

“Why Worship?” – Mar 12:28-34

With this morning’s sermon I am attempting something quite new for me. This is the first in a three-sermon series dealing with worship – specifically the ‘why?’, the ‘what?’, and the ‘what next?’ Writing sermons is not new to me, but this is a significantly different approach. Normally I engage in what is called ‘exegetical’ preaching – I let the text for the day guide me, observing context, structure, and content to hear the message of grace to the original listeners and to hear and proclaim the message of grace to listeners today.

What is so different today is that I am working with a particular theme, and will be using the texts for the day to underscore that theme. Other preachers do this all the time, but I am particularly cautious because there is always the inherent danger that the text or texts will get so bent out of shape trying to make the point that the original point or point of the text will be lost.

However, having said that, I find that the texts for today easily support what I believe are the key answers to the question of ‘why’ regarding worship.

Let’s take the texts in the order that we heard them – Psalm 146, the section from Deuteronomy, an explanation and exhortation from Hebrews, and finally the gospel reading from Mark. Beginning with the psalm we hear the opening words as an exhortation to worship: “Praise the Lord” rings out, both expressing an inner desire and an invitation to do likewise. A double set of reasons for offering that praise to God follows the jubilant opening, offering both the greatness of God and the goodness of God as reasons for being worthy of worship. In the first set we hear a series of four characteristics of God that support the claim “happy is the one whose help and hope is in God”, beginning with an appeal to God as creator, the one who made heaven, earth, and sea. The fidelity and constancy of God is proclaimed as the second characteristic to worship “the one who keeps faith forever,” in sharply implied comparison to the fickleness of humans. God is also identified as the one who guarantees justice to the oppressed and who provides for the physical needs of all. Providing examples of these characteristics of God in action the psalm next offers seven activities in which God acts to alleviate human distress and defends those without rights, and then concludes with a repetition of the opening call to join in adoration of the Divine One, to “Praise the Lord.” This psalm is an excellent example of joyful exhortations to offer praise, honour, and adoration to God.

However, in marked contrast with the joyful tone of the psalm, the reading from Deuteronomy stamps an impression of an obligation to worship God, or at the very least to honour God by faithful obedience to the commandments. This passage presents what is called the “Schema”, what is often considered the basic and foundational commandment and creed of Jewish faith. Where the psalm offers the exuberant expressions of one engaging in worship, the passage from Deuteronomy is presented with all of the gravity of a Principal Clerk of Assembly. To be sure there is the promise that with perfect obedience will come the reward that “it may go well with you, and so that you may multiply greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey” but that promise seems somewhat remote and not-quite-possible, being too high and too hard for the ordinary mortal to attain. Mind you, some people do respond more to the stick than the carrot, and we can easily see around us those who do so, ranging from the orthodox Jews who literally write these words in little cubes and tie them onto their foreheads to the ultra-conservative Christians who strive for perfect obedience, fearing that one sin is sufficient to cause God to reject them forever.

That heavy tone is echoed in the reading from the letter to the Hebrews, which is in reality more of a sermon than a classical letter. The author (preacher?) has been arguing for chapters about the image of Christ as the ultimate High Priest, suffering none of the failures that

beset human priests, high and otherwise. At this point in the argument he (or she, for that matter) follows a great didactic principle of going back to first principles. “Now even the first covenant had regulations for worship and an earthly sanctuary” this chapter opens, thus shutting down any counter-argument that worship might somehow be a late invention with the contention that said worship was a requirement right from the very beginning. After providing a goodly number of details about the lampstand, the table, the curtains dividing the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies, Aaron’s rod that budded, and the tablets, the text declares, “Of these things we cannot speak now in detail.”! Having spoken of them, however, the author is now free to use the items to show how Christ has now entered a new Holy Place (“one not made with hands”) and is thus able as the ultimate high priest to offer us purification and redemption. In this way the obligation to worship God continues, but now through Christ and because of Christ’s sacrificial offering of himself. Again we can see contemporary examples of people responding to this kind of exhortation to worship – gloomy, guilt-ridden, “I am not worthy” expressions of religious groveling, hoping like the Galilean woman to touch Jesus’ robe to be saved without being noticed.

Now, to be sure, these three texts offer compelling reasons to worship God, reasons that range from the heavy obligation of “because God told us to” through the joyful expressions that “God is great, God is good!” to “we have a new Holy of Holies.” But it is the passage from Mark’s gospel that I believe provides us as Christians with a broader and deeper and more fulfilling reason to worship – community. In response to a probing question meant to trap him in legalism, Jesus begins by quoting the Deuteronomy passage, “Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.” This is the foundational order of faith presented in the Old Testament, and in Hebrews, but it is one-dimensional. By that I mean that it represents the link between God and the individual, a ‘vertical’ link if you will. Jesus provides us with a whole new dimension, a ‘horizontal’ link between people. We can even see this two-dimensional concept represented in the image of the cross, the vertical being the link between people and God and the horizontal being the link between people and people.

And should you think that this link between people is somehow not important, consider the well-known and oft-cited statistic about people and faith in the region in which we live. Some eighty percent of people in our region broadly called Cascadia claim to be ‘spiritual’ but only twenty percent attend religious services – i.e. worship. I’m not sure what the number is that represents those who identify as Christian but who don’t go to church, but I’m sure it’s a significantly large number. Somehow people have gotten the mistaken understanding that it is possible to ‘worship’ God while alone. Communing alone with God is possible. Praying to God can certainly be done in isolation.

But worship is communal. Worship is two-dimensional. Worship is the joint expression of faith in God, the combined declaration of gratitude to God and the assembled imprecation to God for help that is done by people of faith together. “Wherever two or more of you are gathered together in my name, there also I will be” Jesus pledges. Worship is the beginning of acting out the second half of the two-dimensional great commandment outlined by Jesus, for it is in worship that we are renewed, re-energized, re-equipped, and restored to go out into our community, into the world around us to “love our neighbours as ourselves.” We are stronger when we act in groups; we are affirmed and strengthened by the love and support of others; we are enriched when we join with others to offer our praise, our confession, our thanksgiving, our prayers to God in the company of those who share our faith.

“Praise the Lord” cried the psalmist, and this brings us full circle, for not only is that an outburst and expression of faith by the psalmist, it is an exhortation, an invitation to join together in that praise, and in the joining together to participate in worship. “Praise the Lord” is my invitation to you to respond to Christ’s invitation to gather together with him, offering ourselves not only in devotion to God but in service to our neighbours in his name. “Praise the Lord” is the answer to the question, “why worship?”.