

“Thankful for Worship”

Psalm 100; John 4:19-26

The need to worship is woven right into us, into all people. Let us be thankful for it!!



In today’s passage from John 4, Jesus talks about worship with a Samaritan woman he meets at noon at her village’s well. Though no one outside the village would know why the woman is there at noon, an unusual time, Jesus knows, and we too learn the truth. She has had five husbands and is currently living with a man to whom she is not even married. She comes to the well at noon to avoid the smirks and snickers of the other women in the village. She lives a lonely life, socially cut-off in a world driven by family and community.

She quickly gets over her astonishment that Jesus knows the truth and, not surprisingly, tries to change the subject. Isn’t that so like us all. When we get close to the heart of a difficult matter—when we begin talking about something that makes us uncomfortable—we try to shift the conversation elsewhere.

The woman changes the subject to a talk about worship, especially the “where” of worship. I guess that shouldn’t surprise us either. We can get pretty caught up in the importance of this spot of land or that one, in one building or another. Certainly, Jesus’ fellow Jews were often so focused on the importance of “The Land,” that they failed to see God’s work in all the world. Jesus tries to help her see that worship is not really about the “where” but the “who.” What matters is not where the woman worships but that she worships the true God. And as we learn in John’s gospel, God is revealed fully only in Jesus Christ.

What or whom?

Worship is hardwired into us. Our deepest self feels this urge, this need to worship. Thus, the question isn’t really whether we worship, but only what or whom we worship. Will we worship our ancestors or nature or our jobs or a sports hero or wealth or sex . . . you get my point. N. T. Wright rightly takes this a step further when he says that we become what we worship. Worship money and we become greedy. Worship sex and we become lustful. . . . But worship the LORD God, our creator and redeemer, and we become Christlike. That is simply how it works.

It is easy for us to think of worship as something we all gather for once each week. We pray, sing hymns, hear a sermon, and so on. Then we return a week later for another worship service and do it all again. But this is not the biblical understanding of worship. Our growth as the covenant people of God will not come through a one-hour shot in the arm each week! Instead, as Richard Foster says so well, “To worship is to experience Reality, to touch Life. It is to know, to feel, to experience the resurrected Christ in the midst of the gathered community. It is . . . being invaded by the *Shekinah*¹ of God.”² As the passage from the Gospel of John shows and as evidenced in Psalm 100, God actively seeks worshipers. God wants a relationship with us and our acknowledgement of his glory and worth. Worship is a vital means by which we grow as God’s people and enrich our lives with each other as well as with God.

Bringing back together the who and the where

We are made for the worship of the LORD God, revealed in Jesus Christ. And, as Simon Chan writes, “God made the world in order to make the church.” As we saw last week, the church does not consist of buildings, not even the beautiful sanctuaries such as our own. Rather, the church consists of all those who have faith in Jesus Christ. When we rise each week to recite the Apostles Creed and affirm our belief in “one holy catholic church,” we mean the universal church, the body of Christ – to which all Christians, all those who have faith in Jesus Christ, belong. God had once dwelt in the temple of Jerusalem, but, beginning at Pentecost, God dwells

¹ *Shekinah* is an Old Testament term meaning the glory of God dwelling with his people.

² From Richard Foster’s, *The Celebration of Discipline*, 1978, New York: HarperCollins. p. 158.

in and among his people. It is the people of God themselves who are joined together in Christ, a new creation and new humanity, growing into a holy temple, the temple to which God has returned. What a remarkable claim we make, that God's very presence dwells in us, the church -- the people of God.

N. T. Wright on Worship and Wholeness

Bishop N.T. Wright of the Church of England is not only one of the foremost New Testament scholars of his generation, but he has also spent considerable time in his career as a working pastor, leading worship, preaching, and providing pastoral direction. The following are some of his reflections on worship and its God-given role in helping us all to be more whole persons living in community within God's creation.

Christian worship ought to bring together the often-disjointed aspects of our human life, integrating the whole person, the whole community, and the whole creation.

First, the whole person. Loving God, as the Shema [the Jewish prayer that begins with Deuteronomy 6:4] insists, with heart, mind, soul, and strength means loving God as integrated human beings. Each of us, no doubt, is tempted to advance on one of these fronts ahead of the others; growing to maturity means learning how to keep them all in balance. This, again, is where some branches of Protestantism have made mistakes in one direction, just as some parts of Catholicism have made mistakes in others. The danger of Gnosticism is never far away from many parts of Protestantism: that is, the danger of a dualism in which the created order, including our own bodies, is regarded as dangerous or second-rate, so that worship must renounce our embodied-ness, our belonging within the created world of space, time, and matter, rather than reaffirming and redeeming it. If we follow the biblical pattern at this point, we will find our way through various pairs of opposites. There are the ugly sisters of formalism and in-formalism, to which I shall return; or the twin evils of control and chaos, with some churches having everything nailed down into place so that the Spirit is effectively locked out, and others — like the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 14 — so spontaneous and ill-disciplined as to threaten the gospel by their structure as much as their content. Or, again, the twin evils of ritualism and anti-ritualism, the first perverting the liturgy of response into a magical rite designed to manipulate God, the second throwing out the baby of true liturgy with the bathwater of pagan superstition. Ultimately, being human means, both now and in the age to come (i.e., in the resurrection), being embodied. Good liturgy celebrates that embodied-ness and takes it seriously. Just because liturgy can be abused there is no reason not to do it, any more than we would forbid marriage just because sex can be abused.

Worship also integrates the whole community. That is Paul's point in Romans 15, with Jew and Gentile coming together to worship the one God, fulfilling the central Jewish prayer, YHWH our God, YHWH is one (see 3:27-31). In Galatians 3, Paul echoes the standard synagogue prayer in which the congregation thanks God for being made Jewish, free, and male, by saying that there is now neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, no "male and female." In Christian worship, if it is true Christian worship, all those who name the name of Christ belong together, at the same table, saying the same words. Again, good liturgy is designed to make that happen. Such liturgy ought to be part of the ecumenical endeavor as we put back together the shattered fragments of the body of Christ.

And worship, as we saw in Revelation but also in Romans 8, is designed to unite the whole creation. True worship is not world-denying but world-changing. We proclaim the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, heralding him as the Lord of the world, and as we do so, the world becomes a different place. It may not look like it all at once, but that is what worship accomplishes. One day, when God gives us our resurrection bodies and then and thereby gives freedom and new life to the whole creation (Romans 8:18-25), our present acts of faithful responsive worship will be seen as stepping-stones on the way to the final "Amen" from the four beasts [of Revelation]. If that is so, we should be looking for signs and ways in which, in the present, we can anticipate that eventual future. The most obvious such ways are in the sacraments and in our political life, in which we are commanded, invited, urged, and encouraged to celebrate the lordship of Jesus Christ over the whole creation, in anticipation of the day when at his name every knee shall bow (Romans 14:11; Philippians 2:10).