

Sermon – 19/10/2008 pm

True Worship Restored

Study Text: Ezra 3:16

When God called Abraham to go to a new land he obeyed. He went to Canaan where the Lord appeared to him, promising to give this land to his descendants. What was Abraham's response? He built an altar to the Lord. He *built an altar and called upon the name of the Lord* (Genesis 12:8). Abraham responded to God's revelation, and to God promises, by worshipping God. Is this how you respond to God's promises and God's blessings?

'Man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever' (Shorter Catechism 1). Worship should be a priority in the life of a child of God. It is not something we do when there is nothing better to do. How can people say that they are Christians and believe in God when they put God way down the list of priorities in their life?

'It was such a nice day we went for a picnic' is the excuse some give for not attending worship. 'Oh it was the football finals and I could not miss that – God will understand' they say. Indeed God does understand. He understands that you do not put him first in your life and, being the jealous God that he is, his wrath comes upon you.

When the children of Israel, the remnant that is, returned to Jerusalem, the first thing they did was worship God. They worshipped him according to his written commands. 'Their vocation, like ours' writes Kidner 'was to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual (and in their case, literal) sacrifices acceptable to God'.

Fellowship

The people gathered together as one man in Jerusalem in the seventh month (3:1). Arriving back in the land the lay people went to their hometowns but when the time came for them to go up to Jerusalem to worship the Lord they all went together. Their forefathers, distant forefathers, went up to the same spot to worship according to the Law of Moses. Their more immediate forefathers had neglected such worship and that is why God sent them to exile in Babylon.

The returning remnant was determined not to neglect the God who heard their cry and brought them back from Babylon. They were determined to remember the Lord their God who long ago brought them out of Egypt and gave them this land. They were determined to remember the Lord who forgave their sin. They would once again make sacrifices for their sin as God required.

The seventh month was a festival month. It was harvest time, a time of thanksgiving, of feasting and worshipping the Lord their God. All the people of God came together in this one place to worship. Worship was not just an individual matter but a communal matter. It was not something each man did in his own way and in his own time. Worship was not a voluntary matter but was obligatory for the people of God. Those who did not join together were excluded from the fellowship and the blessings of God.

Fear

God had stirred up King Cyrus to allow the Jews to go back to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple. He had stirred them up to go and build the house of the Lord. There was no doubt that this was God's will; God's plan and purpose. But God did not promise they would have no difficulty in carrying out his will. He did not promise they would have no problems or no opposition.

When you experience difficulties in life do not assume that you are not walking in the will of God. That may be the case, but not necessarily. We do not learn God's will by some trial and error method. The place to find God's will is in word. In this world walking in obedience to God's word will not be easy – just look at Jesus.

The people in the nations surrounding Jerusalem had gloated when the city was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar (Ezekiel 25). They were not happy to hear that the Jews had returned and were going to rebuild the city. From the outset they opposed the rebuilding work. Since they greatly outnumbered the remnant, fear came upon the people of God. But this fear did not stop them going up and worshipping God – not at this time anyway.

Faith overcame fear. Believing in God and his word they confronted this fear with faith. The people of God always have been, and always will be, opposed by the enemies of God. *Consider it pure joy my brothers whenever you face trials of many kinds because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance* (James 1:2). In this fallen world followers of Christ will always have those who oppose them and persecute them.

It is interesting how people react upon learning that there is a minister in their group. They feel uneasy. They stop swearing and telling filthy jokes. Not just pastors but anyone who confesses the name of Christ will experience this ostracism, this rejection and even animosity in this world.

Christians have been made scapegoats many times in history, including in India today. As a child of God the world will not accept you. You will be opposed and made to live in fear. But 'be of good cheer' said Jesus, 'I have overcome the world'. *This is the victory that has overcome the world-your faith* (I John 5:4).

Fire

They arose and built the altar of the God of Israel, to offer burnt offerings on it as it is written in the Law of Moses the man of God (3:2). These people were determined to worship God according to his commands; and his commands were written in the Scriptures handed down to them. There was no innovation in this worship. It was not a case of one man telling them to worship one way and another telling them something different. They were united in God and his word.

Jeshua is mentioned first in this passage probably because, being the priest, he assumed leadership in the matter of worship. But Zerubbabel was there also with his brothers. The whole community was there as the altar was rebuilt and burnt offerings or sacrifices were made. This was for the first time after more than fifty years.

The altar was made of wood overlaid with bronze (Exodus 27). Animals were sacrificed on this altar, their blood being offered in atonement for sin. Sacrifice were made both morning

and evening every day. There were special offerings on special days and different sacrifices for different purposes as set out in the Law of Moses.

What a tremendous time this must have been for the people of God, being back in the holy city and able to worship the Lord again. Can you imagine the joy that must have been in their hearts? Can you imagine being prevented from gathering on the Lord's Day to worship God? What would it be like for you if this church was burnt down and you had no place to meet for worship? Can you imagine if your Bible was taken away and you had to live without God's word?

Feast of Tabernacles

They also kept the feast of tabernacles as it is written (3:4). Notice the 'as it is written' yet again. The first and the seventh month were the main festival times for the Jews. The first month was marked by Passover and the seventh by Tabernacles or Booths – the seventh month was our September or October. The Day of Atonement was on the tenth day of the seventh month, but this could not be celebrated since there was no temple as yet.

The Feast of Tabernacles involved making tents and living in them for a week to remember living in the dessert during the exodus from Egypt. This festival had not been observed for a very long time – since the time of Joshua according to Nehemiah 8:17. Every day during this festival offerings were made on the altar *as required by ordinance (3:4)*.

They had not yet laid the foundation of the temple but true worship, worship according to what was written in the Scriptures had recommenced. It was a great day, a day of thanksgiving and praise, a day of recommitment to God. It was a day when fear gave way to faith as God's word was read and obeyed.

Would faithful worship continue? This was the question. This was the concern. Would the people of God regularly gather to worship him? Would they make this the highest priority in life? Would they worship him according to what is written or would worship once again be corrupted by worldly ideas and idolatry?

What is the status of true worship today? Where are the faithful and obedient people of God? It is tragic that a vast proportion of those who do gather to worship do so in ignorance of what is written. They worship according to the words of men rather than the word of God.

Praise God for the Protestant Reformation and the restoration of true worship, or worship free of idolatry. In a few days – on October 31 – it will be 491 years since Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the door of the church at Wittenberg.

Pray that we will be faithful in worshipping God, faithful in gathering together as God has commanded us and faithful in worshipping according to his declared will. Let us love the Lord our God with all our heart, all our soul, and all our mind, and let us worship him in spirit and truth though Jesus Christ our Lord.

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