

Worship

A Sermon for Pentecost 15 2008

Jeremiah 15 vv 15-21 p774, Romans 12 vv 9-21 p1139, Matthew 16 vv 21—28 p984

William Temple (Archbishop of Canterbury during World War II) wrote: *People are always saying that conduct is supremely important, and that because prayer helps it, therefore prayer is good. That is true as far as it goes; still truer is that worship is of supreme importance and conduct tests it.* Do you see why it is important that it should be that way round? In our OT lesson Jeremiah is agonising in prayer. He believes that he has a commission from God to preach to the Israelites but it has all gone wrong. The Israelites won't listen to his message and have turned on Jeremiah. The prophet wrestles with God in prayer. Prayer is one of the most natural of human activities and it is certainly right that we should pray. Even people who normally think very little about religion pray when they are in trouble. Clergy are sometimes asked to give advice about prayer. Well, it is perfectly simple. Take time each day to commune with God. Tell Him your troubles. Confess your sins. Don't forget to be thankful for all the good things He gives you. Ask for His blessing on other people. Enjoy worship and praise. Use prayers that other people have written if you find them helpful. Talk to God in your own words. Listen. Let the Holy Spirit speak for you. Also, remember that God is with you every minute of the day and you can always, at anytime, share with Him your thoughts, your perplexities or anxieties, your hopes, your reasons to be happy, anything you might be sorry or ashamed about, absolutely anything that may be on your mind. And meet with other Christians for Sunday services and on other occasions to pray together because Jesus promised to be present whenever even two or three are gathered in His Name.

Prayer helps us to cope with life. I often think how terrible it must be for those of no faith at all when they have to face up to really serious issues. Parents who bring up their children without teaching them to pray are cruelly depriving them of the greatest resource they need for living their lives. Prayer makes us better people and it is certainly right to pray for God's Blessing on what we attempt to achieve in His Name, whether as individuals or as a Church.

Prayer is so good for us that there is the danger that we may pray selfishly, not merely that we might ask God for what we want, rather than for what He wants, but that we might pray simply because it is so good for us. Temple says, *Prayer is good. That is true as far as it goes; still truer is that worship is of supreme importance and conduct tests it.* In the Romans reading, Paul has a great deal to say about Christian conduct, but I am sure that the key words are *let love be without dissimulation* and *continuing instant in prayer*. It is our relationship with God, our communion with Him which determines our relationship with other people and, therefore, our conduct. This relationship is worship and it is what Jesus is talking about in the Gospel when He speaks about how we may lose or find our lives.

The only person we ought to worship is God. The only place I can think of in Christian writing where it is ever said to be appropriate to worship anything other than God is in the Prayer Book marriage service (and the Puritans objected to that and it got left out when the Prayer Book was eventually revised in C20). We may not worship angels or holy people. We may only worship God. To worship is to offer your whole life. To offer your life to anything less than God is to waste it. To fail to offer your life to God is to waste it, because if you are not living for God, you are living for something else and God is the only worth living for.

In the Prayer Book marriage service, the groom says to the bride, *With this ring I thee wed, with my body I thee worship*. Surely the new service means the same, *all that I am I give you. Self-offering = true love = worship*. But we can only say this in the context of a Christian marriage, because, as Christians, we know that our human relationships are *within the love of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit*, (new service) and we make these commitments in His name (old service).

We become what we worship.

Almighty God, whose only Son has opened for us a new and living way into your presence: give us pure hearts and steadfast wills to worship you in spirit and in truth: through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.