

Sermon – 23/01/2011 am

Worship in Spirit and Truth

Study Text: John 4:19-26

Sir I perceive you are a prophet. Jesus revealed the truth to the Samaritan woman about her past life. He saw into her heart. He saw the sins of her past and her present life. She was standing before the revealer of all hearts, the one who is the truth and from whom nothing can be hidden. She did not recognise him as Messiah at this stage but as a prophet, a man who spoke the things of God.

A prophet she said, How wonderful here is one who can answer my question. She was a religious woman. She knew about Jacob's well. As a Samaritan she held to the Pentateuch, remember. And what was the question uppermost in her mind? What sprang immediately to mind as a question to put to this man of God?

Worship! Is that a great surprise? Is there a congregation today that you could walk into that is not divided about worship? People disagreeing over what songs they should sing, what music they should have, how long should the sermon be and so on. How great it is to be in the Free Church and not have to deal with such issues – is that what some think? And what is worship after all. Do you have to be in the church building to worship. Does it have to be at a certain time to be worship?

Let us not proudly rush over the question this woman put to Jesus as if it does not concern us, as if she is ignorant about true worship. Rather let us humble ourselves and learn from what our Lord said to her.

She brought before Jesus the age-old dispute between Jew and Samaritan about the place of worship. The Lord spoke through Moses regarding worship in the Promised Land saying, 'You shall seek the place where the Lord your God chooses ... to put his name for his dwelling place and there you shall go' (Deuteronomy 12:5). Where was that place? That was the big question.

When Abraham entered the land, he built an altar at Shechem (Genesis 12). When Jacob returned, he built an altar at Shechem (Genesis 33). Joshua built an altar here – actually on Mt Ebal opposite Mt. Gerizim. On the basis of the Pentateuch, the Samaritans held that the right place to worship was on Mt Gerizim.

But the Jews of course knew that David had brought the 'ark of the covenant' up to Jerusalem and declared that his son would build the temple there. Solomon built the temple in Jerusalem – and the second temple was built there also.

This prophet would solve the dispute.

The Hour Has Come

Which place was right? Neither! Believe me woman said Jesus, the hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem worship the Father. What is this hour he was talking about and why would it make such a difference with regard to worship.

This 'hour' referred to the time of his death, resurrection, and ascension. It would be the most significant time in history. It was the time when everything would be fulfilled in Jesus Christ the Son of God. Worship of the Father would radically change at this time. Not only would the way of worship change but the place would no longer be important.

Why? Because there would no longer be an earthly temple. Jesus would be raised from the dead to be the new temple. He spoke of this when he cleansed the temple in Jerusalem (2:21). After this 'hour' the earthly temple will be obsolete, it will have no place in the new covenant in the blood of Jesus Christ.

We live in the last days, the days following that 'hour'. There is no longer a place for a temple in Jerusalem, or on Mt Gerezim or in Mt Drutt. Jesus. Jesus is the new temple and he will come again in the new Jerusalem – I saw no temple in it for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple (Revelation 21:22).

Salvation is from the Jews

No place special to worship anymore. But does that mean all worship is acceptable. Does it matter how the Father is worshipped? No that was not what Jesus was saying. Worship must be based upon the revelation of God. God chose to reveal himself through the Jews. Salvation for mankind is of the Jews said Jesus.

The worship of the Samaritans may have been sincere but it was defective in that it was not based on the complete revelation of God. They were worshipping what they did not know. They were in the dark as it were, they were ignorant of what God had said and was doing with regard to salvation. It is of course impossible for an unbeliever to worship God (Hebrews 11:6). They must accept the complete revelation of God in the Scriptures. Then they would see God's plan of salvation through the suffering servant and Son of David.

We know what we worship said Jesus speaking as a Jew. God has revealed to us something of his essential being and so our worship must be such as accords with that revelation. If we have ideas about God that are not according to his revelation or exclude parts of his revelation then our worship will be defective.

'God has made a rich and full revelation for us in Scripture but when we go to church on Sunday all too often it seems our approach to God ignores much of this'. 'It is a terrible thing if it can be said of us that we do not know what we are doing when we engage in worship' (Morris). Let me add that to say we have always done it this way is not a valid reason. That is what the Roman church said at the time of the Reformation. Let us examine the Scriptures for ourselves and be able to give reasons.

In Spirit and Truth

There is no 'in' before truth. These two aspects are as inseparable as they are essential. The hour is coming and now is. The hour has come because Jesus has come. He is the one who determines everything about worship. And he declares here that worship will be transformed. There will be a fundamental shift in focus, from outward things such as place of worship, to inward things, to heart and the spirit.

Jesus has been trying to reach the heart of this Samaritan woman from the beginning. He is trying to reach your heart, trying to get you to worship him from your heart. That is very difficult. 'They worship me with their lips but their hearts are far from me' was the word of God to his people through the prophet Isaiah (29:13). Where is the heart of a person who walks out of church while the Word of God is being read? Oh, the lips are saying all the right things. The prayers are eloquent and pious. But where is the heart? Where is your heart right now?

True worshippers, said Jesus, will worship in spirit and truth. Presumably false worshippers worship in the flesh and in falsehood. False worshippers focus on the place of worship and a multitude of other external things. They look at the manner of dress. My how the young were castigated back in the 70's for their long hair. How could these young men come to worship with long hair? The eyes of the elders were fixed on that hair – but where were the eyes of the Lord – upon the hearts of those young people. Praise God that many walk with him still today – but not in the PCEA.

God is Spirit said Jesus. Not 'a Spirit' but 'Spirit'. That is part of his essential nature. And is a part of his nature that must be borne in mind in worship. Worship is when our spirit has fellowship with the Spirit of God – on the highest plane while we are in the world (I John 1:6, Romans 8:16).

When Jesus ascended into heaven, he sent the Holy Spirit into the heart of those who would believe. That Holy Spirit brings new birth as Nicodemus was told. The children of God are led by the Spirit of God. The Spirit bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God (Romans 8:16).

What is truth? Jesus said I am the way, the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father but by me. All worship must be through Jesus for he is our mediator – the only mediator between God and man. Only through Jesus do we have access into the presence of God the Father.

Worship that the Father is seeking from you and from me is such worship. Worship in spirit, worship focused upon the Lord Jesus Christ who is seated at the right hand of the Father in glory. Let us draw near to him in faith, let us open our heart to him for he wants to bless us as we come to worship him.

We hold to the 'regulative principle' and 'purity of worship'. We believe this is what Scripture teaches regarding acceptable worship. But let us not for a moment think that having all the right outward forms makes our worship acceptable to God. Some think we have to have the right version of the Bible, as determined by them of course, to be able to worship acceptably. Remember – they worship me with their lips but their hearts are far from me. Let our hearts be touched and transformed by the all-powerful Spirit of God, that we might worship him in spirit and in truth.

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