

Matthew, Devotion, Commitment and Worship - Sermon on the Feast of St Matthew **2014**

Chapters 8 and 9 of St Matthew's Gospel has 13 examples of people coming to Jesus. Only two show Jesus making the approach – one is to Peter's mother-in-law, who is too sick to move, and the other is Matthew. An interesting thing for us to ponder is; does Jesus approach Matthew because he is extra special person in God's plan for salvation or is it because Jesus recognises Matthew's fear of rejection and so lays down a challenging invitation?

Either way, even for Matthew, his future depends upon his response- a response of commitment to God and devotion to Jesus. So in all these examples, we learn something significant about coming to faith: faith requires a committed move towards Jesus.

Through the Gospels we learn that all the close apostles and disciples grow in faith as they become more committed to prayer, worship, action, giving, service and especially obedience. As they become more faithful so they spend more time in devotion to God, they willingly give up more of their possessions to build the church, and they listen more intently and obediently to Jesus' direction.

We, the disciples of today, are no different. The only way to grow our faith, to understand God more, to become a better Christian is through our commitment and devotion manifested in these same ways. As we pray more, give more, care more and engage deeper in worship, so we feel our faith deepen and our trust in God increase.

Thus, we must have a constant willingness to deepen our commitment to God in prayer and worship: two of the most important aspects of discipleship, because these are the things through which God unquestionably guides us.

Last week we spoke about the importance of learning to be comfortable in prayer and silence. We discovered that, in the end, we would need to be comfortable meeting God in the silence. Just as Jesus was to meet God in the silence of the Cross, we too, will need to move deeper into God through the silence and it is in this silence that we can hear God's call and direction.

Today we should think a little about worship. In our modern world there is a whole plethora of styles and content for worship. Broadly speaking these may fall into two categories. Some can be quite difficult for the newcomer to understand, but are extremely valuable at deepening our journey into God and when engaged with openly can spiritually sustain an individual at an extremely deep and transformative level. Others, are instantly understandable and engaging to newcomers and can provide an exhilarating experience in the immediate moment, but provide the individual with little of substance. Both have their place in our modern church, but only that which aids our enduring journey towards God is helpful to all of us in the longer-term, because only that can continually build upon our formation towards our living God.

So the, we need to consider what these things carefully, considerately and openly. If we want to be sure that the way we worship includes those things that are valuable in our formational journey, we need to consider those things in the church's tradition that have proven themselves over the test of time. This is such a vast subject area that today we are only going to think about one tiny aspect of it, but a very important aspect – actions and symbols.

Actions and symbols enable us to engage in what is occurring in a way quite unlike anything else. First, we need to remind ourselves that actions having nothing to do with being an evangelical or a catholic, a liberal or a conservative. These labels are never helpful and only ever extremely divisive.

Actions in worship are of course simply physical prayers being made with our body. Devotional actions that move us closer to God. When we bow, genuflect, cross ourselves, hold our hands out as we pray or sing: all these things generate different devotional resonances in our inner psyche as we do them and thus move us closer to God in different devotional ways. A single

action can speak a thousand words. Devotional actions move us deeper into our living God than any single word or sentence could ever do.

Some devotional actions are far more effective when done together in community. Our Anglican liturgy offers some firm guidance for when we as a community should stand, sit, kneel. We stand to show respect. So at the beginning we don't just stand because we are singing a hymn, that is just coincidence. We stand at the beginning of the service in anticipation of God joining us. If the Queen were to enter the room we would all show our respect by standing. So too we should stand for our God.

We believe that the bread and wine are transformed into his body and blood following our Eucharistic prayers. If we were to approach our Queen we would genuflect or bow, so too when we approach God at his Altar or when standing before Christ's body and blood.

Kneeling is important in prayerfulness, because our actions seriously affect our inner ambience. In prayer we need to enter into a prayerful mind. Kneeling helps. If kneeling is difficult for us, then one can still close one's eyes and bow low in one's seat; it will achieve the same internal focus.

As the community becomes more confident in its worship and more committed to engaging corporately with God, so too sitting, bowing and kneeling become more natural.

Other actions, of course, are less corporate and far more about personal devotion: holding our hands open or clasping them in prayer, crossing ourselves for protection or to remind ourselves of Christ's sacrifice on the cross, bowing or genuflecting to show our obedience and respect to God or to acknowledge his presence, raising our arms in song – all these things are down to the individual.

As far as such personal devotion is concerned there is a passage in the New Testament that could transform our devotion and engagement with our living God for each of us, if we took it to heart. St Paul in the letter to the Philippians chapter 2 says 'at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow'. This famous first line to one of my favourite hymns contains a timeless truth. St Paul recognises that small devotional actions have the power to transform our commitment and our discipleship. Over the past two thousand years, trillions of Christians have been deepened in their faith by following this simple direction of St Paul. Actions speak a thousand words.

I would like to task you with a wager. As of today, why not act on these words of St Paul? Each time you hear our Lord's name proclaimed in worship, give a small bow. Then if in a month you don't feel a marked increase in your commitment, devotion and faith and an increase in your confidence as a disciple, I will give you an extra wafer at the communion rail!!!

Bows can be as small or large as you like. If you are embarrassed, then your neighbour need not even know. Bows can be tiny or huge, the important thing is that by doing them they help us to honour our Lord's name. We believe the name of our Lord to be of central importance. Because it is our Lord who brings in his heavenly values to cure our world of all its ills. It is our place to aid the coming of his kingdom. And so devotion to our Lord is essential. Because St Paul is right, as heaven comes near, at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow.

Amen.

R.T. Parker-McGee 2015