

WORSHIP AND OBEDIENCE

A Sermon for the Second Sunday in Lent, 2011

On the Text: Propers for the Day, Zech.

By the Reverend Doctor Randolph Constantine

What would you think if some Sunday morning, right after the Creed, I turned to this lectern and said to you something like: “I couldn’t think of anything to say to you for today, so we’ll just proceed directly to taking up the Offering.” Would you be happy or would you feel deprived. Would you think, “Good. The service won’t be as long. We can get to the coffee and goodies sooner. I can go home earlier and have more time to do what I had planned to do this afternoon.” You might think any number of things. You might think I was shirking my duty; ... and if you thought that, you’d be right.

I’m not allowed to omit the sermon. Right there in the Prayer book, in the fine print in italics at the bottom of page 71, it says, “*Then followeth the sermon.*” That is an instruction to me that I am not allowed to ignore; it is something I have to **obey**. These pieces of small-print italics are called rubrics because in the early PBs they were printed in **RED**. The rubrics tell us how the services are to be held. Some of them give instructions that **have to be** followed, such as the reading of the Exhortation I had to read last Sunday; others give us options, as in: *Here may be sung a hymn.*; while others may just give an explanation of something.

The reason I am not allowed to omit the sermon is that the Bishops of the Anglican Church decided many years ago that having a sermon is an integral and needed part of our Worship of God and His Son, Jesus Christ, so they put that rubric in the Prayer book

You may have noticed in your bulletins that there are two headings that divide the Communion service into two parts: The Liturgy of the Word and The Liturgy of the Sacrament. The word, *liturgy*, comes from the Greek, **λειτουργία**, (*leitourgia*), which comes from roots meaning the work of the people, and which was used by the Greeks in ancient times to mean any sort of religious service: pagan, Jewish or Christian. In English, now, **liturgy** is also used to mean the written or printed Order of a Service, so that what is in your PBs between pages 67 and 89 is “the *liturgy* for the service of Holy Communion”.

In the Liturgy of the Word, we have hymns and prayers, but the primary emphasis is on the hearing of God’s Word, His instructions to us through the Holy Bible. After the opening prayer, we begin hearing His Words with either the entire Ten Commandments or the Summary of the Law. After a few more prayers, we have the OT lesson; we all participate in a responsive reading of one or more Psalms, and then we hear the Epistle and Gospel lessons. We follow those with a recital of the Nicene Creed, which is a summary of our faith as it has been distilled from the Scriptures over many centuries. In seminary courses, it is often said with a smile that the Creed is put right before the sermon to remind the minister what he is supposed to preach about, and what he should not stray from. We end the Liturgy of the Word with the Offering, which is sort of a transition from the Liturgy of the Word to the Liturgy of the Sacrament.

We call all of these services, Worship Services, and the sermon is part of our services; but saying that brings up the question: Is the sermon worship? To some extent it can be, but not by itself. The sermon is really instruction, but it is an integral part of worship. It is an exposition and an explanation of some part or parts of Holy Scripture with the object of teaching us how to be better Christians. I don't just preach to you; I preach to myself also. I need to hear everything I say to you more than once.

Saying that still leaves the question: What *is* worship? Is what we do here each Sunday something that is *worshipful* to you? I hope so. Most of us have our own definitions of what worship is, but our definitions do not always agree with those of other people. Many modern-day churches have people who are called their, "Worship Minister", who happens to be the person who picks out and leads the singing of the "Praise Songs" whose words are projected on a big screen. These are songs that bear little resemblance to the hymns in our hymnal; and while they may be something we are willing to admit may be part of worship, most of us are likely to think that there are many other things that comprise worship, not just the singing of praise songs. Let's look a little further.

Recently, in my reading, I came on two ideas about worship from two very different sources that prompted me to think about this. The first source is a book about worship by Allen P. Ross that is titled, *Recalling the Hope of Glory*. Dr. Ross specializes in the OT, has written five books, and is currently writing a commentary on the Psalms. At one time he taught at one of our REC seminaries. In what I read, he gives three characteristics of **true**, Christian worship before he gives what he calls a "working definition" of worship. Those characteristics are: First, it must be God-centered and formulated within the framework of the Holy Trinity; Second, worship must be in and of Christ, the Son of God, who came into the world and brought us salvation; and Third, All genuine worship must be by the Spirit because it is the Holy Spirit who enables all spiritual worship. These three conditions are covered in one statement that Jesus made to the woman at the well in John 4:23-24 23 ...**the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him. 24 God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth.** Many of you will recognize the first verse of this as one of the possible opening sentences for Morning Prayer; you can see that on page 3 of the BCP.

Dr. Ross's working definition of worship is a little long and does not cover all of the attributes of worship that he comes up with later, but then it is a "Working Definition". (Pass out copies of the definition.) As you can see, it is typed in a form you may not recognize. That is the form of some early Hebrew poetry and is called a *chiasm*. Scholars of the OT seem to be enamored of the chiastic form of poetry, which occurs frequently in the Psalms. Let me read it to you now.

Dr. Allen P. Ross's "WORKING DEFINITION OF WORSHIP"

True worship is

the **celebration** of being in covenant fellowship with
the sovereign and holy triune God,

by means of
 the **reverent adoration** and **spontaneous praise**
 of God's nature and works,
 the expressed **commitment** of **trust** and
obedience to the covenant responsibilities, and
 the **memorial reenactment** of entering into
 covenant through ritual acts,
 all with the **confident anticipation** of the fulfillment
 of the covenant promises in glory.

I went through this and singled out the pertinent nouns in this definition that are the components of worship. Here's what I get for the components of worship: celebration, reverent adoration, spontaneous praise, trust, obedience, memorial re-enactment, confident anticipation. [Added for publication. When writing the sermon, I skipped over the word, **Commitment** because the importance of **Trust** and **Obedience** just jumped out at me. I did not notice the omission until I read Ross's definition while giving the sermon. I made an extemporaneous comment about the importance of commitment

Celebration? Do we celebrate? Yes, we celebrate many things, most especially Jesus' Resurrection and Ascension. **Reverent Adoration?** Yes, but I would separate that into **Reverence** and **Adoration**. Every bit of our worship should, in my view, be **reverent**, because that word, *reverent*, is to me a synonym for *worshipful*. **Adoration?** Of course. How can we not adore the God Who created this universe and us, and then gave His Son to die for our sins. **Spontaneous Praise?** Praise yes, but I am not too sure about that spontaneity bit. That smacks a little too much of Pentecostalism and having a rowdy and disorderly service, which is not part of the Anglican tradition. **Trust?** Do we trust God? Trust is the essence of Faith, which we expressed when we said the Creed. **Obedience?** What are we being obedient to? Allen says that "**Worship is not a choice, but a Divine imperative.**"

When we worship God, either together as we are here, now, in the church, or singly, individually, at home or wherever one of us might be when alone, we are obeying His orders and desires that we worship Him as expressed in that quote I read you from John 4:23, and in many other places in the Bible.

Memorial-Re-Enactment is something we do in the Communion Service, and in other services, as well as in Christmas pageants which, I think, are also a form of worship.

The last item I highlighted was "**Confident Anticipation**". Confident Anticipation is an almost perfect translation of the Greek word, *ἐλπίς*, (*elpis*) which is usually translated as "*hope*". The Christian's hope is much more than just a blind hope; it is an anticipation, an expectation, that is held with confidence that the promise of the Gospel will be fulfilled. It is with that confidence in the truth of God's promises that we should worship Him. With that confidence, our worship will be full and worthy of the worship we should give to a loving and infinite God.

The second idea I found was something I read in Tim Keller's new book, *King's Cross*. At one place, Keller is talking about the story of the transfiguration as described in St. Mark's Gospel in 9:2-8. In that story, Jesus takes Peter, James, and John up on a mountain, where Jesus is transformed into a luminous being with clothes so white they were blinding. Jesus is seen talking to Moses and Elijah. Then God the Father speaks out of a cloud, saying, "**This is my Son whom I love. Listen to Him.**" Then, everything is suddenly back to normal; Jesus clothes are no longer blindingly white, and Moses and Elijah are gone. Peter is shaken up and starts babbling about making three tabernacles for Moses, Elijah, and Jesus. His problem was that he knew that he and James and John had just seen some of the glory of God, and they were not dead!

Keller points out that one of the purposes of the original Tabernacle and later of the Temple, was to protect the people from what the Hebrews called the *Shekinah* glory of God, the glory of His full presence. The Holy of Holies in the Tabernacle and the Temple was the place that God could come to in all His Glory without harming the people. Keller then says that Jesus is the bridge between God and humanity, that He is the ultimate Tabernacle and Temple because within Him is all the glory of God, but people can look upon Him without dying. In Jesus' presence, Peter, James and John were bathed in the Shekinah glory of God, and they did not die. After that, Keller makes a statement that at first boggles the mind when he writes, "**James, Peter, and John have experienced *worship*.**"! A little later Keller wrote, "**Worship is not just believing. ... The presence of God had enveloped them. They had had a foretaste of what ... we are all longing for: the very face and embrace of God.**"

Here in this church, we come closer to that than you might realize for one reason: what Jesus said in Matthew 18:20 **20 For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.** Jesus is here, now, in the midst of us, in Spirit, but not bodily in His full glory. If you felt, if you believed that Jesus was close enough to you to touch, wouldn't you feel a little bit of awe tinged with fear? He who is the Word by whom all things were created? Verse 10 of Psalm 111 gives us good advice: **10 The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom.**

Do we dare be as brash as the Canaanite woman of the Gospel lesson? I don't know. Jesus knew what would happen there before it happened. That incident was also an epiphany, a revelation to the disciples that Jesus was going to expand His ministry to the Gentiles.

There is one more thing I think we need to know on this second Sunday in Lent. On Friday, I opened one of my Bibles at random to see what I might find there. It fell open to Zechariah 7, where I read this, which begins with God speaking to Zechariah:

Zechariah 7:5-13 **5 "Say to all the people of the land and to the priests, 'When you fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh months these seventy years, was it actually for Me that you fasted? 6 'And when you eat and drink, do you not eat for yourselves and do you not drink for yourselves?'" 8 Then the word of the LORD came to Zechariah saying, 9 "Thus has the LORD of hosts said, 'Dispense true justice, and practice kindness and compassion each to his brother; 10 and do not oppress the widow or the orphan, the stranger or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another.' 11 "But they refused to pay attention, and turned a stubborn shoulder and stopped their ears from hearing. 12 "And they made their hearts like flint so that**

they could not hear the law and the words which the LORD of hosts had sent by His Spirit through the former prophets; therefore great wrath came from the LORD of hosts. 13 "And it came about that just as He called and they would not listen, so they called and I would not listen," says the LORD of hosts;" This passage is truly a Lenten message.

This chapter of Zechariah has a heading that says, "Obedience [is] better than Fasting" In this time of penitence where fasting is not required, even though fasting will be appreciated by God if it is done for the right reasons, we do better in God's eyes if we just obey His commandments and even His "suggestions": those things God says that just seem like gentle requests when spoken in the Psalms, such as: to "worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness" and "O come let us worship and fall down, and kneel before the Lord our Maker, for we are the people of His pasture and the sheep of His hand.

Let us worship the Lord by our obedience in the keeping of His commandments; Let us worship Him in the partaking of His Holy Eucharist. Let us obey the Lord in worshipping Him in Spirit and in Truth. In all that we do,

Let us worship the Lord, our God in the beauty of holiness.

Let the whole earth stand in awe of Him.

AMEN!