You won't get to God through Oprah. You won't get to God through yoga. It's only Jesus who provides us the access.

[18 : 44] But we must come reverently. And what happens when you come reverently? Well, you come ready to listen.

You come ready to listen to the king speak. That's why you go in a throne room. That's why you have an audience to hear what the king wants to say.

And of course, when you come into the throne room of God, his throne itself is positioned around the Ark of the Covenant in the tabernacle. His throne room is dominated by the Lord Jesus, who is the word.

When we come reverently, we come prepared to listen to the living word. Our God speaks and continues to speak.

So our job is to learn to listen. Did you notice that in the Exodus 33 reading? That when Moses pitched the tent, he called it a tent of meeting.

[19 : 51] And he spoke with God face to face. Though when Moses asked to see God's glory, God said, you will not see my glory, but you can hear my name.

It's hearing that's of such central importance when you come into the throne room. Indeed, from that very same passage, Hebrews chapter 12, the verse 25, between the two sections that I've read, the writer says, Because our God is a consuming fire, we must listen.

As part of our approach with reverence and awe. And of course, we need to keep translating the Bible into languages that do not yet have a vernacular version of the scriptures.

A couple of years ago, I went into the new museum in Washington, D.C. called the Museum of the Bible. It tells the story of Bible translation, more than that, of Bible preaching, which is wonderful.

But they have this extraordinary room. It might be just slightly smaller than this. And along the shelves around the walls are books. They look like books.

[21 : 36] They're not really. And if a certain language has all the scriptures translated, the binding, the spine of the book will be dark brown.

But the languages of the world that do not yet have the scriptures in their language are in really gentle yellow. And as you look around the room, where all this wall is gentle yellow, and the spines of the books get darker and darker, you see that on this wall, on the top shelf, there are about 20, 30 books that have a dark brown spine.

Most of the world's languages still do not have the scriptures in their native tongue. Now, of course, those six books on the top there are Spanish, English, Mandarin.

So a lot of people speak those languages, right? And perhaps the books on this side of the wall, only 100 people speak that tongue. But it still was a reminder to me that if we want people to know God, we have to persist in the work of Bible translation so that we might do effective Bible teaching. The primary sense that you use in church on Sundays is your hearing through your ears. Because faith comes from hearing.

[23 : 15] We come to church with reverence and awe to listen to the Lord. But of course, once the Lord has spoken as his children, we are entitled to present to him our petitions.

Of course, when you come to church, you hear God speak. But we also speak to him and give to him in words our own heart's concerns.

We can present to him our pleas. He loves to hear our requests. We don't make our approach to God through sacrificing pigeons or goats.

But when we've come to him, we give to him the fruit of our lips as our sacrifice of praise.

We need to keep praying for governments. How few churches that I visit still pray for those in authority, even though there's a direct instruction in 1 Timothy 2 to pray for those who are set over us.

[24 : 23] That we might have peace in the land and that the gospel might be preached without impediment. Prayer is one of the chief ways that we show our faith to the Lord.

And it might be that you stammer in praying that you aren't very good at it. That's fine. God's given you 150 sample prayers in the Psalms.

So why not just choose one of them instead and make that your prayer to God today? Bonhoeffer, that German martyr in the Second World War, loved Anglican services because Anglican services still use Psalms.

Lutheran churches do that less often. So when he was in London, he wrote, There's not the juice, the strength, the passion, the fire which I find in the Psalter. Anything else tastes too cold and too hard.

But he says, with the recovery of the Psalms in worship will come unexpected power. There's no right or wrong way of praying.

[25 : 43] Look at the Psalms. They sometimes start with praise. They sometimes start with thanksgiving. They sometimes start with confession. They sometimes start with supplications.

According to the Psalms, there's no right or wrong way of starting, middling and ending a prayer. So just use them and pray. God loves hearing his own words used with faith in speaking back to him.

But in a throne room, it's not just that God speaks and that we listen. When we've been in the presence of greatness, we're sent out to act as God's emissaries, his ambassadors.

If you've been in the presence of greatness, you just want to talk about it. Some years ago, I met Hillary Clinton. Don't hold it against me. She came and did a round table where I was studying in the US.

We turned up early, waited for five hours. She arrived like a rock star really late. I was determined not to be that guy who lines up to get a photo. I'm not going to be that guy. I'm not going to be that guy.

[26 : 58] And I wasn't. Except, as I was waiting back, the crowd parted. Hillary sees me there with my camera in hand. Okay, there was a backup plan.

And she says to me those famous words, Do you want a photo too? And fearing that I'd be chucked out if they heard my Australian accent, I went... So Hillary politely waits.

I take my photo. And do you think I could stop talking about that moment? I still am ten years later, right? Once you've been in the presence of greatness, if you will, it's something you want to talk about.

We are, having been in the throne room, having brought to God, having drawn near this morning, we go out, we leave this place, having been commissioned as ambassadors for Christ.

No wonder Isaiah in Isaiah 6 says, I will go for you. Declaring praises in church, and declaring praises each day of the week.

[28 : 14] We don't come to worship on Sundays to avoid the world. We come to worship on Sundays to get ready to serve the world.

To be sent out with a commission to represent the Lord, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday. The end of a church service shouldn't be a reminder that we meet again next Sunday at 10.30.

As if Monday to Friday just aren't important. No, of course, what Anglicans do is send us out to serve God, to love and serve Him, and also, of course, we'll need to get back here next Sunday to be prepared to serve Him the week after.

Worship's a throne room because we draw into God's presence through the merits of Christ. We hear Him speak. We cast before Him our concerns.

He sends us out as His ambassadors with a message for the world. Friends, we draw near, not just for the sake of now, but for the sake of this week.

[29 : 40] And beautifully, most of what I've said this morning is captured in Hebrews chapter 10, 10, 19 to 25. The writer says, Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the most holy place by the blood of Jesus, of course, that's a picture of the tabernacle or temple, right?

Since we have confidence to enter, to draw near to the most holy place, you only get to the ark once you pass by the altar. You enter the most holy place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain that is His body.

And, brothers and sisters, since we have a great high priest or a great priest over the house of God, it's not just that Jesus died. He lives and reigns and makes intercession for us even this hour.

The writer says, Let us draw near. Let us draw near. That could be on Mondays, Tuesdays, but it certainly includes Sundays. Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with a full assurance that faith brings.

Having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience, having our bodies washed with pure water. We approach confidently, but not sloppily.

[31 : 23] We come with assurance that faith brings and having been cleansed and our bodies washed. Indeed, we draw near, verse 23, and hold unswervingly to the hope we profess as we did this morning in the words of the Apostles' Creed.

For he who promised is faithful. And, notice this, he's assuming that you're drawing near and you're drawing near in church on Sundays because he says, Having drawn near, let us consider how we might spur one another on to love and good deeds.

Of course, you might draw near every day of the week in your prayers and in the quietness of your heart, but certainly we're drawing near today. And part of drawing near means, verse 24, that we spur each other on to love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as is the habit of some, but we come this morning to encourage one another.

And all the more as you see the day approaching. This morning, our prayers and praises join the prayers and praises of those who are already gathered round the throne.

In a sense, we've already drawn near with that heavenly throng to the Lord Jesus himself. Our worship centers on Christ.

[32 : 54] But worshiping in time and space means we can celebrate his presence with us. We can exhort one another to keep fighting the fight, to keep running the race.

And so to remind us of all that a church service achieves, we're going to stand and say together Psalm 95, which will appear for you on the screen.

Psalm 95 is an extraordinary psalm, which reminds us that when we worship, we both listen and speak.

Together. Come, let us sing for joy to the Lord. Let us shout aloud to the rock of our salvation. Let us come before him with thanksgiving and extol him with music and song.

For the Lord is the great God, the great King above all gods. In his hand are the depths of the earth and the mountain peaks belong to him.

[34 : 06] The sea is his, for he made it, and his hands formed the dry land. Come, let us bow down in worship. Let us kneel before the Lord, our maker, for he is our God and we are the people of his pasture, the flock under his care.

Today, if only you would hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did at Meribah, as you did that day at Massah in the wilderness, where your ancestors tested me, they tried me, though they had seen what I did.

For forty years, I was angry with that generation. I said, they are a people whose hearts go astray and they have not known my ways.

So I declared on oath in anger, they shall never enter my rest. Well, come again, God serves thee, lérationANS is g e ■■■erc■ in these.

For our children, I said, I'll come back over his knees, I told you I told you thatly thatly my career