08 Worship as Communion

Readings: Isaiah 6:1-10; Revelation 4:1-2, 6-11; St Luke 12:1-7
Psalm 93 (plainsong)

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

This morning we round off our thinking about worship that has been the basis of our sermons for the past two months. There are aspects of worship we haven't yet touched on, which can be grouped together as one theme of Worship as Communion. The very word "communion" to us immediately evokes the sacrament – which is the distinctive and most basic act of Christian worship. It is one of the great ironies of the Scottish Reformation that because there were originally so few ministers in the Reformed Church the sacrament could not be celebrated regularly, as the Reformers had hoped it would be. Sunday services without the sacrament were led by Readers, using the material in Knox's Book of Common Order. The ministers travelled from parish to parish, taking Communion services – the origin of the practice still prevailing in the Highlands, where the sacrament is generally celebrated by a visitor. Once there were sufficient ministers for all the parishes, infrequent celebrations were already established as the Presbyterian thing to do. I suggested last week that it may be time now to consider whether the Lord's Supper should be made available more often to our members. But the sacrament, precious though it is, is not different in kind from other worship, and the grace received within it is not some sort of spiritual wonder drug. What we've come to call Communion highlights and embodies in a vivid way truths and relationships that are valid for all Christian worship.

There is first our communion, or bond, with each other. Worship draws us into a relationship that is compared most often in the Bible to a family. We come in through the church doors a motley collection of individuals (very motley really – in what other context would this same community be constituted? Certainly not on the golf course or the bowling green or the lecture room or the union meeting or the package holiday) and we become here the body of Christ: spiritual relatives, with obligations to each other, with shared values and a common purpose. Each of us has an equal right to be here; each member is as important as all others, whatever our rank or position in the weekday world. And the great bond, or leveller, is the total dependence we all share on the grace and the mercy of God. Standing equally in need, none of us has any grounds to feel superior to any other; being redeemed by the same Saviour, called by the same Holy Spirit, the forgiven children of a loving Father, all of us become through God's grace kings and priests. So, any rifts within the family are an affront to the Father of the family as well as to each other. A congregation is bonded together at a level deeper than any secular organisation. Whether or not that bond is being demonstrated at a service by the passing of the bread and by the sharing of the cup, its reality applies to all our worship. Nobody should leave church with relationships jangled or with grudges unforgiven. We have all drawn equally from the fountainhead of love. We are equally committed to be channels for it.

But the circle of this communion into which we are drawn by the activity of worship extends further than the people gathered in one building. In praise and prayer we are linked with all the other congregations in Edinburgh, all over Scotland, and throughout the world, who also acknowledge the lordship of Christ and are voicing their praise in hundreds of different languages and idioms, in buildings ranging from mud huts to vast cathedrals, and in climates as dissimilar as the ice caps and the tropics. Surely no-one who has any sense of the Church catholic could possibly imagine that there is any single right way worship should be offered,

any music that's inherently more worthy of the praise of God than any other, or a special language that God wants to listen to. The Church started as a branch of Judaism. It divided between East and West. Within the past two hundred years it has diversified enormously. There may be principles, drawn from the Bible, that apply to all the Church's worship, but there is no fixed pattern. Just as the absence of any information about Christ's appearance allows every culture to identify completely with him – so that Westerners can see him as blue-eyed blond, and Africans as Negro, and Laplanders as an Eskimo – so the absence of a blueprint for the Church's worship allows every dialect and culture to affirm the faith in ways appropriate to its tradition and to its locality. Every time we worship we are part of an enormous and a richly varied fellowship.

We are part, too, of the Communion of Saints; for the faith that unites us in this world links us also with those who have been taken to the next world. Our first sermon in this series started with the opening chapter of the Bible – the account in Genesis of human beings created as a different species from all other inhabitants of planet earth – the only creatures capable of knowing God and enjoying him. For today's Epistle we turned right to the other end of Scripture, where the Book of Revelation peers as far into the future as Genesis peers back into the past. Like Genesis, Revelation takes us into realms of poetry and picture. The beginning and the ending of the world are both far off our present map. Nobody was there to make notes when the world began, nobody can work out how it's going to be fulfilled. Both things have to be translated into symbols drawn from space and time; both by definition transcend space and time, but we can't picture things that don't relate in some way to our own experience. So there's no point in getting too hung-up on the biblical pictures of heaven, or trying to deduce from them what life outside space and time will be like. The images we have – the wedding feast, the city with jewelled streets, the congregation gathered round a sapphire throne singing across seas of crystal – these are the only hints we are given, and quite clearly none of them is to be taken literally.

Two things are consistent though, however much the imagery changes. One is that those in heaven are still very much aware of what is going on here and very much involved in it. We affirm every week our belief in the Communion of Saints, as part of the Apostles' Creed; but within our own denomination I don't think we have made enough of the great cloud of witnesses who still surround us and who still support us. The reaction against prayers for the dead was so strong at the Reformation, because of the abuses and the crude sale of Indulgences that took place earlier, that for some years even funerals were banned; and Scottish people have been left without the quite legitimate support that faith in the life beyond death ought to give. It seems to me a very cruel thing to tell a newly widowed woman that she must not remember her husband in her prayers any more, when she has probably been praying for him every day for fifty years during their marriage. It isn't a question of trying to upgrade the departed, let alone of trying to manipulate some contact with them like the Spiritualists, but of affirming what we say the Church believes in. In our services we have a prayer of commemoration, in which we give thanks for those who have gone to glory ahead of us, and express our hope of being united with them on the other side of the curtain we call death. It's a prayer that isn't likely to mean very much to many young people, but will matter more as years increase and more of our circle are not any longer in this world. The communion with the Church in heaven opened up by worship is a factor that we have to take largely on trust at this stage; but this doesn't mean that it's not real.

The other constant factor in the images we have of heaven is the absolute centrality of worship. In Scripture saints aren't pictured simply making whoopee – still less are they pictured as enjoying "eternal rest", which is the depressing state to which we generally

relegate them. Every time we hear of them they are singing their hearts out to the praise and the glory of God. Heaven is about togetherness, and it is about worship: the sheer enjoyment of God the Creator for his own sake. And that picture of life in its fullness, life as it is meant to be, brings us full circle to the point from which we started, with Adam and Eve in their garden, their contact with God unimpaired. I doubt if all that many people realise that worship is how we hope to spend eternity; maybe it's a good thing more don't realise it! We have made church-going so much a matter of duty, failed so badly to make worship the inspiration of life here that it should be, that a heaven consisting of worship would probably strike most people as a dreary, boring concept. Yet this is where the very bedrock of reality and the whole purpose of life lie. We are created in the image of a God whose glory fills the universe, yet who, we are assured, knows every hair on every individual's head. Worship affirms our communion, our relationship with that transcendent yet close, tender God: the all-powerful who chose to express his deep love towards us on a criminal's cross.

It's become almost a cliché nowadays to say "the Church of Jesus Christ exists for mission". And indeed that's true, insofar as there's a desperate need to make the love of God more widely known and draw people into the faith. We need to take the task of sharing faith much more seriously than we do. But that task is a means to an end; the end itself is worship. Mission is the call to others to take their part in creation's chorus; but when every last soul has been brought in and there's no need for mission any longer, the Church will not have worked itself out of a job, like doctors in a world where there's no longer any illness. The chorus will be ringing clearer and louder than ever before, and everything will be refined down to that simplest of all songs of praise – Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty – which is about as close as we can come to the distilled essence of all worship.

This series started from the prospect of the new organ being built here next winter, and the possibilities that should be opened up when we can use the building in a fuller way, with seating that's less rigid and a PA system that allows more voices to be heard. I hope that we'll be led to new discoveries and to more varied forms of service. In the end of the day, though, all worship that's devised by wayward souls like us is inarticulate and must be woefully inadequate to the God for whom it is intended. We don't have the words, we don't have the songs, we don't have the minds or the imaginations or the energy, to worship the Creator as he should be worshipped. The basis of whatever we do here has to be the grace of Jesus Christ, crucified and risen and ascended, and his power working through the Holy Spirit; for everything depends on that. We can only tinker with the parts. The power and the reality belong to him alone.

To the God who is the source and the fulfilment of our being, to Christ our Priest who draws us into his own worship, to the Spirit who inspires our praise and makes our worship real, be all honour and glory for ever. Amen.

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