

Blandford Forum - Sunday 4 March 2007 - 9.00am Service

Langton Long - Sunday 4 March 2007 - 11.00am Service

Rev Tim Storey

"Worship Is ... Sacrament"

1 Corinthians 11:23 -29, Luke 24:28-35

A few years ago there was a great furore at the Festival of Remembrance in the Royal Albert Hall. The Prime Minister's son, Euan Blair, then a teenager, to the horror of some present, wore a jumper rather than a suit and tie. Shock, horror, probe - how dare he?

What is worn in worship means a lot more to some than it means to others. It is entirely appropriate that I am wearing what I am wearing in this act of worship, just as the same is equally true when Martin will lead the worship later on this morning in informal garb. Appropriateness of dress *is* important, but Jesus warned of paying too much attention to the outside. In one of his outbursts at the Pharisees Jesus called them Whitewashed walls. In another he said "***You Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness.***" (Luke 11:39)

At the start of this series on Worship, we began where I believe God wanted us to begin with Jesus' statement that we should worship in "Spirit and in Truth". These words of Jesus point us to the idea that we cannot hide our true, inner feelings from God and, therefore, that is where the truth of our lives lies. And if our worship is going to be "in truth" then that is where our worship should be, "in spirit". And if we are going to be different to the Pharisees, then the *outside* of our lives must reflect the *inside* of our lives.

If we stop for a moment, the fact is that the way we dress reflects who we are and what our inner tastes are. People who are flamboyant, tend to dress flamboyantly. People who are quiet, tend to dress quietly. If I am in a casual mood, I will wear casual clothes.

There was an item in the paper last week which made me sit up and notice it. It pointed out that the way people write e-mails betrays the truths in what they say. In other words, if you look carefully you can tell quite easily when they are lying ! This may come as a surprise to some, but actually God doesn't find that difficult to do. If we are to worship in Spirit and in Truth then our life outside must reflect what is inside. And it is inside, where we cannot hide anything from God that the truth about our lives is found.

Today we come in our series on Worship to the subject of "Worship is Sacrament" and I began with unpacking the need for us to appreciate how spirit-filled and honest worship comes from the *inside*, because it is inextricably bound up in the word "Sacrament". If God is going to do something in us, then there is no point in him doing something on the outside, if all he is doing is adding another layer of whitewash to our lives. That, I think we would all agree, is a pointless exercise. We want him to do something where we can be changed on the *inside*.

In its simplest terms a Sacrament describes something we do ***outwardly*** that, when we do it, enables God to do something ***inwardly***. A slightly more wordy definition says:

A sacrament is a rite that mediates divine grace.

In other words when we eat bread and drink wine or when we pour water on a baby's head, we believe that something else is happening: God is *doing* something on the inside. It is us asking God to do *something*: We don't know what, we don't know why and we don't know how - but in Communion and Baptism, the Sacraments which the Anglican Church recognises, we know that there are times when God speaks greatly through the physical actions of bread and wine and the pouring of water.

Holy Communion is a service, instituted by Jesus himself, that enables us to appreciate as fully as possible the sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross, a sacrifice that brought forgiveness to the whole world. But Communion is far more than a simple memorial service. For it speaks of the depth of God's love for us, it speaks through its very name of the relationship that we are enabled to have with God through Jesus and it speaks of the sacrificial life that we are called to ourselves. So when we recognise the deep meaning of what we do, when we come forward with our hands cupped, ready to receive from him, God does something *in* us - he enables us to understand more of that sacrifice and more of his love, he enables us to have more love in return.

If we think of a communion *only* as a memorial service then it becomes just like any other service perhaps having a special emphasis - on Maundy Thursday or Good Friday. But if we believe that something special happens when we come to Communion, we are forced to take it far more seriously.

But this raises the question "Who says that Communion is something special?".

- ❖ We have the fact that Matthew, Mark and Luke all record the last supper making it clear that this was something Jesus wanted his followers to do and take seriously because it said so much about his sacrifice for us.
- ❖ We have the fact of the incredible significance of the meal itself: relating all that Jesus did to the story of the Passover in the Old Testament.
- ❖ We have the fact that Paul wrote to the Corinthians about it, telling them to take it seriously and uses the exact same words as the Gospel writers- which makes it clear how important the early church regarded this.
- ❖ We have the fact that down through the centuries since church leaders such as Justin, in the 2nd Century through Hippolytus, Augustine, Luther, Calvin and countless others have all concentrated work on the importance of communion.

So we "do" communion because Jesus himself gave it to us, because it reminds us over and over again that our freedom from sin was bought at a heavy price and because for two thousand years people have believed that God has spoken and acted through our participation in it.

The obvious thing to say is that if we have good reasons to hold communion services then we should surely be taking them seriously. The question is whether we do: that is why Paul has a go at the Corinthians for **not** taking communion seriously enough, for treating Communion as the Church equivalent of a MacDonalds snack.

Paul firstly records the central story of Jesus initiating the memorial of his death and then, in verse 26, we have the first major teaching: "***Whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes***" If we are proclaiming Jesus, surely we must take the job seriously

“Therefore”, Paul continues, “whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord.” Paul is saying “take your time” - think about it, reflect on it, prepare for it.

Sadly, too often, we are guilty of preparing the *outside*: wanting people to see the wonders of our worship or the majesty of our robes. And our worship becomes based on the outside impression we give. Don't get me wrong, this is just as true in modern worship as it is in traditional styles of worship: If it is not our robes, then the question is whether our band is the biggest or most professional, whether we have the biggest congregation, or whatever.

Remember what God said to the Prophet Samuel as he stood before Jesse's oldest son Eliab in 1 Samuel 16:6 - Samuel saw Eliab and thought, ***“Surely the LORD's anointed stands here before the LORD.”*** ***But the LORD said to Samuel, “Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The LORD does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.”*** It is a sobering thought.

If we limit our worship to what we portray outwardly, then we can never have honest and spiritual worship, for by its very definition, Worshipping in Spirit means worship that comes from within.

And if our worship is in Spirit, and comes from the heart then that is where God can minister *to us*. In the same way, if we restrict our understanding of Sacrament to something we do, then it will stop at the external, ritual act, whose meaning stops at the extent of our love for God.

If we open our hearts in Spirit and Truth, in the fullness of the worship which God wants us to worship him with, then the fullness of sacramental worship, the fullness of his love poured into our inner being can be the greatest experience of all, leading to a life in constant worship and love in return. Amen.