

## ELEMENTS IN ACCEPTABLE WORSHIP (Isaiah 1:10-20)

Several weeks ago a bulletin article reminded us what worship really is. The Old Testament reading for 8 August (Isaiah 1:10-20) instructs us about this important matter again. Although God had given detailed instructions to Moses about the temple, the priesthood, sacrifices, and the people's worship, God used the prophet Isaiah to say that He hated insincere worship. God called the Israelites "Sodom and Gomorrah" and said that He did not want their sacrifices or their trampling His courts. He detested their days of worship. He was tired of putting up with them. He would not listen to their prayers (Isa 1:11-15). We need to examine ourselves that He may not make a similar assessment of our worship.

The Israelites thought that they could earn God's favour and blessing by going through the worship that God had commanded in an external way. We must guard against worship that is thoughtless. Jesus has given us the Lord's Prayer as a model, but He does not want us to use it carelessly. God hates the use of our words in worship when He knows that our hearts are far away from Him.

The Israelites also thought that they could earn God's favour without being sorry for their wicked lives. God detested their pride and self-righteousness. Although God wants us to worship Him, confess Him, praise Him, and pray to Him, He does not want us to use what we do to Him as excuses for feeling proud. God detests it when we hate or mistrust our neighbours, think about them with lust, or use our tongues in unbridled ways. God measures our service to Him in thoughts, words, and sacrificial deeds by our love and obedience to Him.

God knows that we need His mercy and forgiveness. He does not need anything from us, but He welcomes people who approach Him as humble receivers. We call our time in His presence on Sundays "services." They are both sacramental and sacrificial. The most important part is God's sacramental service to us through His Word and Sacraments. Our response to Him is service to Him in prayer, praise, and offerings, and using our spoken and sung words in service to our fellow-worshippers.

The order of our church service instructs us by beginning with a reminder that we have been baptised and by leading us to confess our sins to God. Isaiah's words tell us that God takes our lives and our attitudes to our lives into account when we approach Him in worship: "Wash yourselves! Make yourselves clean! Remove your evil deeds from My sight! Stop doing evil! Learn to do good! Try to give right decisions! Straighten out the oppressor! Administer justice to the orphan, and plead the cause of the widow!" We cannot wash sin away from ourselves, but God washes us when we acknowledge with sorrow that we are dirty, and trust in His forgiveness for Jesus' sake.

The central part of worship is receiving God's forgiveness. God told the Israelites, "Please come! Let us argue the case together! ... Although your sins are like bright red cloth, they will become as white as snow. Although they are red like crimson, they will become like wool" (Isa 1:18). We approach Him as people who are aware of our great need, and, like beggars and infants, have nothing to offer Him, but long to receive from Him. Sinners who are clean in God's sight are those whom He has cleansed. Jesus' obedience to God's commandments and His victory over the guilt of human sin on sinners' behalf through His suffering, death, and resurrection are what God reckons to those who believe in Him. The whiteness of His righteousness covers all our red and crimson. That is true service in which God delights, His service to us.

Because worship is essentially the reception of God's cleansing, the means that He uses are vital. We must not separate our faith from God's means, through which He creates and sustains faith. No one would say, "It is the water that makes my dirty face clean, not the washer that applies the water." What makes our faces clean is the wet washer. It is one thing through two things, just as the hendiadys "bread and butter" is really buttered bread. "Home and hosed" is one compound expression for a complete return. It includes both arriving at home and washing the car. It is even more wrong to say, "What justifies and saves me is faith, not God's Word", or "What justifies and saves me is faith, not Baptism." Paul wrote, "Our Saviour Christ Jesus ... through the Gospel has brought life and immortality into the light" (2 Tm 1:10). Paul wrote, "He saved us ... through the washing of regeneration and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Saviour" (Tt 3:4-7). A "not-but" approach to justification and salvation is a false contrast. Our faith in Jesus Christ has been created by the Word and Baptism, and is nourished by the Lord's Supper. Through these tools that God uses on us, the Holy Spirit creates faith, and faith receives the blessings of Jesus Christ as it fastens on Him and on the means that God uses to bring His blessings to us. God offers, conveys, and seals His forgiveness to us in, through, and by His Word and the Sacraments. We recognise the central importance of the Word and the Sacraments during our worship. They are the most precious things that we have, for, in our great need, we receive through them our true heavenly treasure, the righteousness that is valid before God, for Jesus Christ's

sake. When God tells us, “Wash yourselves”, He means that we should use the means for cleansing that He has provided.

Isaiah went into detail about the Israelites’ wicked living. Their putting away of evil was not a means of gaining God’s favour. What mattered was faith in God’s forgiveness. However, God measures the sincerity of people’s confession of sin by their response. John the Baptist said, “Therefore produce fruits worthy of repentance.” The fruits on a tree do not make the tree alive, but are they evidences of the way a living tree is responding. People whose lives do not indicate a response to God indicate that their repentance is not sincere.

God measures the sincerity of our worship by whether we fear, love, and trust in Him and are being fair and loving to our neighbours. He wants us to examine and reform our own behaviour as well as relieving people who are oppressed and speaking up for those who are defenceless.

Although God’s forgiveness in Christ is unconditional, God’s blessings in this life are conditional on loving Him and keeping His commandments. His threats and punishment are conditional on disobedience. His threats should make us fear Him, and His conditional promises should make us love and trust Him. That is how we should understand God’s words through Isaiah, “If you were willing and obedient, you would eat the best things of the land. However, if you refuse and are rebellious, you will be consumed by the sword” (1:19-20).

These are the ways in which we say before God that we are people “who worship in the Spirit of God, who boast in Christ Jesus, and put no confidence in what is bodily” (Plp 3:3).