

TRRS4010 – CHRISTIANITY AND JUDAISM

3. CHRISTIAN WORSHIP

The Westminster Shorter Catechism, used for three hundred years by Presbyterian Christians to train children and new converts in the Christian faith, begins with the question ‘What is the chief end of Man?’ The prescribed reply is ‘Man’s chief end is, to glorify God, and to enjoy him for ever’. While the question and answer appear to suggest that worship of God is first and foremost the duty of all human beings (man is generic here), they also encapsulate a sense of purpose to human existence wrapped up in engagement and relationship with the Creator. While worship is offered for the sole reason that God is God and consequently worthy of honour, blessing, glory and power, the Catechism also recognizes that this brings benefit to the worshipper. He or she is able to ‘enjoy’ God for ever.

Worship is the primary responsibility and natural state of the Christian. As the spontaneous thanksgiving and adoration of God which follows the revelation of his saving acts, it takes precedence over doctrinal formulation and theological reflection. In other words, the initial response to God is worship and then to try to understand who is worshipped and why. Such an attitude towards theology has existed through the centuries. Anselm (c.1033-1109), Archbishop of Canterbury (1093 to his death), suggested it when he spoke of ‘*fides quaerens intellectum*’ (faith seeking understanding), while the same meaning is captured in the old Latin phrase, *lex orandi, lex credendi*,¹ meaning literally that as we pray, so we believe. In other words, theology rises out of worship. This emphasis on worship confirms that Christian faith is a lived faith: its reality is grounded in people’s lives rather than in academic or intellectual argument. In Christian thought, God is not an intellectual idea, but a reality with whom men and women are called into relationship and lives of pilgrimage. What they think about God is secondary to their commitment to worship and follow him. And the primary locus for this is the church. Worship is fundamentally a communal act in which God’s people gather together to give glory and honour to God, to seek forgiveness for wrongs, to discover his will and to receive the power of the Holy Spirit to follow God’s will in their daily lives.

Having said that, it is important to recognize that worship does not occur in a vacuum because the story of God’s creative, redemptive and sustaining love, made known in the incarnation (God become flesh), life, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, has already been told. This provides a context in which the presence of God is understood and to which the worshipper responds.

¹ The phrase is based on words of Prosper of Aquitaine (c.390-463), ‘Ut legem credendi lex statuat supplicandi’ (that the law of prayer establishes the law of belief). Capitula Coelestini 8 (Migne, Patrologia Latina 51, 205-12).

A theological formulation and understanding already exists, and it finds its way into formal worship usually in the liturgy, hymns, recitation of creeds and preaching of sermons. But believers must first recognize God's worth before attempting theological formulation because it is through knowing God in relationship that knowledge and understanding of God can be attempted. The believer exists within a historical tradition of faith in which people have worshipped and validated theological formulations in order to express knowledge of that relationship. He or she inherits these, but responds first with worship and then with understanding, and he or she benefits from the understanding already gained in the community of faith.

Characteristics of worship

If the denial of the self is central within Christian faith (Matthew 16:24; Luke 9:23), then sacrifice is an important aspect of worship. Primitive forms of religion throughout the world have taken this literally, and sacrifice was central to the Temple cult in ancient Israel, as recorded in the Old Testament. In Christianity, worship is 'a sacrifice of praise' where the word 'sacrifice' is understood metaphorically. According to the sixteenth century Reformer, Martin Luther,

When I declare the Word of God I offer sacrifice; when thou hearest the Word of God with all thy heart, thou dost offer sacrifice. When we pray and when we give in charity to our neighbour, we offer sacrifice. So, too, when I receive this Sacrament, I offer sacrifice - that is to say, I accomplish the will and service of God, I confess Him, and I give Him thanks. This is not a sacrifice for sin, but a sacrifice of thanksgiving and praise.²

Communion with the divine depends on setting aside this life and the pursuit of its pleasures. Christianity teaches that life surrendered, paradoxically, also brings newness and lasting life. It leads to the worshipper being prepared to give things up whether that be time, energy, adoration or thanksgiving.

Worship has several characteristics all of which concern the fact that it is worship of God by human beings and consequently has a subject and an object. As a result, the activities involved in worship interact in such a way that they focus on both. Acts of worship generally follow some kind of liturgical pattern in which those who gather begin with adoration of God, where God is recognized for who he is and the mind is focused away from the self in order to ascribe worth to him (the word 'worship' literally means 'to ascribe worth'). Recognition of God's worthiness and holiness leads the worshipper into

² Martin Luther, *Sermon for Maundy Thursday*.

repentance and confession of sin which is then declared to be forgiven in the absolution. Exhortation follows confession (or sometimes precedes it where the worshippers are prompted to repent by hearing the Word) through the reading and expounding of the Word and this leads to intercession where the world and its needs are brought into the equation. The central point of the service, in which all this reaches a climax, is the Communion or Eucharist when Jesus' death and resurrection are recalled and recognized as giving sense to the activities of adoration, confession, exhortation and intercession, all of which incorporate 'giving worth' to God.

Looking at this worship event, several theological characteristics can be discerned which give us a clearer understanding of what is believed to occur when Christians gather to worship. Susan J. White identifies six: service to God; the mirroring on earth of heaven's worship; affirmation of the worshipper; communion; proclamation; and entry into the arena of transcendence.³ Though possibly not all present at all worship services, or not perceived by all those present at worship services, these characteristics are intended to be experienced and acknowledged when Christians gather to worship God. Certainly, they succeed in demonstrating the necessary juxtaposition of human activity and passivity where those engaging in worship are making their own sacrifice of praise and simultaneously receiving of God's goodness and grace. It is this that is most significant: worship is not simply an act of the believing congregation. It is an act-in-relation where God draws forth people who respond to his calling and take part in the possible relationship which he opens with himself through Jesus Christ.

Public worship, then, is the response of Christians declared to be God's children, out of gratitude and obedience to the one who has effected their salvation. It has the nature of a solemn duty and of a joyful response while it has the nature both of an individual giving and a corporate gathering. The Christian meets with other Christians to give God the glory he deserves but also to give to God from the deepest desires of his or her heart. But because it mirrors heaven's worship, the sense of human duty becomes somewhat remote within an all-encompassing vision where things are as they ought to be. Worship in heaven is perfect and eternal. Worship on earth is imperfect and temporal. Even in this partial and inadequate worship, a glimpse is seen of how things should be and in doing so it provides the dynamic and the impetus to challenge things to conform to the requirements of the Kingdom. Thus worship as a mirror of heavenly worship 'can sustain and uphold us in the human struggle, as well as in the work for

³ Susan J. White, *Groundwork of Christian Worship* (Peterborough: Epworth, 1997), pp. 2ff.

justice and peace on earth'.⁴ In other words, worship empowers the Christian to live as a Christian in the world.

Sacraments

Worship of God, particularly in its public form in the west, has tended to emphasize the cerebral almost to the detriment of other aspects of human character. Some blame John Calvin (1509-64) for this over-intellectualist attitude whereby worship is subordinated to instruction. For Calvin, the symbolism of the sacrament in itself was not enough: people had to have the symbolism explained in order that they understand it properly. As a result, the sermon, the exposition and preaching of the Word of God, took centre stage in the Reformed tradition with the consequent danger that teaching would displace worship as the focus for church activity.⁵

The primary visual aspect in Christian worship revolves around the sacraments. The Roman Catholic Church defines the sacraments as 'efficacious signs of grace, instituted by Christ and entrusted to the Church, by which divine life is dispensed to us. The visible rites by which the sacraments are celebrated signify and make present the graces proper to each sacrament. They bear fruit in those who receive them with the required dispositions'. It is important to see that, for Catholics, Christ has instituted the sacraments, but he entrusts them to the Church which then becomes the means of mediating divine grace to people and to the world. Furthermore, the Catholic Church teaches that the grace mediated by the sacraments comes *ex opere operato* (literally 'from the work done'), which means that grace is mediated regardless of the minister who presides or of the recipient, though the recipient can block grace if he or she is unwilling or unready to receive it. One reason for this would be unconfessed and unforgiven sin, which is why Catholics are encouraged to go to Confession with a priest on a regular basis.

Sacraments, as maintained throughout the history of the church, are signs of God's reality and grace. In Catholic and Orthodox tradition there are seven (Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist, Penance, Unction, Ordination and Matrimony) while Protestant denominations have tended to restrict them to two, namely Baptism and the Eucharist. Jürgen Moltmann suggests that Baptism is the 'sacrament of initiation and the door of grace' while the Lord's Supper is 'the sacrament of confirmation and the path of grace'.⁶ This explains why Baptism is a sacrament performed only once, while the believer receives the sacrament of the Lord's Supper on a regular basis (though daily, weekly, monthly and even

⁴ White, *Groundwork of Christian Worship*, p. 5.

⁵ See Roger Grainger, *The Language of the Rite* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1974).

⁶ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit* (2nd ed., London: SCM, 1992), p. 227.

annual communions have been instituted and justified by different Christian communions).

Neither Baptism nor the Eucharist are merely visual as both take place within the context of a developed liturgy which usually offers a theological explanation of the sacrament. But both contain the power of symbol to express the numinous in a way beyond words: Baptism through its symbolism of cleansing and of dying and rising again with Christ, and Eucharist through the use of products of nature – bread and wine – to recall Christ's supernatural sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins. John Calvin defined a sacrament as 'an outward sign by which the Lord seals on our consciences his promise of his good will toward us in order to sustain the weakness of our faith'.⁷ Human beings are both material and spiritual creatures inhabiting a material world. Sacraments are instituted by God in order to convey spiritual truth through a material reality in order that material beings may perceive spiritual truth (that is, truth about God rather than truth about the created realm).

While there is a basic agreement between the Christian communions, the precise nature of the sacrament is disputed. Baptism, in most Christian churches, can be either of an adult believer or a child whose parents promise to raise him or her in the Christian faith. Some Christians believe that Baptism should only follow a confession of faith which precludes the baptism of babies. What is important in both forms is that at the centre of the sacrament is the grace of God revealed to human beings and available to humankind. As in other forms of worship, the human subject can be too obvious in baptism and easily displaces the central role which should be for God in recollection of God's redemptive grace.

The Eucharist or Holy Communion or Lord's Supper also has a complex history in which various explanations have been offered over what occurs when Christians share bread and wine. Initially the Lord's Supper was celebrated as a full meal which ended with the sharing of bread and wine. Only gradually did it develop into a symbolic meal, where Christians received only a drop of wine and a morsel of bread. Controversy has accompanied the church's explanation of the Eucharist, centring particularly on the issue of Christ's presence in the meal. In the ninth century, Paschasius Radbertus emphasized the real and actual presence of Christ in the bread and wine. Despite concerns at materialising a spiritual reality, this was upheld and further explained by Thomas Aquinas who asserted that the invisible *substance* of the bread and wine was transformed (transubstantiated) into Christ's body and blood, though the *accidents*, namely the appearance of the bread and wine, remain unchanged. Christ's body and

⁷ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Bk. IV Ch. 14 1, tr. F. L. Battles, ed. J. T. McNeill, vol. II (London: SCM, 1960), p. 1277.

blood somehow are then made real in the bread and wine and this allows a representation of Christ's sacrifice during worship. Protestant churches, by and large, reject this and see the communion as a memorial of Christ's death, though there is still some debate regarding Christ's presence in the meal. In the Protestant tradition, this stems from the belief that even though a sacrament is a sign, there is a direct connection between the sign and that which it signifies. For Luther, this meant the *consubstantiated* presence of Christ in the bread and wine, where the bread and wine remained so in substance but were joined miraculously and mysteriously to the substance of Christ's body and blood, while for Zwingli the meal was no more than a reminder of Christ's Last Supper on the night in which he was betrayed which brought to mind his sacrifice for the sins of the world. Calvin maintained almost a middle ground between the extremes of Reformation thought. He rejected the Catholic sense of transubstantiation but accepted that Christ was present in the meal. Unlike Luther, however, he offered no theory in explanation of that presence. Instead, he maintained that it was a spiritual mystery and a matter of faith. In that way, it occupies a position in worship which takes the worshipper beyond cerebral understanding into the mysteries of God's grace.

Conclusions

Worship, when it emanates from the whole person and is strengthened by use of vision and symbol, enables the act itself to inspire the worshipper to greater service. There is an intrinsic connection, made explicit through worship, between learning something of God, feeling and perceiving God's acceptance and love of the worshipper, receiving of God's grace and empowerment, and the sense that this should issue in moral actions and service.