25/86 The Meaning and Importance of Worship

This report was received by the Synod of the Diocese of Sydney in October 1988.

Preamble

1.   This report is presented in response to resolution 25/86, passed by the Synod in October 1986. The full text of the resolution reads as follows -

"This Synod requests the Standing Committee to appoint a committee to consider, and report to the next session on -

(a)   the meaning and importance of worship in the life of the Christian Church today;

(b)   the relevance of this to Anglican formularies and structures; and

(c)   practical ways in which the desire expressed by our Archbishop for a 'renewal of true worship' in this Diocese might be promoted."

2.   Those appointed pursuant to this resolution were Archdeacon V.W. Roberts (Chairman), Mrs R. Christmas, Mrs C. Dixon, Revs J.E. Davies, P.J. Hughes, Dr W.J. Lawton, M.B. Robinson, J.G. Mason and J.W.H. Squires.

3.   The Committee presented an interim report to Standing Committee in August 1987 and requested leave to sit again with a view to presenting its final report for the 1988 Synod. Canon J.C. Chapman was appointed to the Committee in August 1987. The Rev Dr W.J. Lawton resigned in September, and Mrs C. Dixon resigned in October 1987.

Introduction

4.   The Committee has attempted to present guidelines for thinking about and improving Sunday "services". It has in particular investigated the question "what is worship?", and the extent to which the word "worship" is appropriately to be used of what takes place under the term "church services". The words "worship" and "services" (in inverted commas) are used in this report with the sense and meaning that they have in common usage.

5.   The Committee has wished to produce a statement that can be taken up by parishes across the spectrum in the Diocese, and used to examine and enrich the character of Sunday "services".

6.   In the light of this, the Committee -

(a)   Acknowledges the existence of a wide variety in the "services" of our parishes and the desires expressed, on the one hand, for more flexibility and, on the other, for regular and familiar use of prayer book forms.

(b)   Maintains, in view of the foregoing, the views that

(i)   the BCP and AAPB currently provide acceptable forms for regular Christian gatherings;

(ii)   it is important to foster a deeper understanding of both the BCP and AAPB;

(iii)   AAPB in particular should be used more intelligently and creatively, taking full advantage of the flexibility already contained within it.

(c)   Encourages parishes to be aware of the sociological and behavioural factors which exist in any congregation and of the human realities of their own congregation in particular. (See Appendix 1 "Church: a divine reality; a human reality".)

7.   As indicated, the Committee has paid particular attention to the word "worship" itself, questioning its appropriateness as a description of what we do "in church". The Committee would encourage all readers of this report to examine their own use of the word "worship" in the light of the following points, which are further developed in the report. These are as follows -

(a)   The New Testament uses worship language of *all* of life.

(b)   The New Testament rarely if ever uses worship language of the behaviour of Christians when gathered as a church.

(c)   The use of the word "worship" in common English usage suggests the activity of men and women who are doing something towards God, whereas the *emphasis* in the behaviour of gathered Christians in the New Testament is on the activity of the Godhead towards and among us. To use "worship" of church "services" as many do can reflect and teach a pattern of thinking inconsistent with the character of the Gospel.

(d)   Much of the difficulty in using the English word "worship" is because it derives from the idea of offering someone their honour, due or worth. This word is used to translate at least three different Greek words used in the New Testament (see Appendix 2, New Testament "Worship" Words).

Part One: "Worship"

8.   Worship is the appropriate response of the entire person to God's revelation in Christ: it is an all-of-life activity. In Romans 12:1, for example, readers are urged to present their bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, "which is your spiritual worship" (*latreia*: see Appendix 2). The New Testament writers in general take over the language of Old Testament ritual worship, and use it as metaphors for Christian living. Hebrews 12:28-29, 13:15-16 and I Peter 2:5 provide further examples.

9.   The word "worship" *may* then be used of what we do in "services", for as Christians we are continually to be worshipping the Father in our words and actions. Our church activity is in large part to encourage and enable us to do this. However, it is potentially misleading to describe Sunday "services", or any liturgy, as "worship", since -

   (a)   we don't speak of any other activity in this way, and consequently imply that *only* cultic, formal activities are "worship";

   (b)   the focus in so speaking can tend to fall on the *form* of the activity, rather than on the personal attitude;

   (c)   linguistically the implication is that "worship" is something a person does for God, which is a significantly incomplete view of our "services" (e.g. "I go to church to worship God").

10.   Such a way of talking, therefore, can encourage the assumption that we "worship" simply on the basis of attendance; that we do not "worship" in other parts of life, and that "worship" is a one-way offering by people to God.

11.   The Bible must be our guide in deciding what we should do when we meet as the church. The Committee presents the following essential features -

   (a)   Worship, in the Biblical sense, is used to describe the *total* response of a person to the Lordship of Christ.

   (b)   Christians meet together in the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ to hear him speak to them, to encourage and minister to one another and to respond to him with prayer, thanks, praise, the breaking of bread, and wholehearted allegiance. (So Colossians 3:15-17 and also Acts 2:42 ff.) God's Word is central in the gathering of God's people. Our part is to listen, and to respond in obedience to his voice in a life of worship (as in Romans 12:1). The gathering, biblically understood, equips us to do this also in every other area of our lives.

   (i)   A majority of the Committee sees Israel at Sinai to be the most determinative model for church in the Bible. God calls his people to himself, comes down to them and speaks to them of their lives and calling, to which they respond, undertaking to be obedient. (Exodus 19-41, especially 19:3-9). This experience is profoundly affected by the reality of Christ (II Corinthians 3:7-4:6) but the model remains valid (Deuteronomy 18:15ff, Acts 7:37, Hebrews 12:25). Others of the Committee think that Acts 2:42 better delineates the purpose for gathering.

   (ii)   Christ is present with his people through his Spirit (I Corinthians 3:16), and speaks through the people who exercise the gifts which the ascended Christ has given to the Church (e.g. Ephesians 4:7-13). Essential among these ministries are the declaratory gifts.

   (iii)   We are to exhort and encourage one another to respond in love and obedience to Christ's love, and to do this in appropriate ways in every area of life (John 13:34-35, Galatians 5:25-6:10, Hebrews 10:19-25).

   (iv)   When we meet, everything is to build up the body (I Corinthians 12:7, 14:12, 14:26).

   (v)   The "movement" of our attention, in church, is -

   I   Vertical :   God to us - in Christ.

   II   Horizontal: Us to each other - through Christ in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

   III   Vertical :   Us to God - through Christ, enabled by the Holy Spirit.

   (c)   Worship, therefore, is the activity of all the people of God, individually and corporately. It is never viewed by the New Testament as a sole preserve of a special class of people such as apostles, prophets, teachers or elders. (Consider, for example, I Peter 2:4-10; Philippians 2:17, 30).

Part Two: When We Meet

12.   The need now is to explore any tension between what has been said so far and what actually happens in Anglican "services". What ought our expectations of our meetings to be? What changes are to be considered? Which of our existing patterns are essential, which acceptable or optional, and which to be avoided? In this second part, the report seeks to relate the essentials outlined so far to the practical issues raised by our historical experiences.

13.   The New Testament evidence of church procedure and content is sketchy, in keeping with the nature of the evidence and the fact that in Christ the believer is essentially liberated from cultic or ritual obligation. Our present Anglican patterns derive from two principles: (a) the adoption of such biblical models as can be identified, and (b) the view that we are free to develop patterns of doing things as long as they are not contrary to the clear teaching of Scripture. Our existing forms of "service" for Morning and Evening Prayer and the Lord's Supper reveal the assumption that it is right for the congregation of believers to meet to -

    (a)   Hear God's Word and be challenged, motivated and encouraged to live in the wider community as God's people.

    (b)   Praise and thank God for his goodness and love revealed in Jesus Christ by focusing specifically on the nature and activity of God, especially in relation to issues and needs that affect the lives of his people; and to gather at the Lord's Table to proclaim the Lord's death until his glorious return, and "feed on him in our hearts by faith with thanksgiving". In this, church is therefore an occasion for celebration.

    (c)   Reflect on the need for true repentance and to accept the promise of God's full and free forgiveness in Christ.

    (d)   Be assured of being at peace with God, and so be motivated to honour and serve Jesus Christ as Lord.

    (e)   Pray together about the common concerns of God's people and the world in which we live.

    (f)   Discern and exercise the gifts of the Holy Spirit for the building up of believers in their relationship with Christ and with one another.

14.   For the framers of our Prayer Books a church "service" is a meeting: a meeting of God in Christ with his people, and therefore of his people with each other. The primary reality is that of God's people gathering in submission to his Word. Our "services" not only provide for this to be done, but also an opportunity to respond in prayer and praise. The following is one explanation of the key features of our present "services":

    (a)   The Word of God will be projected verbally and symbolically. Traditionally, the sermon has played a major role in such "worship", by emphasising the acts and words of God as expressed in the Bible. In church-meeting we explore the initiative of divine love which searches out a wayward humanity and points to the divine-human encounter with Christ. Reconciliation is always at its centre, because this is the declared purpose of our almighty God.

    (b)   By emphasising reconciliation, the sermon becomes a symbolic focus of all "worship". It expounds the paradox that fallen creatures are embraced by a heavenly Father whose will it is to redeem and transform them. The sermon also explores the "humanity" of the Christian religion: its words link personal needs to the community in which we exist or find meaning.

    (c)   From Apostolic times, the sacraments have provided a way of enacting and symbolising the proclamation of Christ's atoning death. They are significant means of heightening congregational awareness of the intersection between divine love and human response. Their performance will inevitably express the central motifs of Christ's death and resurrection, His ascension and the giving of the Spirit. Their language will be coloured by the needs for personal spiritual fulfilment and by the long history of denominational and sectarian rivalries.

    These, together with other actions or dramatic presentations of the Gospel, are ancillary to God's Word, not substitutes for it. To use the language of the Reformation, they are *Action*, and they are "visible words". In our non-literary society, the need to experiment here is all the more pressing.

15.   Church "services" must stand in the mainstream of Christian tradition. This will not necessarily mean the retention of certain language or style of expression. Some terminology as part of our common tradition, is essential, but in the main, liturgy must be seen as a living medium. It cannot avoid, as in the use of the Creeds, a recollection of past victories, but if it is to help interpret our existential dilemma, it is essential that it be contemporary. For example, we need to examine the language of hymns, songs and choruses, the canticles and collects etc, lest God's revelation of himself be obscured by what is erroneous, antiquarian, or trivial.

16.   Church is primarily for the faithful, but should be of such a character that unbelievers who may be present might be convicted by what they hear and see of the reality of God with us (I Corinthians 14:1825). The principle of *interpretation* of non-verbal communication, expounded by Paul in this same chapter, likewise must apply to modern possibilities in our "services", such as dance, drama, or mime. The issue is not one of whether the communication is verbal or non-verbal but whether it is intelligible and consistent with Scripture.

17.   The Prayer Books are a rich and useful pattern for Christian corporate activity. It is imperative that future revisions acknowledge the changes to religious and ethnic structure in Australian society. The Committee therefore recognises the need for ongoing liturgical reform. There is a case for controlled revision as argued,

for example, in the Preface to AAPB (page 9). However, progress in developing effective forms of service ought to be on the basis that -

(a)   In church the "movement" should be -

I   Vertical :   God to us - in Christ.

II   Horizontal: Us to each other - through Christ in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

III   Vertical :   Us to God - through Christ, enabled by the Holy Spirit.

(b)   Existing forms of service should be as fully understood and appreciated as possible.

18.   The Committee hopes that its report might encourage new and renewed concern for the enrichment of congregational experience and the strengthening of the Christian's all-of-life behaviour.

For and on behalf of the Committee

V.W. ROBERTS
Chairman

3 May 1988

Appendix 1

Church: A Human Reality; A Divine Reality

That church is a miracle of God's grace need not lead us to be naive about the human reality in congregational behaviour. Congregations will at one level be no different from other human associations. Moreover, they vary in the extent to which they embrace consciously their local, national or ecclesiastical histories, and the culture of the community from which attenders come. Their meetings, though verbally focused by and on the Gospel, are also culturally and denominationally determined, usually more unconsciously than consciously. Any group of people meeting regularly, as a congregation does, will be characterised by a multitude of human factors which operate at the unconscious, emotional and non-rational levels of our being. Refusal to recognise such factors, or denial of their existence, can lead the activity of gatherings into unreality. We must live with the tension of being part of congregations which are at one and the same time divine and human realities.

Appendix 2

New Testament "Worship" Words

The English word "worship" derives from the idea of offering someone or something their *honour, due* or *worth.*In the New Testament, three Greek word groups and their cognates - *proskunein, latreuein* and *leitourgein - illustrate* the point.

(a)   *Proskunein* describes an attitude of reverence for a holy God. Its basic meaning is "to bow", "to prostrate oneself". The word is used in the Bible as a physical correlate of an inward attitude of reverence for God. Faith, therefore, the true response of one who "bows", is the recognition of God as the one who alone is great and worthy of praise.

(b)   *Latreuein* (and *latreia)* translates a Hebrew term used in the Old Testament which has the sense of *serving God, loving him* and *obeying him* (see, for example, Deuteronomy 10:12-13). The Bible views this as a response to God's covenant love: it is not a meritorious work. The theme is developed in Romans 12:1-2 where the Old Testament motifs of "sacrifice" are used in relation to "spiritual worship". Worship involves not only acknowledging God in word, but living out its meaning in daily life.

(c)   *Leitourgein* in the Old Testament generally described the function of the intercessory priest who offered the people's prayers, sacrifices and needs to God. In the New Testament Epistle to the Hebrews, Christ's "ministry" *(leitourgia) is* shown to be the perfect culmination of the Old Testament priestly ministry - His was the perfect sacrifice for sin, He was the perfect high priest. There are, however, a few occasions in the New Testament where the meaning of *leitourgein (leitourgia) is*expanded. In Philippians 2:17, for example, Paul uses *leitourgia* to refer to his own ministry as an apostle. In this sense, "worship" implies "proclamation". Paul in Romans 15:16 sees himself as a minister *(leitourgos),* that is, one whose offering is to present every one mature in Christ (see Colossians 1:18), and this occurs through the preaching of the Word of God.

Appendix 3

Some Practical Areas Meriting Investigation and Critique

1. *Planning services as a total "action"*

This can be achieved only when the "service" leaders, normally the parish clergy, give the planning of services the highest priority. They will need to encourage, through example and training, the participation of others in the congregation.

2. *Developing an awareness of congregational dynamics*

This aspect of leadership focuses on what is in fact happening when we gather, rather than on what we think should be happening.

3. *Explaining the role of movement*

    (a) Considering the links between the doctrines of creation and redemption and our physical and emotional experiences (both individually and corporately) when gathered as a congregation.

    (b) Identifying the present patterns of movement (in-out; sit, kneel, stand; movement towards significant locations - table, font, lectern etc in the whole context of architectural design).

    (c) Considering the place of dance and drama in helping to achieve the goals of our gatherings.

4. *Assessing the place of music*

    (a) Examining the role of music in human experience.

    (b) Considering ways music enhances or limits the primary aims of congregational activity.

    (c) Assisting learning about music across age and cultural barriers.

    (d) Discovering the role of music as an expression of denominational and congregational culture and tradition.

5. *Alerting clergy and people to issues of "role"*

    (a) What is the role of the incumbent in a "service", and of those to whom his responsibilities are delegated? How does it relate to other roles expected of the incumbent?

    (b) Should more members of a congregation be involved and if so, how?

    (c) What are the positive and negative functions of clerical dress, and how can we assess various responses to the wearing or non-wearing of certain robes?

    (d) How can members of the congregation employ their gifts and spiritual insights in an appropriate way for the building up of the body of Christ?

6. *Church Calendar*

The value and limitations of observing the doctrines, days and seasons of the Church's year.