

Worship

Readings: Isaiah chapter 6, verses 1-8; Revelation 4

In common with all the Churches throughout the Circuit today we are considering Worship as the theme — and not just worship but Passionate Worship! Whatever that means. I say that because the first thing that springs to mind is of the congregation throwing their hands in the air and giving each other a huge hug and getting enthusiastically emotional. And that immediately produces a negative reaction from some people; — me included.

It doesn't have to mean that. All worship should be passionate but what is worship? I begin with the definition of worship given by Archbishop William Temple:

“Worship is the submission of all our nature to God.
It is the quickening of our conscience by His holiness,
the nourishment of our minds with His truth,
the purifying of our imagination by His beauty,
the opening of our heart to His love,
the surrender of our will to His purpose —

In this context we consider the nature of passionate worship.

Passionate worship is participatory worship. It is not a case of the congregation just sitting there and either being bored or entertained as the case may be. It is a case of the congregation being involved.

A good illustration is to liken the preacher and congregation to an orchestra. The audience is God — not the congregation. The minister/preacher is merely the conductor and every member of the congregation has a part to play. Even if you are not playing the organ or reading the lessons.

The best example of this came when I was a student in college. We were sent out every Sunday to preach and on this occasion I was planned at a village in Wiltshire. There were 15 in the congregation and all went well until half-way through the sermon when a ruddy-faced farmer sitting in the back row suddenly stood up and shouted “Hallelujah”. It threw me completely. Two minutes later he did it again. I reflected on it afterwards and realised that he really was participating. He was involved. He was not just agreeing with what I said but aligning himself with it and letting everybody else know it! The sermon was as much his as mine. The only reason why I don't encourage that is because if you are free to shout “Hallelujah” then you must also be free to shout “Rubbish” and my services would be reduced to chaos!

Passionate worship is expectant worship. Expectancy is an attitude we bring to our worship and it is vital. All too often we come to worship expecting nothing to happen — and the inevitable consequence is that our expectation is fulfilled. But if we come expecting to hear a word from the Lord, whether it be from Bible readings or hymns or the sermon then we will surely hear it. An air of expectancy is something you can feel, it is palpable and it is essential. And nothing is more deflating than when expectancy is replaced by bored resignation. As a preacher I can see everything that goes on and I long since accepted that when it comes to sermon time people surreptitiously look at their watches. The only time it worries me now is when, 10 minutes into the sermon, they hold the watch up to their ears!

Passionate worship is consequential worship. It is not confined to the hour we spend in Church for, if we have really worshipped, it is reflected in what we do during the rest of the week.

Which is why we sang the hymn before the sermon:

“Behold us Lord, a little space from daily tasks set free”.

It ends with the verse:

“Work shall be prayer if all be wrought
As thou wouldst have it done,
And prayer by thee inspired and taught
Itself with work be one”

If, in our worship, we sense the presence of God, it cannot end there. And the best example of all is Brother Lawrence who wrote a small book entitled “The practice of the Presence of God”. Brother Lawrence was a monk who worked in the monastery kitchen. One of his jobs was peeling the potatoes (the chip-monk if you like!) and he said that it was possible to practice the presence of God amongst the pots and pans and potato peelers of the kitchen.

So it is that the daily round and common task is the context in which passionate worship works itself out. Yet all too often we separate worship from work and prayer from politics and Communion from commerce. Many Christians, faced with the choice of going to a prayer meeting or a Trade Union meeting would opt for the Prayer meeting. It’s no wonder that the world is in such a mess for we have confined God to the sacred and left Him out of the secular altogether.

Passion is not just an emotional thing as we suppose it to be. Passion is also a commitment thing and, if we have truly worshipped this morning we shall go from here resolved serve God in every part of life that in us and through us and by us His will might be done and His Kingdom come.