



Worship – Cleaning The Mirror

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The most obvious public thing that the Church does is worship on Sunday mornings. Luke gives us a lovely picture of the first Christians continually in the Temple praising God.

Worship is the very heart of the Church's life, and it is public worship because we believe that it should be the heart of all human life. But our society does not think so. Worship, in our kind of society, is odd.

When the first question is 'What do you get out of it?' it is not easy to explain worship. One of the symptoms of contemporary spiritual decay is the absence of reverence – the noblest sentiment of which human beings are capable. It is almost taken for granted that even the most heroic character will be up for 'de-bunking' some time. Only Muslims seem to be seriously concerned when God is blasphemed.

In this spiritual climate, to kneel in awe and adoration before the glory of God seems out of character for 'Man come of age'. And this climate sometimes affects our worship in Church, so that it becomes trivial, chatty, devoid of the sense of the awesome majesty of the one in whose presence we are. And yet it is striking that so many thousands of people gather at places like Iona and Taize to have the experience of worship which is authentic.

A full hour of praise

Worship is the turning of our whole attention to the one who is supremely worthy of our attention. The point is not to 'get something out of it'. Feelings come and go. What matters is that we turn our whole minds and hearts to God. It takes a whole lifetime to begin to learn how great and glorious God is. We shall need eternity to learn it all.

I find that worship in the congregation needs to be nourished by the daily practice of reading and thinking about what is given in the Bible. The rich tapestry of poetry, story, prophecy and vision that fills the Bible gradually enables me, as I read it in the context of daily duty, to be grasped more and more by the wonder of God's dealing with me, the terror of his just anger and

the marvel of his endless mercy. All this serves to fill the hour in Church (and I sit in the pew now!) with the reality of praise and thankfulness.

Praise is the most antiseptic of human activities. It washes away the scum of resentment and envy and self-pity and makes us clean as we were meant to be, clear mirrors for the light of God.

The shape of Christian worship is given to it by history. Its foundation is the worship of the Synagogue with the remembering of God's great deeds through the reading and exposition of Scripture and the seeking of his presence in prayers of adoration, confession and thanksgiving. But from the first, from the day of resurrection, the disciples learned that this worship was to reach its real climax in doing what Jesus had told them to do.

The Emmaus story (Luke 24) gives the clue. On the way Jesus expounded to them the Scriptures. They learned that what we call the Old Testament was to have its fulfilment in him. And then, as they sat at table, he broke the bread and their eyes were opened. They knew his presence with them.

Calvin was defeated

For 15 centuries the only form of public worship was the one shaped then – the ministry of the Word leading to the breaking of bread. By the time of the Reformation things had degenerated so far that people attended the service but (except once or twice a year) did not share in the meal.

Calvin and other reformers struggled to restore the ancient pattern but were defeated. Since they thought it wrong to have the Supper without the people sharing in it, they developed a form of worship which omitted the proper climax and became only a service of the word. That has had profound consequences.

In the 19th century the Churches of Christ restored the ancient custom in their worship and they have brought this among their gifts to the URC. I dearly wish that we might all welcome it.

Worship is, properly, the action of the whole congregation. One person has to preside but everyone is involved. All should have some share in voice and action. Something has gone wrong when the minister has to do it all. And when the minister even has to say Amen to his own prayers, something has gone very wrong indeed!

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