

Sermon for the 15<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost 15<sup>th</sup> September 2012

What Worship is.

This is the first Sunday back in full gear at Grace Church in this “new year”. The choir is in their new seating and the sanctuary has had a re-arrangement. I want to say a few things about Worship, because this is what we are doing slightly differently. But what we are doing is, actually, profoundly unchangeable.

About 20 years ago I spent a day with a little Christian Community about 150 km east of here. It was called “The Place of Uncreated Light”. There were only four members - old, retired, British missionaries from India. They all had little jobs in the house and community and lived in simplicity and poverty. They met for worship three times a day. I remember best the morning service. It was a service of prayers and readings, silence and blessings. But it was how it began that set the tone. On the battered coffee table they used as an altar, in front of which we all knelt on the floor, they had a small bowl of water. And upon this water they placed, each morning, a fresh flower. Just one flower, floating before the cross, in clear water. The flower had been picked from one of the plants in their garden.

This very simple act of offering something beautiful at the place of holiness in their home was, for me, a definition of worship.

Worship is what you offer at the place of holiness.

In the Gospel today there is a story of worship.

A woman placed her daughter, in her illness, in front of Jesus.

Jesus wanted to rest and to be anonymous. Jesus was tired after a 3-day walk of 100 miles. Jesus was a traditional Jew who felt God’s people were the Jews, and this woman was not one of his, or God’s people.

He called her a dog.

And still she placed her daughter, in her illness, at the place of holiness.

Worship is not about how worthy, or qualified, or religious you may be. Or how unworthy, unqualified, unreligious either.

God accepted her worship and Jesus realized this and sent her home to find her daughter healed.

“Be in peace, God has seen your worship.” He might have said.

Most Sundays we have flowers in the place of holiness. They are usually on the flower stands at either side of the altar. Very frequently they are brought in memory of someone.

This is an act of worship. Today they are placed on the altar. Flowers, remembered love and prayers for God’s blessings beyond this life. These are laid upon the place of holiness. These come from someone’s heart, with faith and cost and prayer.

Candles are lit on the altar. These began in history as illumination so the priest could read the books. Now they stand as symbols of light, of the presence of the Spirit, the flame of God's love, and as a symbol of us all gathering to be present with God in this holy place.

The candles are an act of worship. Buying them, polishing the stands. Lighting them, and finally putting out the flame reverently and carefully. These are acts of worship.

Whether it is preparing a sermon or the prayers, serving the chalice or singing in the choir. Properly understood, each of these is a way of bringing yourself, your abilities, your own sense of unworthiness, your best effort, and offering these in the place of holiness.

Each one of us, simply by walking in the door today, placing ourselves in this holy place, this church, this dedicated, consecrated building, we offer ourselves to God. We may be distracted by the events of last night, or worries about tomorrow. We may bring a list of people we are praying for. We may bring tiredness, or sadness, or joy or hope. We may even bring a forgetfulness of why we come each week. But here we are. Each one of us has come. Our simple presence, like the lower floating in the water before the cross, is an act of worship.

Worship is the private, secret, unfathomable part of being in Church. It is not about showing off, or being a performer.

The Anglican tradition of the people in the sanctuary wearing gowns is about anonymity. We are wrapped up in the clothes of the church so the congregation does not look at the person, but at the worship they help the whole church to offer together. The choir members don't sing to an audience, but to the Holy One who is in our midst. And they sing to lift the hearts of us all, to open our hearts to the mystery of God's closeness and to lift, as it were, our offerings higher for us.

No one knows the secrets of our hearts. We see each other's outsides when we meet. God only sees our hearts. I think God may be blind to everything else about us, perhaps. It is our hearts, in the end, as we proclaim together in the Eucharistic Prayer, "we lift up to the Lord". We lift them up, and lay them down in the waters of our baptisms, and we say "Lord, hold our hearts, our lives, our loves, our hopes and our fears and failings also. We place them, unworthy as we may be, at the place of holiness." And we might just hear Jesus say, "Be in peace, God has seen your worship."

When Jesus told us not to judge each other, I think that really matters when we meet in worship. Here we see as God sees. So when we exchange the peace, do not race for your friends, or avoid a stranger, that is to judge. But reach out to whoever is before you, whoever passes close to you, and see a worshipper, and let yourself be seen like that too. We all float on the water, like petals, before the cross of Christ, and in worship, that is the only identity we need.

All the rest, as they say in theatre, is just props.