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THE NEW SHOFAR

God wants substance and not style

There is no separation between worship and life – Jewish theology

One of the core messages of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount is: *all that happens in our daily lives needs to be shaped as acts of worship offered to God.* When we engage in formal liturgical worship, we then include each of these moments of the sacrificial offerings of daily life and work. As believers, we exist for the worship and service of God and God alone.

It is at this point we can understand Christianity as being counter-cultural. Worship has God as its subject. Always God. Never the self. Worship is always the result of a divine call to *be* someone in the world – an invitation to be *as Christ*; to make Christ known. This we do when we ensure all we *are* and all we *do* is an acceptable offering in the sight of God.

Psalm 19:14 Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer.

And why is this important?

It is important for Christians today because it urges us to move the focus of our discipleship and parish renewal from a preoccupation with the self, on what we are doing, back to an emphasis on my response to what to the Almighty is doing. We might then see ourselves more as being the Body of Christ in this place than the parish of X.

A genuine Body of Christ will eschew all forms of the narcissism that endangers the Church, questions such as: *what can this religion do for me and do it more efficiently?* This manifests itself in a focus on style rather than substance, on what will please the self rather than assist in the formation of genuine disciples for Christ.

The members of the Body of Christ will keep God at the centre of our worship. It will not prioritize the question: *what can I get out of this* but explore words, ways and deeds that will give God the glory from the entire Body. If our worship does not change us, transform us, challenge us and “send us out”, then it cannot be the worship of God.

God is not interested in our style, or in us being satisfied

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A major challenge for Christians is the “**how**” of this. How do we ensure our every word and deed is something we believe God will consider “**acceptable**”? What would make a word or deed “**unacceptable**” to God? How do we re-establish our relationship with God after an **unacceptable** offering?

One of the great mistakes of faith communities is the belief that our churches will grow and be filled to overflowing if we can just *meet people where they are*, or if we could be *all things to all people*. It is essential that we communicate the Good News of Jesus Christ in a way that is accessible to our contemporary world but that does not mean dumbing down the Gospel to make discipleship easier for people. A transforming faith is about substance, not style (**note:** multiple studies show that more than 90% of new-Christians come to Christ through the example, witness and invitation of a friend rather than by style of worship). The Church grows when it is faithful to the *traditions of the apostles*, to what Jesus the Christ himself taught, and sent his disciples to teach to the world.

And what is The Truth? Is there A Truth?

Here is a difficulty for too many of our Anglican leaders – Bishops and clergy alike. They lose sight of the essentials of what it means to be a Christian. To be a follower of Jesus is to believe that the fullness of the Truth of what it means to be fully human and fully alive; the meaning and purpose of life is to be found in Christ and Christ alone. It is a unique and distinctive way of viewing reality. It includes a body of teachings and religious truths around which men and women are committed in the transformation of their life and the world.

Is this not what we find in Matthew’s *Sermon on the Mount*? This is not about setting down guidelines for individuals. It is outlining a way of life in the Kingdom of God. It is about living together in the world as the Body of Christ - that the world may be healed.

This is why we are so blessed to be Christians in today’s world. We are able to tap into the accumulated and lived wisdom and beauty of the Church, qualities built up under the Holy Spirit through the life and witness of so many saints. As one spiritual writer puts it, in the *faith of the apostles*, we believers are ***set free from the accidents of time and place*** (Percy Dearmer). It is in sharing life, faith, worship and acts of mercy we are joined with the great array of believers around the world, along with the faithfully departed already around God’s throne.

Reading from the Sermon helps us to avoid what Nietzsche calls *feverishness*. It means that we are tempted to lose faith in the power of the roots of our faith to come to flower and to produce fruit...***feverishness is the condition of an institution that has ceased to be faithful to its origins. It is then caught up in a restless, cosmopolitan hunting after the new and ever newer things*** (Guinness *Dining with the Devil*). We find ourselves struggling to balance the need to have faith in what God is doing and the need for us to go out into the world and collaborate in what God is already doing “out there”. God promised Peter and the Apostles that the gates of hell will never prevail against the Body of Christ. The future of our Church is thus guaranteed as long as we are the true and living Body of Christ.

We live at a time when so many of our actual historical links to the apostolic teachings are being weakened. Matthew calls us to become a community of memory, perpetuating the narratives of the past and bringing the past into the present. Churches do not die because they hold onto the traditional beliefs and practices of the past. Only an enduring, orthodox Christian faith can bring about the kind of commitments to discipleship Christ demands. People require an empowering system of beliefs that are founded in Jesus. Nothing else will work.

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