

THE LIBERATION OF WORSHIP

**The Dr Robert Lee Lecture delivered in Greyfriars Kirk,
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The title I have chosen is intentionally ambiguous. It refers first to worship as liberating, the freedom to which Christian worship points us, into which in part we enter in worship, of which worship is the sign. And, in the second place, it refers to the freeing of worship so that it may be authentically Christian, and therefore liberating, worship, an expression of the freedom of the Spirit.

1. Worship as Liberating

Come with me to the remote little village of Muthialapad in the Andhra country of South India. There is as yet no motorable road, and we must approach either on foot or by bullock-cart, a sign that this is far from being a prosperous part of the country. The little Christian community is entirely composed of converts, one or two generations back, from an Untouchable caste, the Malas. Poverty-stricken, oppressed, and despised for centuries, the change of religion has brought little visible change in the social and economic condition of the community. Their ramshackle huts are crowded together in a damp hollow a little distance from where the higher caste people live. And there, totally incongruously, stands a tidy little gothic church. The building, and — far more important — the worship which takes place within it are of profound significance for that little group of poor and oppressed people. To us at first this comes as something of a surprise. The building has no architectural or artistic merit, and jars with its social and physical setting; but to the Muthialapad Christians it is a constant visible reminder that the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ dwells with them, and that they have here no abiding city. No outsider would think of calling their worship glorious, rather it is on the surface rather humdrum and too westernised in form; but to these Christians, despised by their neighbours as irremediably polluting, ostracised and subject to daily indignities, petty or more severe, worship is a constant assurance that they are the beloved children of God, forgiven and endowed with dignity and regarded as of infinite worth by the God who is no respecter of persons.

Until thirty-five years ago, the Christians of Muthialapad were compelled to perform the traditional role of the Malas in the annual village festival. When the buffalo had been sacrificed, its entrails were draped around the necks of the Christian Malas who, thus attired, had to go on procession, dancing and playing drums and tambourines, through the main streets of the village. Here was worship which confirmed their degradation, which legitimised the social order of the village, which expressed a totally different message from that of the worship in the little Mala church. Under duress they had to continue to participate in this repulsive idolatry, until a teenage boy, now a leading Christian academic, led the Mala Christians in refusing to take part in the traditional Hindu festival. The Christians' huts were burnt, there was violence; the police had to be called in to maintain a fragile peace. But finally the point was won. There were two kinds of worship in Muthialapad. The one sanctified injustice and oppression, confirmed the social order of the village, and condemned many to bondage and degradation. The other was the worship of free men and women, who found in it a human dignity denied to them in village society, and a vision of justice and liberty.

Now we change continents, going to North America to listen to James Cone speaking of the significance of worship for American Blacks: "The eschatological significance of the black community is found in the people believing that the Spirit of Jesus is coming to visit them in the worship service each time two or three are gathered in his name, and to bestow upon them a new vision of their future humanity. This eschatological revolution is . . . a change in the people's identity, wherein they are no longer named by the world but named by the Spirit of Jesus. . . . The Holy Spirit's presence with the people is a liberating experience. Black people who have been humiliated and oppressed by the structures of white society six days of the week, gather together each Sunday morning in order to experience a new definition of their humanity. The transition from Saturday to Sunday is not just a chronological change from the seventh to the first day of the week. It is rather a rupture in time . . . which produces a radical transformation in the people's identity. The janitor becomes the chairperson of the Deacon Board; the maid becomes the president of Stewardess Board Number 1. Everyone becomes Mr and Mrs, or Brother and Sister. The last becomes first, making a radical change of self and one's calling in the society. Every person becomes somebody, and one can see the people's recognition of their new

found identity by the way they walk and talk and 'carry themselves'. They walk with a rhythm of an assurance that they know where they are going, and they talk as if they know the truth about which they speak. It is this experience of being radically transformed by the power of the Spirit that defines the primary style of black worship. This transformation is found not only in the titles of Deacons, Stewardesses, Trustees and Ushers, but also in the excitement of the entire congregation at worship. To be at the end of time where one has been given a new name requires a passionate response with the felt power of the Spirit in one's heart."¹

All around the world, in all sorts of contexts, one finds this exhilarating experience of Christian worship as liberating. Polish shipyard workers, striking for free trade unions and free expression in an authoritarian society, are sustained in their search for liberty by daily celebrations of the mass in the yards. Groups of the victims of dictatorship in South Korea find that their thirst for freedom and justice is totally dependent on regular meetings together for prayer — and for those who are in prison, the knowledge that their brothers and sisters are praying for them gives them new courage.² In Latin American even traditional forms of piety such as the stations of the cross have often come to be regarded as protests against oppressive regimes which deny liberty to the people. As the sufferings of Christ are remembered the words, "As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me", come to mind.³ That Archbishop Romero was murdered while presiding over the worship of the people of God was no accident, for he and the church he led had often shown that worship was central to their concern for the oppressed, at the same time a protest against oppression and the nourishing of a thirst for liberty.

Enough has been said to show that in our day there has been a remarkable recovery of the experience of Christian worship as liberating. But one must enquire as to the authenticity of this understanding of worship. Is it, perhaps, that people turn to worship for the stimulant or tranquilliser most in demand at any given time, and in an age of liberation movements fighting for political emancipation, of women's liberation, and gay liberation, and so on and so forth, they naturally seek liberation in and through worship? Are we in danger of speaking not of worship in the Spirit, but of worship in the *Zeitgeist*? The question is a real one, but the answer is quite clear: what has happened is in fact the recovery of a central emphasis of Christian worship which has in the past often been all but lost.

It is not, of course, as if worship as such, in isolation as it were, is liberating. Christian worship is the re-presentation of God's mighty deliverance of His people, the re-capitulation of salvation history, in which the people of God appropriate and enter into the salvation or liberation wrought by God Himself, express their gratitude and delight in freedom, are nourished to work for liberty and stimulated to yearn for freedom's final consummation. It is God who is the liberator; in worship we respond to his act, enter into the freedom he has given us and are nourished to share in his continuing work of deliverance. As the psalmist puts it:

When the Lord delivered Sion from bondage,
It seemed like a dream.
Then was our mouth filled with laughter,
on our lips there were songs.

The heathens themselves said: 'What marvels
the Lord worked for them!'
What marvels the Lord worked for us!
Indeed we were glad.

Deliver us, O Lord, from our bondage
as streams in dry land.⁴

Passover above all was the celebration of God's liberation of his people. The rite expressed, and continues to express, the present liberty of God's people, reclining as free men and women around the table, as totally dependent on God's gracious act of deliverance. Had God not acted, the Jews would still be in bondage, not yet a People (*laos*), without name or dignity. The rite repeats and re-enacts the story, reminding the people of their roots, of their dependence upon God, of their dignity, and celebrating the liberty they have been given. And it does more than represent a past deliverance: it gives the resources for living as free men and women now, and provides an appetiser and a foretaste of the joys of the fully consummated liberty that is to come. Each Passover points forward — 'Next year in Jerusalem' — and beyond that to the messianic banquet.

It is hardly surprising that Passover became a time when a peculiarly intense thirst for liberty was commonly in the air, a time when Jews were usually liable to protest or revolt against contemporary oppression, being nourished at the feast of liberty. And it was this rite that Jesus took, reshaped, and attached for

ever to the 'exodus' that he was to accomplish in Jerusalem. In the Lord's Supper, at the centre of Christian worship, there is accordingly this inescapable focusing on liberation. We remember, recapitulate, and participate in the liberty won and given to us by Christ. Here we receive food for living as free men and women, and a thirst for the banquet in the Kingdom of heaven when many will come from north and south and east and west and sit down with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. And in this Supper not only do we receive liberty and a thirst for liberty, but our understanding of liberty is clarified and refined, our vision enlarged and our hope stimulated.

Authentic Christian worship, then, cannot be separated from a concern for liberation, for this would be to detach it from its rooting in the mighty acts of the God who delivers His people from bondage. For freedom Christ has set us free; in worship we appreciate, enjoy, proclaim and express this freedom; and the freedom celebrated in the cult must infect the life and structures of society if we are to avoid a quite blasphemous separation between the sacred and the secular.

2. Freeing Worship

"What," asked the history teacher, "were the Four Freedoms?" Promptly the boy replied: "Freedom from want, Freedom from fear, Freedom from thought, and Freedom from religion". His answer, although wrong, was revealing, for many people, particularly in the secular West, see religion and worship as the opposite of emancipating. They are held to be things that bind, that limit, that enslave — the opium of the people. Freedom and maturity alike involve freedom from religion, leaving worship behind as something childish and enslaving, unworthy of an emancipated adult. Worship is outgrown, like playing with dolls or Hornby trains. We may well point out that modern man, having proclaimed that he has no need for worship, invents a multitude of surrogates, and devotes a remarkable amount of time and energy to the worship of strange gods — the pomp of civic religion, the ritual of the demonstration or the football match, the fertility cult that is denounced as pornography, and countless other substitute forms of worship. We may go on to say that false worship is indeed an opiate for man; that it often disguises strong yet subtle forms of social control; that it discourages the asking of awkward questions; that it frequently conceals injustice and exploitation under a pall of sanctimoniousness. But when we have said such things we still have to face the problem that many people, including many

Christian and intelligent people, find what passes as Christian worship dull, irrelevant, and totally remote from the great issues of freedom and human dignity with which we found Christian worship to be properly and necessarily linked all round the world.

Those who have dealings with young people these days must have become sadly accustomed to young Christians, brought up in good Christian homes, who abandon the public worship of God and put all their enthusiasm, commitment, and concern into the work of Amnesty International, Anti-Apartheid, or the like. If you talk with them you quickly discover that they have been unable to find any connection between the worship which they have experienced and the great causes and concerns of justice and liberty. They have come to feel, as Reinhold Niebuhr did, that if the churches were realistic about their own worship they would remove the crosses from their buildings and put instead on the holy table the three little monkeys, who hear no evil, see no evil, and speak no evil. Is it possible for our worship to recover what once it had, when every conventicle on the hillsides was an act of protest, an affirmation of the crown rights of the Redeemer, and a laying hold of the freedom with which Christ makes us free? Could the day come again when people could say of Christian worship in Scotland something like this comment of a Latin American theologian: "Every truthful and consciously celebrated eucharist can be regarded as the most radical act of protest," proclaiming and showing forth the rule of Christ, "the only saviour and liberator, the only Lord of history and of man. . . . His rule excludes every other rule which seeks to dominate man and . . . in him all men are made free. . . . By celebrating the Eucharist, we commit ourselves to the work of removing all forms of political, social and ideological oppression that are incompatible with what we have proclaimed"⁵?

But first, our worship must be freed from the distortions and limitations which make it so much less than Christian worship ought to be. Worship must be freed, if it is itself to be liberating.

How easy it is for worship to become domesticated and tamed within a particular culture, and expression of the national spirit, a custodian of one people's ethos — and nothing more. There is, of course, a sense in which Christian worship must find itself at home in every age and culture, just as the language of worship should be language understood by the people. There is no case at all for worship being entirely uniform in every age and place.

But Christian worship may be tamed if it is confined too closely within a particular culture and society, and ceases to be aware of itself as a specific expression of the constant worship of heaven and of every age and nation upon earth. Sometimes worship which should be catholic in the truest sense, seems instead to have been imprisoned in the kailyaird, incapable of seeing over the fence or sharing in the worship of the whole Church of God. A baptismal certificate which is (or was until very recently) on sale in the Church of Scotland bookshops bears at the top a bold design, unambiguously tartan, the outline of which may be seen equally well as a thistle or a dove descending. The tartan thistle/dove suggests and encourages a dangerous confusion between what it means to be a Scot and what it means to be a Christian, a confusion which sometimes penetrates deeply into worship. The integrity of worship demands its liberation from provincialism and ethnic captivity, together with the realisation that Christian worship is a challenge, a questioning, a disturbance to all cultures and all social orders. For it points to, and is already the anticipation of, the Kingdom of God.

Our problem is not simply that so often in worship the kailyaird triumphs over the catholic; it is also that within Scotland worship is so often seen as a middle class activity: there is a bourgeois captivity of worship. An experienced minister in a great housing estate says this: "The mass of Protestant working people do not believe that the Church is on their side. . . . It is obvious to the working class community that the Church does not belong among them, and that it is not in solidarity with them in their lives. It is always a visitor from the outside."⁶ In one sense, of course, the church and her worship must always be a 'visitor from outside'; or, to put the point more clearly, the church is a pilgrim people, exiles and strangers seeking their true homeland, and worship is nourishment and direction for the way. But if worship is to speak of Christian freedom to the working class it must be nourishment for *their* pilgrimage, it must relate to *their* hopes and fears, to *their* condition rather as Christian worship relates to the Mala Christians of Muthialapad. The remarkable renewal of the church in Latin America in recent decades arose largely from the discovery that it was impossible to worship God in the horrendous slums without sharing at the deepest level in the hopes and the despair of the poor and the oppressed. Christian worship lost its integrity if it became either isolated from the realities of life, or an escape from the implications of oppression. It is impossible to keep company with Christ if we refuse to accept the company

he has chosen to keep. Following the patristic principle *ubi Christus ibi ecclesia*, where Christ is, there is the Church, it is necessary to go to find Christ and therefore the Church among the poor he loves, to listen to them, and to learn afresh from them how to worship God in Spirit and in truth. If we were to realise this in Scotland, it could well ignite a revival of the church and a new vitality in worship.

Our worship needs to be freed from its obsessive wordiness if it is to recover a vital awareness of the Word of God which is living and active. Only too often the Reformers' insistence on the complementarity of Word and Sacrament, so that each interprets and confirms the other, has been lost. Instead we have unease about symbols, signs, actions, movement, silence and indeed all forms of non-verbal communication and expression. Sacraments become regarded as little more than visual aids, and worship sinks into a dry didactic exercise reminiscent of school classrooms prior to the advent of modern pedagogical method, with its emphasis on participation and learning by doing. There is more truth than we might care to admit in the words of that great Scottish Christian poet, Edwin Muir, writing of his motherland:

The Word made flesh here is made word again,
A word made word in flourish and arrogant crook.
See there King Calvin with his iron pen,
And God three angry letters in a book,
And there the logical hook
On which the Mystery is impaled and bent
Into an ideological instrument.⁷

From this there flows the extraordinary passivity of the people in worship. We cannot expect to have an active, living church which lives out its royal priesthood in responsible involvement in the life of the world if in worship, the throbbing heart of Christian love and care, the people of God are taught to be passive. In much of our worship the priestly activity of the People of God is hardly in evidence; instead the minister does and says practically everything. The symbolism is powerful — and terrifying. It runs directly counter to the doctrine of the corporate priesthood of believers and confirms a disastrously inadequate understanding of the nature and mission of the Church. We need to recover the sense of worship as an activity in which the whole People of God participates, and which involves the whole person, not just the eyes, or ears, or brain. And in doing so we will also find a truer understanding of the wondrous mystery of God and of Christ in our neighbour, a

mystery which must be worshipped, loved and served, which must not be 'impaled and bent into an ideological instrument'; a mystery which spills over constantly into common life, calling into being fellowship, sharing, justice, and hope.

Worship separated from the great issues of liberty and justice has become idolatry, an instrument of ideological manipulation, a way of hiding from God rather than encountering Him. The prophets teach that it is not acceptable to God:

'What are your endless sacrifices to me?'

says Yahweh.

I am sick of holocausts of rams

and the fat of calves.

The blood of bulls and of goats revolts me.

When you come to present yourselves before me,

who asked you to trample over my courts?

Bring me your worthless offerings no more.

the smoke of them fills me with disgust.

New Moons, sabbaths, assemblies —

I cannot endure festival and solemnity,

Your New Moons and your pilgrimages

I hate with all my soul.

They lie heavy on me,

I am tired of bearing them.

When you stretch out your hands

I turn my eyes away,

You may multiply your prayers,

I shall not listen.

Your hands are covered with blood,

wash, make yourselves clean.

Take your wrong-doing out of my sight.

Cease to do evil.

Learn to do good,

search for justice,

help the oppressed,

be just to the orphan,

plead for the widow.⁸

"My grandfather," a rabbi in one of Martin Buber's writings relates, "was paralysed. One day he was asked to tell about something that happened with his teacher — the great Baalshem. Then he told how the saintly Baalshem used to leap about and dance while he was at his prayers. As he went on with the story, my grandfather stood up; he was so carried away that he had to show how the master had done it, and started to caper about and dance. From that moment he was cured."⁹ That is an

apt parable of the way in which Christian worship, the ritual representation of the story of God's liberation of his people, must be the authentic source of ongoing participation in the liberating activity of God himself.

Worship in Spirit and in truth is an encounter with the God who cares so deeply for justice and for those in bondage that he sent his Son in order that we might be free. And the joy of freedom which we find in the worship of the one true God is something which must flow out into the world, sustaining and clarifying the passion for liberty.

NOTES

1. J. H. Cone, cited in Geoffrey Wainwright, *Doxology: The Praise of God in Worship, Doctrine and Life*. London, 1980, p. 419.
2. Julio de Santo Ana, ed., *Towards a Church of the Poor*. Geneva, 1979, pp. 11-12.
3. J. Moltmann, *The Crucified God*. London, 1974, p. 53.
4. Psalm 126, Grail Version.
5. S. Galilea, "Les messes de protestation", in *Parole et Mission*, 14, (1971), p. 334.
6. John Miller, *Problems of the Ministry and Mission of the Church in New Housing Areas and Other Working Class Parishes*. Glasgow, 1976, p. 2.
7. "The Incarnate One", in Edwin Muir, *Collected Poems*. London, 1963, p. 228. Grateful acknowledgement is made to Faber & Faber for permission to quote this extract from the poem.
8. Isaiah 1. 11-17. Cf. Isaiah 58. 6-8, Amos 5. 21-24, etc.
9. Cited in Edward Schillebeeckx, *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology*. London, 1979, p. 674.

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