02 Fellow Worshippers with Christ

Readings: Leviticus 16:1-7a, 2-22; Hebrews 10:19-25; St Mark 15:33-39
Psalm: Antiphonal Psalm 53

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

"God looks down from heaven", said the Psalmist, "looks down on all mankind, to see if any act wisely, if any seek out God. But all are unfaithful, all are rotten to the core; not one does anything good."

Clearly, whoever wrote that had been having a bad week. But even if he was a little jaundiced, he was expressing a strand that runs consistently through Scripture – and it's one that has implications for our worship, which we started to think about last Sunday. We saw then that our belief in worship as a quite distinctive human privilege goes back to our belief in a divine creation. Men and women are made in the image of God, the only creatures capable of knowing and enjoying God. To worship, to offer love and glory to God, is one of the deepest ways that we can affirm our humanity. We are destined to be priests, intermediaries, between God and the rest of his creation.

But, sadly, it is not just so simple as that. The story of creation is followed all too quickly by the story of the Fall – that brilliant account of what's wrong with God's world. None of us slips neatly into that idealised role set out for us in Genesis 1. We inherit a powerful attachment to our own self-interest. We are born into a world that is in constant tension between good and evil, faith and cynicism, love and hate. The Fall severs relations between us and God as well as between individuals and between nations and races. And worship is affected by the Fall as well. It may not be true, as the Psalmist maintained in that liverish mood, that "not one human being does anything good". I certainly do not believe that that is true. But it is true that not one human being is entirely good, and therefore there is not one who is worthy as of right to stand before a God who is all-good. The Jews of the Old Testament were very well aware of this – horribly conscious of the gulf between their vision of a pure and holy God and the knowledge of their own inherent unworthiness. So they had to find ways of reconciling this mis-match – the worship of fallen humanity always reveals a longing for peace and forgiveness, a desire to re-establish good relationships with God.

Like all their neighbours in the ancient Near East, the Jews sought to do this by structures and rituals and sacrifices. There had first of all to be priests – men who were not necessarily better than their neighbours, but who by virtue of their office were thought fit to stand for the people before God and offer prayers and sacrifices on the people's behalf. Our Old Testament reading reminded us how careful the priest's preparation had to be, and how much ceremonial was necessary to ensure that the officiating minister was ritually clean and fit to do his job. That reading also introduced what was later to become a high point of the Jewish calendar – the Day of Atonement, when the cumulative sins of the whole people were symbolically projected on to a poor animal, a scapegoat, which was then driven off into the wilderness bearing (and at the same time removing) the people's guilt. Later, the Jews came to feel the need not just of holy rituals and of holy people, but of a holy place too. Their aspirations became focussed on the Temple at Jerusalem – the only building in which sacrifices could be offered and real worship carried out. Those who lived too far away to worship regularly in the Temple had to make do with their local synagogue – but synagogues

were always a poor substitute: preaching stations, prayer halls, where the Scriptures could be studied and the Psalms could be sung. The effective transactions between God and mankind, though, took place in its fullness only in the Temple. The Atonement ritual, once enacted with the scapegoat in the open air, was transferred to the innermost part of that building – the Holy of Holies, screened off by a curtain through which nobody could pass except the High Priest, and he only once each year.

The whole system can seem quite remote and primitive to us – until we recognise the honesty and the perceptiveness within it. Societies have always had their scapegoats – lepers, witches, albinos, Jews, homosexuals, blacks – but the results are much more sinister and much less therapeutic when the needs projected on to human scapegoats are unconscious and rationalised, than when they are faced openly, the way the Hebrews faced them. All societies have their rituals too – think of people taking care to walk round ladders – and certainly all religions do. There is nobody more thirled to ritual than the Presbyterian who thinks he likes "plain simple worship". Any change in the usual sequence, any deviation from singing St George's Edinburgh at a Communion service, can upset him very much. Even Quaker meetings have a ritual, built around silence.

We benefit from buildings too. The Hebrews knew what they were doing when they put up a Temple dedicated to the worship of God, different from other buildings, special, and as fine as they could make it. There is a danger in trappings like rituals and buildings, and the prophets recognised the danger very clearly. It is that we may come to love the form more than the content and to go through the motions of right worship while leading very uncommitted lives. But that risk does not undo the value of the sanctuary, any more than the risk of an accident makes it a bad thing to travel by car. And we too have our ministers, or "stewards of the mysteries" as Paul once called them – set aside by ordination to deal in holy things. Every Christian minister has reason to be thankful that we preach and celebrate the Sacraments by virtue of our office, not because we are reckoned to be worthy in our own right.

So the insights reflected within Hebrew worship are still relevant, and we cannot just lightly dismiss them. They were precious to Christ, and they are part of our inheritance; yet in themselves they could not meet the need expressed within the rituals. It is not really rational to suppose that by dumping your sins on a goat and then driving it out of the town you have changed your relationship with God or undone the effects of the Fall. Atonement can't be engineered by us, through any ritual. It can only stem from God; and atonement was the central purpose of the coming of the Son of God. All the strands of Hebrew worship were given a quite new expression and interpretation in the light of Jesus' Life and Death and Resurrection and Ascension; and these strands all converge on the Person of Jesus. The Old Testament images and categories are still very much to the fore under the new Covenant, but they are now perceived quite differently. The Temple curtain that had screened off the Holy of Holies was torn down at Jesus' death, because he is himself the everlasting scapegoat, the sacrificial victim, Lamb of God – taking on himself, in love, our guilt, our conscious and unconscious aggro. And he is also Priest; not like other priests by virtue of an office or a form of ceremonial, but as the one individual who is worthy in himself to mediate and intercede – to offer up to God the needs of a world that has failed God.

The rituals were changed and re-interpreted as well: instead of circumcision, Baptism; instead of the Passover, the Lord's Supper; instead of the Saturday Sabbath, Sunday the Lord's Day; and the Temple becomes Church – which means not a building only, but principally a people, every Christian being a living stone in the new structure. So while buildings may be precious

to us and provide a lot of help for worship, they are never necessary in the way the Temple was. The mystique and the centrality that once belonged to that one building in Jerusalem are now transferred to Christ.

All Christian worship in fact has to be channelled through Christ, and understood in the light of Christ. Indeed it is sounder to say all Christian worship is an extension of Christ's own worship and derives its reality from him. He is still praying with us – still our Priest, still our Atonement. It is by virtue of being joined with him through Baptism that we representatives of fallen humanity can once more come before God confidently. We do not worship any more to win God's favour; He has already shown us his favour. That which we could not do for ourselves, he in his mercy has done for us. And the key to the whole thing is Christ. So, it is no empty formula that leads us to round off our prayers "through Jesus Christ our Lord"; it is not vain repetition that accounts for "Father, Son and Holy Spirit" cropping up about ten times in every service. Worship without Christ is humanity seeking out God. In Christ, worship is humanity's response to a God who has already sought us out, and found us.

To that God who made us and has met our need, to the Son who offered himself for us and the Spirit by whom we have faith, be all glory and true worship now and for ever. Amen.

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