

Worship and Sacrifice

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“The summit of worship is a life laid down.” Anon.

Thousands had fled the burning township, clutching their children as they raced for their lives. For months racial tensions had been high between the black and Indian communities. Then the rumour spread that a black family had been attacked. The reaction was swift and terrible. Within the hour hundreds of homes were ablaze.

The Indian community fled the district, thousands making their way downriver to escape the violence and hatred. The government sent in troops to restore calm, but there hung in the air a mixture of shame and fear. Behind the sea wall, the homeless Indians started building shacks with pieces of timber, cardboard, tin and any other materials they had been able to salvage from the ruins.

Within weeks the thousands of squatters had erected a new township of squalor. When the church gathered for prayer, moved by the plight of the refugees, I suggested that we all should give what we could to help these poor people.

As we worshipped and prayed, an elderly widow came forward. I knew her well. She lived alone, having never had children. Her house had none of the comforts and conveniences that most of us take for granted. To bring brightness and colour to the bare boards of her house, she had pasted pictures from old magazines on the wall.

That night she dropped a small paper bag on to the table where we were placing our offerings. Later, when I gathered them up, I found that her paper bag was two-thirds full of rice. I knew that, small as it was, this offering probably represented all she had. Yet it was not given reluctantly or with murmuring. She had made her sacrifice with the peace and joy of a worshipping heart.

The first mention in the Scriptures of the word `worship' is in Abraham's offering of Isaac upon the altar. In restraining his servants from accompanying them to Mount Moriah, he said, `Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you' (Genesis 22:5).

Abraham never considered that he and Isaac would not return. He was not about to indulge in some misguided act of religious zealotry. Nor did he view the sacrifice of Isaac upon an altar as in some way appeasing a savage God. Abraham was confident that his sacrificing of Isaac would not be to loss but to gain, that the boy would live.

`By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had received the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead, and figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death' (Hebrews 11:17-19).

The first mention of any topic in Scripture often gives a clue to its broader spiritual significance. By this principle, worship and sacrifice are forever linked.

Whenever we worship it is with a desire to give over to God something we feel we cannot keep to ourselves. Whether it is the thankfulness of the heart, the praise of the soul or the adoration of the spirit, we long to bestow them on him and in this sense they become our sacrifices of worship.

They are not sacrifices aimed at appeasing an angry God or bribing a reluctant God, but positive acts in which we gladly give something of ours to him. And this calls for more than mere words; there must be substance to the giving over of our lives, just as Abraham visibly and physically gave Isaac to be bound on the altar.

The final vision of ultimate worship in the Scriptures is centred on the Lamb slain before the foundation of the world, a reminder afresh that all worship is forever joined to sacrifice.

In the meantime, the apostle Paul describes our worship in terms of our surrendered lives: `I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God-which is your spiritual act of worship' (Romans 12:1). Our worship is only as rich as our life.

Each day provides us with new opportunities to demonstrate our commitment to Christ by laying down our lives for him. Paul's idea of the surrendered life is not to live as a religious recluse, cut off from the world of need, imprisoned in religious thinking. Instead, it is to be the outward flow of the love of God to the world around us.

To touch that world will not require most of us to cross the oceans. It will mean involvement with the immediate world of our own neighbourhood, our street, our office, our home. Here we are provided with a multitude of opportunities to worship God by giving ourselves to serve the needs of others. We can give him our eyes through which to look with compassion, our mouth through which to speak, our hands through which to heal, our feet through which to go, and our hearts through which to love. This is our worship.

This marks the dividing-line between the religious and the spiritual, between the Pharisee and the Samaritan. Jesus was never out of touch. The Christ who daily closed in with his Father in worship was the same Christ who daily walked through crowded streets bringing God to the people.

To live this way ourselves requires the ,denial of our selfish wants and the giving of ourselves to serve the desires of God. Worship is more than singing songs and raising our

hands in praise to the Almighty. It means giving our money, our time, our counsel, our understanding, our care-our bag of rice.

God will never require us to pay a cost or make a sacrifice greater than the one he has already been willing to make himself. Christ on the cross is the ultimate sacrifice, the ultimate example, the ultimate provocation for all worship. In the light of that, we can identify with C.T. Studd when he said, **'If Jesus Christ be God and died for me, then no sacrifice can be too great for me to make for him.'**

Today, people's values have lost direction. Worth is measured in material terms: the house we own, the car we drive, the vacations we take. This root of materialism in the human heart ensures that those who have abundant possessions are never content; there will always be the desire for more. For them, money represents power. It gives them the ability to control others, to manipulate and manoeuvre their way through life, taking advantage of people and situations to further their own ends.

But for the lover of God the material things of this world have lost their power. The cross has effectively severed the root of materialism and the heart is now captured to a higher goal, that of God himself. Our values in life are now different. The thing we long for most is to bring pleasure to the heart of our God.

When everything we are and have has been yielded to him, we no longer fear for ourselves in life. Like Paul we can say, 'I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him for that day' (2 Timothy 1:12).

It leaves us gloriously free in life for we are no longer grasping and greedy, no longer trying to hold on to the material things we have received. They are ours to enjoy and to use to his glory. But whether we have them or not will never alter the fact that, in finding Christ and worshipping him, we have discovered and are enjoying the thing that excites the heart the most because it is engaged in that which is of utmost value.

To have everything without God is to be poor beyond description, but to have God and nothing else is to be rich beyond compare.

When we have seen the worth of God which is the touchstone of worship, then our love can never hold on to anything that we are or have. Everything is immediately his.

Were the whole realm of nature mine, That were an offering far too small; Love so amazing, so divine,

Demands my soul, my life, my all.