



Yorkminster Park

BAPTIST CHURCH

Our Vision - Structured Worship

Sermon preached by The Rev. Kerr Spiers on Structured Worship

Over the next few Sundays we are going to base our preaching on the Vision Statement and the Mission Statement hammered out by the congregation some months ago. The core of that Vision Statement is contained in the first sentence. Let me read it to you:

We are a congregation who have established a place and a presence to worship God, proclaim the Kingdom of God and make the love of God in Christ known.

We will attempt to implement that statement of intent in a number of ways which we have itemized as worship, teaching, spirituality, fellowship and mission. We want to look at each of these ways of implementing the Vision Statement. This morning we will focus on this church's vision in relation to worship.

So here we are this Sunday morning and we are in church. We have been in many different places, of course, during this past week. We've been in offices, business plants, universities and colleges, schools and in our homes. But here we are in church this morning and we must be aware that we're in a somewhat different setting from where we have been during these other days of the week. The atmosphere is different in church from anywhere else. The very architecture is different. We have a chancel, a lectern, a pulpit, a cross and an open Bible to indicate how different this place is from other places where we might have been. This is church for us and these are the features of church for us. Indeed it looks as if this place was built for a serious purpose. Philip Larkin, the poet, has written a poem entitled "Church Going" where he describes a visit to a little deserted village church with a graveyard and church yard round about it. He writes this:

A serious house on serious earth it is,
In whose blent air all our compulsions meet,
Are recognized, and robed as destinies.
And that much never can be obsolete,
Since someone will forever be surprising
A hunger in himself to be more serious,
And gravitating with it to this ground,
Which he once heard, was proper to grow wise in,
If only that so many dead lie round.

A serious house with a serious purpose. A place in which human kind grow wise. I think we have a sense, at least, that this is a serious house with a serious purpose.

Let's leave Larkin and turn to the Apostle Paul. I fully expect that some of you were shocked and enraged and almost on the point of walking out this morning during part of the scripture reading that we heard read where, if you were listening, you will remember that Paul says: "Let women remain silent in church.

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It is disgraceful for a woman to speak in church." I felt somewhat sorry for the reader, Pat Bull, because in fact she was reading something from which she was disqualified in the very passage in which she was reading!

When I was choosing this reading I thought maybe I will miss out these two or three verses, but then I said, no – we must take the whole of scripture, warts and all, and I was reminded of a story that I heard about William Willimon who is the chaplain to Duke University. A lady was remonstrating with him about something in his sermon in the narthex after the service. Some people do this to me too. But anyway he said to her "Madam, don't blame me, blame the Bible. I'm only telling you what is in the Bible."

I feel a little bit like that about the scripture lesson this morning. It's a tough passage and first of all I thought the answer to it was this. They had a specific problem at Corinth. It's only related to Corinth and here is Paul's response to a specific local problem. But then I noticed that he was writing this to all the congregations of all the saints and I don't think it's implausible to say that perhaps there was this kind of problem of undisciplined chatter during the service, not only in Corinth but in some other places and that he was trying to deal with it.

Perhaps we simply have to admit that Paul is reflecting the notions of his time. The notions of a male dominated society and, indeed, reflecting the Judaism of his time and with which he was brought up. But one way or another, I don't think that we can take that and extrapolate it and universalize it and make it a kind of ruling for all cultures and all times. Certainly there are very many other passages in the Bible which give a much more positive and creative and fulsome place to women, both in the ordained ministry and in the general ministry of the church and in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

So this little bit about the place or the non-place of women in the church comes in a passage in which Paul is giving to us a description of one form of Christian worship in the early Christian community at Corinth. It was the men, he said, who were to do it, but nonetheless this is his description of how to worship on a Sunday morning in the Christian community in Corinth about the year A.D. 60. He said there would be some hymn singing and then there would be preaching and teaching by those who are gifted by the Spirit to do so. In Corinth there had also been the phenomenon of tongue-speaking. We have no reason to think that this was by any means a widespread phenomenon to all the Christian communities in the first century, but it had surfaced in Corinth and was indeed part of the culture of Corinth. And because of that Paul said "well, we'll accept that there can be people speaking in tongues but then thereafter there must be people who will interpret what they said to make sense to the congregation". All in all I had the impression when I read this that what Paul is wanting in Christian worship is a blend of spontaneity and also order. For he says "everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way".

So again, what are we to say about this glimpse of Christian worship that we find in Corinth around about A.D. 60? In some ways we have to say the same thing concerning it as we said about Paul's words when he was describing the place of women in the church. There is a local and contingent element about it. It is by no means something that is meant to be a rigid pattern for all worship in every culture and every time. The way they worshipped in Corinth does not set a rigid pattern for the way we must worship in Toronto towards the end of the twentieth century.

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Modes of worship are related so much to the time and place, to perspective, to insights and to traditions that have been developed. But beyond everything else, modes of worship are influenced by and determined by the overriding vision of God that is at the heart of the worship. The worship at Corinth with its ecstasy and with its tongue-speaking and with people perhaps talking over one another, reveals something of the culture of Corinth.

I believe that every form of worship, wherever you go, into whatever church you go – every form of worship has a cultural underpinning to it – whether we always recognize it or not. For example, if we took a tour around the world. One Sunday we worshipped with a Christian community in barrios of Brazil. The next Sunday we called in at Westminster Abbey. The third Sunday we worshipped in Calcutta, India. Finally, we came back to Texas and took up a Southern Baptist service during the next Sunday. I believe, and I hope, that in all of these occasions we would be confronted with the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. But it would be expressed in vastly different cultural expressions and in vastly different social settings. And so there are probably as many ways of worshipping God and encountering God as there are gates into the Kingdom of God.

There is no one cultural highway to the divine throne, but there are many. Corinth had its way, a way incidentally that is often attempted to be emulated by modern churches which call themselves charismatic churches. Where there is some kind of feeling of a need to recover the gifts of the Spirit that were evident in places like Corinth – ecstasy and tongue-speaking and healing and the rest. There is that. But you know from the earliest of Christian times there have been other forms of Christian worship developed that have taken their model from the temple of the Old Testament with its majestic worship and from the synagogues of the Jews with the emphasis on the appointed and accredited rabbi or elder or minister offering teaching and preaching from the Torah and the law. This was more objective worship with an emphasis on the holy transcendence of the Lord and the teaching of His truth and His gospel.

And so my friends, what I am coming round to saying is this. That there are many forms of worship that will engage the minds and the hearts and the souls of people in all their cultural diversity, in all their human needs, in all the variety of their psychological experience, in all their social settings – and I don't think really it's up to us who observe from the outside, to be too judgmental about the plurality of the kinds of worship, the kinds of avenues by which people approach the throne of the Almighty and the revelation of God.

But now in all of this plurality where do we find our place in a church like this? What is worship as it is expressed here Sunday by Sunday? What is it that we are about? What is worship for us? Never mind Corinth. Never mind the barrios of Brazil. Never mind Westminster Abbey. What is worship for us in our time and place, in our social and cultural setting with our psychological and spiritual needs?

Worship is an attitude of mind and heart – that first of all. This attitude is born and nourished out of a perception of God that comes really out of the Bible. It stems from a sense of who we are in relation to God. It's an attitude of creaturliness that stems from the belief that God is the creator of the ends of the earth and that the mystery of our personality, the mystery of our beings lies beyond the process of biological procreation to the mystery of divine creation made in the image of God. It's an attitude of restraint, this attitude of worship. It's an attitude of mind and heart. It's an attitude of restraint that puts some discipline over our words when we are in church. Indeed it puts some discipline over our body language in the presence of the One from whom we cannot escape, even though we were as the Psalmist

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says: "to take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea". It's an attitude that recognizes the essential transcendent otherness of God who is high and lifted up, as we read in the unison lesson this morning from Isaiah. High and lifted up and whose glory fills the earth. It's that attitude. It's an attitude which though it recognizes God as our Father, as indeed Jesus taught us to do – Abba (Father) – nonetheless recognizes that even when we speak the word "Father" and apply it to God, we do not do so casually and easily, but deferentially and respectfully. For us there always is "Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name". I don't think that you can think of God like this as the Holy Father and then immediately dive off into a "freewheel carnival of easy-going interactive worship".

So worship is an attitude forged by these things, my friends. Worship is certainly not all outward show and correct protocol and choral processions and pausing in front of crosses. However, if these things become for us the signs that we are gathering into the experience of worship; if in fact they reflect an attitude of worship; if they set an attitudinal tone that signals to us that we are about to do something that is uniquely significant, then these outward things also have value and they give meaning to the inner fire of our worship.

So worship is an attitude. "Come let us worship and bow down. Let us kneel before the Lord our maker for He is our God. We are the people of His pasture and the flock of His hand." That summarizes the attitude of mind and heart that lies beneath true worship.

The other side of the coin is this. That worship is an experience. It's an experience of encounter with God. I think you can put on services in which there is much talk about God, but those services don't yield any real experience of God.

I was reading recently an article in a religious journal, Christianity Today. Let me share the burden of this article with you. The article was called "Are evangelicals missing God at church?" Now I don't like the word "evangelicals" used in that exclusive kind of way so I would prefer talk about it in terms of "are Christians missing the experience of God at church?" The article was about various forms of worship whose legitimate aim was to make people comfortable and happy in church, perhaps with services that tended to be spiritually undemanding with much breezy chorus singing and the like. According to this article which was based on some comments made by students at Wheaton College, which is a conservative evangelical college, many of these young people, over a period of time, were beginning, in that kind of service, to find the missing dimension and the missing dimension was any sense of experience or encounter with God in these services.

Now this was a critique not of hostile liberals to that kind of thing; this was a critique of young people brought up in the evangelical community. They were singing choruses about Jesus and they were perhaps listening to rather long didactic sermons of a particular kind. But what some of them came to say about that kind of experience was this. There was no imagination, no mystery, no beauty. It was all preaching and books and application.

The writer of the article commenting on these statements asks the question "what is worship?" and then he answers it not by giving an abstract definition of worship but by speaking about the worshippers. He said this: "Worshippers seek an encounter with the glory of God, the transcendent power and numinous mystery of the divine." The transcendent power and numinous mystery of the Divine? Now I know that people come to church for more than that. But I believe that when they come to church, they should not go away with less than that – a sense of the transcendent power and numinous mystery of the Divine.

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This should be mediated to people as they worship. It should be mediated through the words that we speak, through the praises that we offer together, through the choral music that we listen to so that both in the text of the music and also in the sound of the music, people begin to have the sense of the transcendent power and the numinous mystery of the Divine – that this place is a serious place! That this place is a different place from all these other places that we inhabit during the week.

I used to worship from time to time in a great Presbyterian church. It had a starkly simple order of service and the service was begun invariably by the minister rising in the pulpit and saying these four words in a gentle sometimes almost inaudible voice: "Let us worship God". As soon as he said that, you had the impression that you were about to enter into something mysterious, something majestic, something indeed transcendent. Something of the experience of Isaiah seeing the Lord high and lifted up. It felt a bit like Jacob. You felt you were saying in your heart: "how awesome is this place; this is the House of God; this is the Gate of Heaven".

A modern commentator has said that our generation has lost the sense of the transcendent. You know, I have to say that I think there are some forms of worship that accept that. Indeed there are some forms of worship that actually encourage that because the worship is all about the experience of human interaction and fellowship and conversation and feeling good – all at the horizontal level without the sense of encounter. Encounter with the transcendent, the Divine God. I do not believe that this generation has lost its sense of the transcendent. I believe it may be buried. I believe it may be trampled under foot by many features of our contemporary day, but I don't believe it is lost.

What I would like to say to the congregation this morning is this: let this be a place where through our worship the sense of the transcendent is recovered and revived and converted into a vision – a vision of the glory of God so that people might say from time to time: "Is this not the house of God? Is this not the Gate of Heaven?"