

True Worship

Acts 2:36-47; Romans 12:1-21; John 4:19-26

Over the last two weeks we have considered the Gospel as credible Truth and necessity.¹ I have argued that there is good reason to trust that when we hear the Gospels we are hearing words of eyewitness testimony and as such, words which are very close to the very words of Jesus himself. I have also argued that there is an urgent need for the *renewal* of our society and culture, that only the reception of the *Gospel* is sufficient to achieve this, and that its proclamation in word and deed is, therefore, an urgent and absolute necessity.

As part of my guided reading programme while on sabbatical, I spent some precious time with Dr. Andrew Burgess (Vicar of All Saints Nelson), who mentored me through a crash introduction to the theology of Karl Barth (an area of historical theology I've neglected).

And the question which came time again from this discussion was, if (as Barth would insist from his reading of scripture), the Gospel is *God's* work from end to end, what is our role in it? How do we connect the proclamation of the Gospel, the proclamation of the 'good news' of God's reconciling, life giving revelation of Himself, to a world around us which so urgently needs it but cannot see it? And what does the church's worship look like in this process?

In our Gospel today, Jesus tells the Samaritan woman that the temple, the place of God's presence, is not about geography or national or ethnic identity, nor (by implication of Jesus' theological engagement with a woman of ill repute), is it about sex or social class. No-one owns God, neither is God limited to some sort of sacred space; rather God is found where he is worshipped by those – regardless of who they are or where they come from – who worship him in Spirit and Truth.

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¹ See *The Gospel as credible truth and necessity parts 1 & 2*

As I travelled around the country over the last three months, I visited churches to see how they went about worshipping God. These were not all Anglican churches, though mostly they were. Neither, obviously, did I visit every church. My selection criteria was to visit churches from which I might learn things that could be useful here at St. Michael's. So my observations are partial and make no claim to be otherwise.

Just the same, I went hopefully to worship at these churches, not just to assess them. I have to say that by-and-large, with a few exceptions, I was underwhelmed by what I found. I found worship that was muddled and lack lustre on the one hand, or stuck in early '80s renewal culture on the other. Singing was often tired, the words either well-worn or vacuous. People were tardy in their time keeping and, though friendly enough, seemed more interested in meeting with their friends than engaging with strangers. Jesus seemed to be everyone's mate but the sense of awe we read of in Acts today, which characterised the primitive church's response to Christ's presence among them, was noticeably lacking.

The scriptures say that "from the heart flow the issues of life"², that "the mouth speaks what the heart is full of"³, and that "where a person's treasure is, there is their heart also"⁴. What then, if my observations are correct, does this say about worship and being 'church' in contemporary New Zealand?

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Cartoon: Michael Leunig / He found God, 2004

² Prov.4:23.

³ Matt.12:34.

⁴ Matt.6:21.

In Luke's account of the beginnings of the church which we just heard, we learn that the church was born out of heart-felt *repentance* and faith. People were told fair and square they had sinned against a holy God who they had crucified – and they needed to do something about it. They needed to repent – to change their attitude and thinking and way of behaving – and they needed to trust in God's grace extended toward them in Jesus' whom they rejected and murdered.

We also learn from Luke that these first believers understood themselves to be baptised, to be immersed, by the very Spirit of this Jesus into his death and resurrection and ascension as Lord and Christ, so that they possessed a new life, hidden in him, their old life having been washed away.

And so we see, in a response of gratitude, they “*devoted* themselves” to the teaching of the apostles, deep sharing, table fellowship and “*the* prayers”⁵. This was a profoundly communal thing. Both our reading from Acts and from Romans give a detailed account of what the church's common life looked like. The qualities described presuppose a wider interactive life of the church. It is a life characterised by humility, compassion, grace, servanthood and love for the other – not just within the household of god, but beyond. In other words, the company of people who belong to and are in-dwelt by “this Jesus, whom you crucified”,⁶ now embody him in his world.

[digression here on LJ]

At the beginning of our reading from Romans, Paul prefaces his remarks about the values and shape of the church's life together, by using temple sacrifice language. It is our lives “offered up”, like Jesus' life offered up, which constitutes our “true acts of spiritual worship”⁷. It is within this wider life context that the ‘cultic’ expression of worship (“*the* prayers”, as Luke calls it⁸), belongs. We are told later in Luke's account that, initially at least, the believers were constantly in the temple praising God and that mighty works were done here in Jesus' name. Yet it is also clear that

⁵ Acts 2:42.

⁶ Acts 2:36.

⁷ Rom. 12:1.

⁸ Acts. 2 :42.

they spent a considerable amount of time in each other's homes, *sharing* their lives with each other. Certainly by the time Paul wrote to the church in Rome, it is remarkable how little the cultic expression of worship occupies Paul's writing compared to the rest of '*life as worship*', which both Paul and Luke describe. (Note, I am not using the term 'cultic' in a pejorative sense here. I mean it in its technical sense. I'm talking about symbolic, liturgical worship, the things we do when we gather like this in this building).

So, how can we understand this – the relation of symbolic worship to worship as life laid down?

Someone once likened cultic worship, what we commonly just call "worship", to the school assembly. That is to say, the assembly is part of the life of the school but it isn't *the* life of the school. Rather it is a representation – a 're-presentation' – of the wider life of the school. The assembly encapsulates the school but it isn't '*it*'. In its gathering, the assembly encourages and binds the lives of those who attend together. It gives it focus and conscious identity. But it doesn't replace the wider life of the school.

Similarly, what we do here for an hour or so each week, according to scripture, isn't '*it*' – or shouldn't be. When we assemble in mass should be because we assemble in each other's homes and other gatherings. When we hear scripture read and listen to the sermon, the sermon represents the opening of God's word which we engage in with each other (in house groups and bible study groups and in our homes) over the week. Similarly when we have the prayers of the people, this isn't all our prayers, it simply reflects in summary our praying with each other in prayer couplets or the Global Mission prayer breakfasts or morning office during the week. When we sing and give praise with gratitude this is because we are for ever grateful for our life together in Christ; and when we share communion, this is given power, not because of a mystical presence of transubstantiated bread and wine, but through the table fellowship we share together with Jesus in each other's homes. The hospitality of Jesus at the Eucharist is a re-presentation of the hospitality he extends to us in being present in our midst whenever we gather.

It seems to me that it is a natural tendency for humans, with the Samaritan woman, to want to domesticate the transcendent and manipulate it to our own comfortable ends, and we as Christians are not exempt from this. We also want reduce the wider Spirit life of the church down to a cultic act in a designated sacred space. We want temple worship. We want ordinary life but in that hour on Sunday we want a special encounter to pep us up for the week ahead. Not long after I arrived in this parish six years ago, some vandals scrawled on the back of our church building “No gods belong in boxes”. How true. Clearly they had been reading their bibles!

If the worship of our church in Aotearoa New Zealand is lacklustre, as a national church if we find ourselves tired when we assemble and regular attendance faltering, changing the liturgy, introducing some pop rock worship music or Taize chant every other week, or even turning our churches into cafes (as a speaker at one clergy school suggested – no, I kid you not), isn’t going to change anything. Neither is more excellent expository preaching or a sublimely choreographed Great Thanks Giving.

All these things may or may not be important ingredients in our Sunday assembly but we cannot freight our expectations into our Sunday hour and expect God to deliver on them before we slip off to Sunday lunch. Worship is not magic nor manipulative ritual geared to inducing transcendent experience which fits conveniently into our busy lives.

We... We are the temple of God – holy and dedicated to God’s service. And we are that temple because Jesus has destroyed the temple of bricks and mortar through his sacrifice, and has replaced that temple by his Spirit by which we are baptised into himself. Christ ascended in majesty and with us through his Spirit is the site of God’s presence in this world and in the world beyond us. When we reclaim this Truth as a church, I believe, we will live it. We will live as the ones who embody the Lord Jesus in his world. And his kingdom will come.