

The Nature and Practice of Worship

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Introduction

Five very short Scriptures will suffice to introduce our topic for this morning and for the coming weeks.

Then Abraham said to his young men, 'Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you.' (Gen 22:5)

The man bowed his head and worshipped the LORD and said, 'Blessed be the LORD, the God of my master Abraham, who has not forsaken his steadfast love and his faithfulness towards my master. As for me, the LORD has led me in the way to the house of my master's kinsmen.' (24:26–27)

And those in the boat worshipped him, saying, 'Truly you are the Son of God.' (Matt 14:33)

Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and lifting up his hands he blessed them. While he blessed them, he parted from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshipped him . . .' (Luke 24:50–52)

Jesus heard that they had cast him out, and having found him he said, 'Do you believe in the Son of Man?' He answered, 'And who is he, sir, that I may believe in him?' Jesus said to him, 'You have seen him, and it is he who is speaking to you.' He said, 'Lord, I believe', and he worshipped him. (John 9:35–38)

God use his word to provoke that same attitude of heart within us all.

You have invited me today and on five further occasions this term to lead you in thinking about an activity that is in fact the highest activity that the human heart is capable of, the activity of the adoration by the creature of his Creator and redeemer.

At least that is how I have read the intent of your invitation to me. I have been asked to speak these Sunday mornings on the topic of *worship* and you will be aware that the Greek and Hebrew words in our Bibles that are translated 'worship' carry an exceedingly wide range of meanings. I too am aware of that. They can indicate *service*, for there is a sense in which our worship of God is nothing less than our day-to-day, hourly, and moment-by-moment service of the Lord in all its aspects and particularly in its practical details.

To yield our bodies as a living sacrifice to God, this is our reasonable service (Rom 12:1 KJV). It is not to be counted the drudgery of a slave, nor the mere fulfilling of a duty. The yielding of our bodies, our energies and our minds to the service of God in every particular of life, this too is counted by God as the worship of his name. Such worship will include that we do good and share our material goods and benefits with other people; 'for such sacrifices are pleasing to God' (Heb 13:16).

Indeed, without those sacrifices our worship might be a very doubtful quality. Our Lord himself reminded us in his famous parable of the Good Samaritan, that a worship of God

which is content with the singing of hymns and the performance of ritual, and neglects the duty of compassion to our fellow men, is of exceedingly questionable quality. A priest and a Levite were on their way to or from the temple when they came across a man lying by the roadside, the victim of a terrorist attack. He was half-dead and they glanced over in his direction but passed by on the other side.

Let us give those two men the benefit of the doubt. Let us suppose that they said within their hearts that if they dared to stop and assist the half-dead man, they ran the risk of ritual defilement and would have been disqualified from the service of God in the temple at Jerusalem. And let us further suppose that they had grasped in their hearts that the service of God in direct thanksgiving and adoration is, and must be, the highest activity that any human is called to; and by definition the service of God must come first. Let us suppose all that. Yet they were wrong; for God incarnate has shown us that God himself would put the need of the human in such desperate circumstances before even his own praise and worship.

I am aware of that as I come to lead your thoughts on worship, not in the sense of service, but rather in the sense of *adoration*. I am aware too, that the topic of worship in holy Scripture includes not merely our service to God and our fellow man, but includes the service, indeed the *sacrifice*, of thanksgiving. It is a lovely thing to give thanks to God for all his benefits received. Should our hearts grow laggard, and prefer to receive God's gifts rather than to give thanks for them, then we must remember it is our duty to rally our souls and to deliberately, with forethought, ingenuity and sincerity, thank God and bless his name for the benefits he has given us.

Not one of those benefits comes to us by accident. Everything that we have been given comes down from the Father of lights with whom there is no changeableness (Jas 1:17). With deliberate design and timing he chooses the gift with perfect wisdom. If he gives it to us with such deliberate care and thought, it is an appalling sentiment within us if we should say, 'But I don't feel like giving thanks.' Suppose you don't, my good Christian friend, don't tell anybody! Above all, don't tell the one who gave you the gifts, but rally your sluggish soul and call upon it to do its duty: 'Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits' (Ps 103:2).

By his comment on the nine lepers, did Christ not teach us how black the sin of ingratitude appears before God? (Luke 17:11–19). Ten lepers were cleansed but only one came back to give thanks. 'Where are the nine?' said he. I'm sure practical duties had called them; the home that had been so sadly neglected in the absence of its owner over these months or years. The wallpaper coming off the bedroom and the rain coming through the roof; the need to get another job and start up life again; to visit long-lost relatives; to meet the wife, of course—all these pressing duties claimed their time and attention now they felt well again and free of their leprosy. Even so, let their duties be what they will, they ought to have returned, says Christ. Deliberately turning their back on all other things and all other duties, they ought to have returned to give thanks.

When we begin to realise in some little way what Christ our Lord has done for us by dying at Calvary, we do well, once a week at least, to turn our backs on every other activity and avocation and deliberately return and give thanks.

For all that, I propose in this series of talks, not to consider worship in the sense of our service of God and our fellow men and women, nor indeed simply worship in the sense of thanksgiving to God. I choose rather to talk of worship in the sense of adoration. Worship, as it is expressed in both Old and New Testaments, as the *bowing down* before God. Be it the bowing down of our persons in his presence; or even more significantly, the bowing down of heart and mind in adoration and adoring wonder, not of God's gifts so much as the wonder of God himself. The wonder of his person and of his character, be it his majesty or his power, his grace or his faithfulness, or even that dark glory that is his wrath.

I propose these days to talk with you about our worship of the divine persons for what they are in themselves. I should like you to understand that, in making these distinctions, I am not proposing to lay down any legalistic rules and regulations. Nor am I keeping things that mix among themselves freely in watertight compartments. Certainly, it is far from my intention to discourage thanksgiving and gratitude, or the expression of gratitude in the meetings of the church, for often it is gratitude that lies at the beginnings of worship.

Gratitude is the foothill, so to speak, that presently gives place to the higher mountain peaks of adoration of the divine persons. But, splendid and proper as gratitude for God's gifts is, sooner or later it must give way to adoration of God himself. Let gratitude forever concentrate on the gifts that I have received, and never turn its eye to the glory of the giver who gave them, then gratitude itself becomes suspect of being selfish. Indeed, were you to listen to my own attempts at worship, you might well conclude that here is a man who, in his highest moments, gives evidence of being incorrigibly self-centred; always thinking about what he has received with a bare and tiny and poverty-stricken appreciation of the person who gave him what he has received.

In response to your invitation, therefore, and it was you who asked me, I feel that it is my duty to lead our thinking in these weeks about adoration of the divine persons. As I pondered it, and how I should go about it, it became clear to me what I must do. It seemed to me that I could not suggest to you all sorts of recipes, rules or regulations for the kind of expression that you might adopt in your adoration of the Lord, nor how you should conduct your meetings arranged for that purpose; I must do something differently.

If I may for a moment descend with impossible incongruity from sublime and holy things to another realm, I could perhaps illustrate what now I wish to say. Suppose I had been asked to come here to help you to laugh. Had that been the purpose, they would have chosen somebody else, of course! But, if that were the case, how should I have gone about it? I could have chosen to talk to you about the mechanics of it; how you must use your lungs, and what you must do with your mouth; the kind of noises that are good to hear when people laugh and those impossible laughs that split your eardrums. You wouldn't have laughed, except at my absurdity.

No, had my desire been to cause you to laugh, I shouldn't have told you *how* to laugh, I should have told you funny stories and you would have laughed. Trying to laugh is a very difficult thing to do, and it's an almost impossible thing to do with sincerity.

Trying to worship—what a sad and sorry thing it is. What would I feel like, if presently God spoke out of heaven and said, 'Gooding, what are you trying to do?' and I said, 'I was trying to worship, but I've found it a difficult job, Lord.' If my worship is going to be anything,

then it must be my almost instinctive response; channelled by my intelligence, but my instinctive response to some glory of God that I have perceived.

Suppose I had been asked (I never would be) to come and help you make a proper response to good music, I could perhaps suggest that you should say something like, 'How superb. Wasn't the flautist very graceful? That's one of his best compositions, I think.' If you really wanted to pose as cognoscenti you would say, 'I don't think that's up to his normal standard'. What use would it be? I could teach a parrot to say that, but the trouble is he'd go on saying it and saying it and saying it, and keep on using the same expressions every week, until it became evident that my parrot was merely speaking empty phrases and, worse still, he didn't even know what they meant.

I must be careful in my worship of not becoming a parrot. It seemed to me therefore that, if I would lead you in thinking of worship as adoration of God, what I must do is to talk to you about God himself, and pray as I do so that God by his Spirit will show you something of himself, which will instinctively call out your response of adoration.

If you will help me to worship God in this sense, my brothers and sisters, tell me how he has delivered me out of darkness. Tell me about that darkness until I feel it in my very bones, and gratitude fills my heart when I think of what I have been rescued from (1 Pet 2:9). Tell me too, about that marvellous light into which God has brought me, and of those ten thousand blessings that he has given me, and shall yet provide. When you've done that, go further and tell me not merely about the darkness, nor about the light, but tell me of the virtues of him who called me. Tell me that if God had been a different kind of God from what he is, I must have perished forever. Tell me about the virtues of him that called me out of darkness into his light, until the greater wonder is not the blessing he has given, but the wonder that he is the kind of God he is. For this it is evident we shall need to know God, and see a difference between gratitude for gifts and adoration.

Sometimes a packet comes tumbling through your letterbox. Inside the packet is a book that some enterprising advertising firm has sent, along with their compliments and other ulterior motives. As you open the packet, you say, 'I don't know these people who've sent me this book; I don't know the person who wrote the address, but I feel very grateful for the book. It's a lovely book.' You can feel gratitude without knowing the giver; but you can scarcely adore God without knowing God.

But example is better than precedent, isn't it? If in our initial study we find it a little bit difficult to see the difference between gratitude for a gift and adoration of the person who gave it, then let us intrude upon the worship of some of our ancient brothers and sisters.

The story of Abraham's servant

I start with Abraham's obscure servant and part of that delightful story, how Abraham in his old age sought a bride and wife for his son, Isaac. He sent his servant down to his kindred, to that far-off country to find a suitable girl. And the servant went, burdened with his responsibility. A difficult task in any circumstance to do any such thing. Choosing a wife for oneself is difficult enough; choosing her for somebody else must be extraordinarily difficult. It wasn't really that. Abraham was a Sheik of great riches and he might be choosy on those grounds just who married his only son. Way beyond that too went the fact that Abraham was

God's friend, chosen by God to play a unique role in history; and the seed of Abraham was privileged indeed to carry the divine purpose down the centuries.

It was no small task to find a wife for Isaac, so the servant came at length to a place and used his common sense and judgment, good man that he was. When he met these girls, he proposed to one of them that she should give him a drink, and she not only gave him a drink but volunteered to give his camels drink as well; a good augury of what she might do for Isaac in the home on Monday afternoons when the wedding was long since past! Presently he enquired who the girl might be, and found she was none other than a distant relative of the very same family as Abraham.

In that moment it was as though a veil had been drawn aside for an instant, and the servant saw something of God and the wonder of God.

The man bowed his head and worshipped the LORD and said, 'Blessed be the LORD, the God of my master Abraham, who has not forsaken his steadfast love and his faithfulness towards my master. As for me, the LORD has led me in the way to the house of my master's kinsmen. (Gen 24:26-27)

You notice what the man is saying, don't you? He's not saying, 'Oh God, how marvellously kind of you to have picked a girl so glorious looking. Isaac will be pleased with her.' Indeed, he was pleased; and gratitude might well have expressed itself in those terms, at least from Isaac. But at this moment it wasn't the girl's beauty that the servant was looking at. He had caught a vivid sight of the faithfulness of God and the wonder of his providence that behind the scenes controls our lives.

When the going is easy, and when the going is difficult; when for months on end we see no evidence of the divine hand and our duties almost overwhelm us; yet we see that God has been planning for our good. God had been faithful and God had been merciful.

Oh, the wonder that the God of heaven should descend to such a small detail and guide that man so precisely. Think of the places he could have gone, to the girls who would have been willing to say yes. God is so big, yet his providences concern themselves so precisely, and he is faithful and true. In that moment it was as though a veil had been drawn aside and he saw into the very heart of God. Before the veil went back again he bowed his head and worshipped God.

I don't know what blessings have come your way this week; I know you have been grateful for them. From time to time it was not so much for the gift, as the insight it gave you into the wonder of God's providence, the precision of his timings and the sense of his faithfulness.

The Story of Abraham

It was so with that greater example of worship in chapter 22, where Abraham with his only son climbed Mount Moriah to offer Isaac upon the altar.

'What is your intention, Abraham, as you climb this mountain to lay your only son upon an altar?'

'I and the boy will go over there and worship' (v. 5).

'Worship? Are you going to have a thanksgiving meeting up on the mountain and rehearse before God all the wonders of the benefits he has given you?'

'No, not today.'

Abraham had done that a thousand times and more in the days that were past. He had sheep and oxen, men servants and maidservants, and wealth beyond computation, and doubtless he had thanked God many times for these gifts. Today wasn't to be a thanksgiving meeting for gifts. God had asked him to take the sublimest gift; the gift that made sense of all the other gifts, without which life was empty and nothing, apart from God. God had asked Abraham to give it back to God.

'Abraham, what kind of a God is he that would give you a gift one day and take it away the next? Are you doing it because you are afraid, lest he should strike you dead if you don't surrender your son?'

'No,' says Abraham, 'I am giving my all to God; I go to worship him. What are all his gifts, if I do not have God? Let me tell God what I think of him. If I had all heaven and ten thousand galaxies and not God, how poverty-stricken I should be. Let God take all, so long as he is mine. That's what I am going to tell him.'

'Furthermore, God has said that through Isaac shall my offspring be named. I cannot tell you how he will do it—will he raise him from the dead, or what will he do? I cannot tell you, but I am going there to tell God what I think of him and I will offer my son as he tells me to. I believe he's not a God who says, "Yes," today and, "No," tomorrow. I believe he is a God of utter consistency, true to his word, though heaven and hell fall apart. If he has said he will bless me and Isaac, he will; though I put Isaac on this altar.'

'That's what I'll be telling God now; I shall not wait until he gives me Isaac back and the warmth of the summer sun begins to unfreeze my heart. Now, in this dark moment, in the flood of the trial, I want to tell God that he is my all. He is my magnificent God and I trust him now. It will be easy to tell him in the sunshine of heaven, when it's all come right in the end, but I should be ashamed to join the worship at that late stage. I'll do it now.'

So he took his all, put it on the altar, and Abraham and his son together worshipped God. May God induce in our hearts such appreciation of himself that in this vale of tears we too might be found as those who think as Abraham did.

The Nature of Worship in the Sense of Adoration

Reading: Revelation 4:1–11

After this I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven! And the first voice, which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, 'Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this.' At once I was in the Spirit, and behold, a throne stood in heaven, with one seated on the throne. And he who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian, and round the throne was a rainbow that had the appearance of an emerald. Round the throne were twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones were twenty-four elders, clothed in white garments, with golden crowns on their heads. From the throne came flashes of lightning, and rumblings and peals of thunder, and before the throne were burning seven torches of fire, which are the seven spirits of God, and before the throne there was as it were a sea of glass, like crystal. And round the throne, on each side of the throne, are four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind: the first living creature like a lion, the second living creature like an ox, the third living creature with the face of a man, and the fourth living creature like an eagle in flight. And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all round and within, and day and night they never cease to say, 'Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!' And whenever the living creatures give glory and honour and thanks to him who is seated on the throne, who lives for ever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before him who is seated on the throne and worship him who lives for ever and ever. They cast their crowns before the throne, saying, 'Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honour and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created.'

Our studies so far

On our first occasion we began to consider the topic of worship, its nature and its practice, and we decided to consider worship in its particular sense of the *adoration* of God the Father, and of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. We observed therefore that adoration is something beyond even gratitude for God's gifts; it is the heart and spirit's response to some revelation of the character and of the glory of the divine persons.

I repeat what I said then. In thus describing adoration, I have no wish to depreciate gratitude, and certainly not to inhibit its expression, whether private or public, for very often it is gratitude to the Lord for his gifts to us that forms the springboard of our deeper adoration. Yet, for all that, adoration does go beyond our gratitude for God's gifts, and on our last occasion we took some examples of adoration.

Abraham's servant

We remembered Abraham's servant in the middle of his duties, when suddenly there opened to him, so to speak, a door into the unseen world. He caught a glimpse of the magnificent timings of the providences of God, and the superlative faithfulness of God, who operates loyally and faithfully on our behalf, whether we can see him doing it or not. So that it was more than the gift of a bride for his master's son that moved him. Starting from that lovely gift, he rose to see something of the eternal character of God. The gift would come and go, but the character of God that it revealed would remain eternally.

Abraham and Isaac

Then we followed Abraham and his son on the mountain of Moriah, to watch them engage in their worship of God. Not now the giving of thanks for gifts received; for on this day Abraham would not be receiving but rather giving—giving all he had, his present and his future. He gave it in no sense of duty's mere obligation; he gave it with a deliberate heart and a deliberate logic as an expression of his worship in response to the faithfulness and loyalty of God.

The story of Peter

We also read another Scripture that reminded us how it was with the disciples when they discovered the person of Jesus Christ our Lord. 'And those in the boat worshipped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God"' (Matt 14:33).

It was the famous occasion on the storm-tossed lake when Peter, taking faith in both hands, got out of the ship and walked towards the Lord Jesus. In the process, however, he took fright and began to sink, and the Lord saved him. Doubtless, when he got back into the boat, Peter's heart would be beating full of gratitude that he had been saved from a possibly terrible fate in the depths of that lake. But the predominant atmosphere was not so much of gratitude for Peter's salvation, for in the dark of that night they had caught a glimpse of who Jesus Christ was.

Soon the clouds of human limitation closed in again and they forgot, and failed to work out its implication. But in that moment, like a sunray coming through the cloud, they had caught a glimpse that this Jesus of Nazareth was no mere carpenter's son. Catching sight of who he was, kneeling in the boat in the swamp of the bilge water, they had discovered a bit of eternity. They saw God manifest in flesh and bowed their hearts in worship.

The story of the Ascension

From time to time, during the forty days before his ascension, the apostles had spent some hours with Jesus Christ our Lord. By God's wisdom they had begun to grow accustomed to the realities of that other world in which Jesus Christ already stood. They had begun to grow accustomed to a way of life that lives with both feet on this earth, yet has discovered the reality of that other world. Presently, on the last day, he raised his hands in blessing and was parted from them and the cloud received him out of their sight.

Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and lifting up his hands he blessed them. While he blessed them, he parted from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. (Luke 24:50–52)

As they saw him rise to sit at the right hand of God on high, his exceeding majesty dawned on them as never before and they bowed their hearts in worship.

The story of the blind man

Born blind, without the faculty of sight, he had been given sight by the creative activity of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Having said these things, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva. Then he anointed the man's eyes with the mud and said to him, 'Go, wash in the pool of Siloam' (which means Sent). So he went and washed and came back seeing. (John 9:6-7)

As divine fingers had taken of the dust of the ground before and moulded a human body and breathed life into it, so yet again the Creator incarnate stooped and took of the very dust of the ground and made the faculty of sight for that man. Some days later Jesus came and found him again and, of course, gratitude flooded the man's heart for this superlative gift. Nor was our Lord slow in prompting his memory and opening the floodgates of his gratitude to Christ.

Do you believe in the Son of Man? He answered, 'And who is he, sir, that I may believe in him?' Jesus said to him, 'You have seen him, and it is he who is speaking to you.' He said, 'Lord, I believe', and he worshipped him. (John 9:35-38)

A month ago he couldn't have seen anybody but now he could see. In that moment, profound gratitude was overtaken by a deeper response; for there comes a point where even sight must be unconscious of itself, and it's not the fact that I *can* see that is predominant in my heart, but *what* I can see. He saw that the gift of sight he had received proclaimed the one who stood before him as the Creator incarnate, and he worshipped him. It is ever thus.

Worship in response to a specific quality or glory of God

It would seem that adoration of the divine persons proceeds not merely from his gifts, but from those revelations that come from time to time to our spirits when we perceive something about the divine persons. This morning we have read about one of the scenes of worship in heaven that John has recorded. When in the Bible we read of people worshipping, we should notice that they are generally worshipping as a response to some specific glory of God. They are not merely content to say that God is glorious; we all know that. It is some special feature about God that has gripped their heart and is promoting their worship.

Who am I to criticize, but sometimes one of the reasons why our worship is weak is because we are content with *generalisms*. 'How wonderful God is!' Well, we know that; what were you meaning when you said *wonderful*? Wonderful, in what respect? It would help us to worship more if you specified what it is.

If I may for a moment again descend from high levels to low, it could happen that after this meeting I go home and remark to my friends, 'Did you see Mr Ponsonby's car this morning?'

'No.'

‘Oh, you should have seen it. He has a marvellous new car, you know.’

And my friends say, ‘Yes, it’s a marvellous car. Well what about it? What was marvellous?’

‘Well it was a . . . well it was—well it was wonderful!’

‘So it’s wonderful; what was it about the car that was wonderful?’

‘Well, it was marvellous. I mean to say, it had four wheels and a steering wheel and it was wonderful.’

That doesn’t get you very far, does it? If I might say so, the ladies would do better than that. They would say, ‘It’s a wonderful car. You should have seen the colour tones; a delightful powder blue and seats to match, and they weren’t that old Rexine¹ stuff. They were real suede and there were carpets on the floor this deep.’

Now they’re telling you something about the car, aren’t they? *Why* it is wonderful. And a sixteen-year-old gentleman would have done better than I could. He wouldn’t have said it had four wheels; he would have said it has fuel injection and goes from nought to sixty in minus ten seconds, and it’s rating was this!

Why couldn’t I say all those things, and only manage, ‘it was wonderful’? Because I don’t know much about cars: that’s the answer. I know them as things going along the street, but I don’t know much about them. Why is it that sometimes I can’t manage more than to say, ‘God is wonderful’? Could it be that I don’t live quite near enough to him to see any more detail?

The worship of God as the moral Governor of the universe

With those thoughts in our minds we come to this scene in Revelation 4, where John was permitted to hear the very worship of heaven, as the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures that surround the throne engage in their superlative worship of God.

Why do they worship?

You say, ‘Because God is wonderful.’

Of course he’s wonderful! What in particular is it that moves them to worship him?

The superb character of his government

On this occasion as they worship, their attention is caught by him who sits upon the throne. It is the wonderful character of God as the moral governor of the universe that is drawing forth their worship.

So John tells us there was a throne in heaven and one sat upon it. What a veritable gospel for a confused world like ours, that there is a throne and it isn’t vacant. Someone is seated on the throne (v. 2). What is he like? This is a question you might ask with some insistence, because this book of the Revelation is about to tell us that from that throne there shall presently proceed dark and terrible judgments. What kind of a throne is it that will issue such judgments that men shall gnaw their tongues with pain? What kind of a character is he that sits on that throne? Before those judgments descend, the highest intelligences in the universe are found bowing down in worship, in admiration of the character of him who sits on that throne (vv. 9–11). Indeed, when it is rightly understood, it is *the wrath of God* among other things that will move us to worship.

¹ Rexine is the registered trademark of an artificial leather fabric.

The rainbow-circled throne and the circle of thrones

John helps us to see the nature of that throne and its government and the character of him that sits on it, by a geometrical description.

Behold, a throne stood in heaven, with one seated on the throne. And he who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian, and round the throne was a rainbow that had the appearance of an emerald. Round the throne were twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones were twenty-four elders, clothed in white garments, with golden crowns on their heads. (vv. 2–4)

He says that round about in full circle of the throne, there went a rainbow green in colour. I presume the circle went vertically; that the rainbow was like we see them on earth, only full circle right round the throne. Then, round about the throne—this time presumably horizontally going round—there were twenty-four other thrones, likewise occupied, with elders clothed in linen and golden crowns upon their heads. Can you visualise it? A throne, occupied, and two circles, the one going vertically all the way round, and the other going horizontally all the way round it. So that if we continued to think geometrically, as we're meant to do, then it becomes true that everything that goes out of that throne; every command that is issued, every act of judgment that proceeds from that throne; must go through and past those two circles.

What are those two circles? The first is a rainbow—the rainbow, indeed. With its mention we are back to the story of Noah and the flood. Because of the great wickedness and violence of men, God at one stage in history drowned our whole world in a flood. After that judgment he promised that he would never destroy the world again with water.

God in his mercy was setting a limit to his judgments

I bid you to ponder it for a moment and read in it something of the heart of God. The transcendent Lord, who need not give account to anybody and does according to his will in the army of heaven—that he should himself put a limit to his judgment. What volumes of his mercy does this show? Tormented and grieved and provoked by man's sin and continuous violence and stupidity, God himself put a limit to his judgment. We may stand amazed at the patience of almighty God that, in his mercy and despite our provocations, he should put a limit to his judgment.

We have this morning surrounded a table upon which there was bread and wine, and remembered how men took God's incarnate Son and pulled the beard from his cheeks, nailed him hand and foot, and mocked him in his misery; yet the transcendent Lord of time and space allowed them to do it. The earth continued and men went on living. The heart that has begun to know itself will presently forget about other people and wonder, 'How does the Almighty put up with me?' There is a rainbow round his throne, and the one who sits on it 'desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth' (1 Tim 2:4).

Why does this great transcendent Lord of time and space allow an eternal lake of fire? Because his judgment is limited. He could save men and women by removing their free will, but that would be to turn them from people into cabbages. God, who has given us free will,

respects our personalities so much that he never would override our free will. When we've made our final choice, he will honour it to all eternity. That's how much he loves you.

It is not merely that in his infinite, limitless power he could be so gentle and restrained with my personality. Not only is God's authority, by his own ordinance and decree, limited by the rainbow of his mercy around the throne; there is another encircling group of thrones. What does that tell us?

'We were doing it in the Bible reading the other night,' you say, 'Now what will this new preacher tell us? Who, please, are those twenty-four elders, seated on the thrones?'

I would willingly tell you, had the Holy Spirit told us first! But, as the Holy Spirit hasn't told us who they are, how do you expect me to tell you? Isn't it curious how dogmatic we can be over things that the Holy Spirit hasn't told us, and so sure that our deductions are right? That isn't to deny that your deduction might be right; it probably is. But what the Holy Spirit has actually told us is more important than your deduction or mine. He's not told us who they are; he's told us what they are and what they are doing. He has intimated to us this stupendous fact, that, though the transcendent Lord is self-sufficient, he has been pleased to invite creatures to join him in government.

Just pause to consider it. These are elders, they are human beings; therefore, they are creatures. God is never spoken of in comparative terms—he is *the ancient of days*. These are elders. It marks them out as creatures, and herein lies a stupendous fact. Will God, the almighty moral governor of the universe, invite creatures to join him in government? He will indeed! I'll have you know that God is no dictator. Though he and he only had the right to govern, simply by the feat of his own will, yet he invites us not merely to be his subjects, but members of his 'cabinet'.

Tell me about the creatures on those twenty-four thrones. What is your opinion of them? If they are angels, a collection of men, or whoever they may be, tell me about them. Do they have real power? Is this a charade, or a game? Is this just a pretence that the Almighty has given them power—but only so far as they say, 'Yes,' unthinkingly to everything he says? You would scarcely worship a God like that, would you? Look at their crowns; they are golden. The chapter tells us that when they finally take the crowns of their government and willingly give them back to God, it is under no forceful compulsion because they can't say anything else but yes. With their free will, and showing perfect personal character (represented by their white clothing) and government of the highest principles, (their crowns of gold), as they consider the glories of him that sits upon that throne they willingly fall down before him in worship and give back their crowns.

We must consider why they do so on another occasion, but this morning let us gather up our thoughts.

You will have caught something of the wonder of the governor of the universe; his mercy and his patience. Even in his judgments, he will respect your personality eternally and never invade it, except with your permission. He's patient towards you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance (2 Pet 3:9). He wants all to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth. Even in the terrors of eternal judgment he will never remove your free will. If you've caught something of his patience, then catch something of his great-

heartedness that invites you not merely to be his loyal subject, but to join him in his government.

At the level of his creatures, God has already delegated that authority to parents. He doesn't come and make your child's breakfast; he delegates that to you. He doesn't educate your child; he has delegated that authority to you. To your child, you stand in the very place of God. May God help you to perform the task right.

And if it is true in nature that God has delegated government to us, his creatures, how much more wonderfully true is it in grace? 'Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? . . . Do you not know that we are to judge angels?' (1 Cor 6:2-3). 'The one who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I also conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne' (Rev 3:21).

Young people, don't you see the answer to the devil's lie, that God wants to keep you down and be a tyrant over you? He wants no such thing. He's not only patient with your sins until you come and find the Saviour, but if you'll let him he will so train you that, with Christ, you may safely be entrusted in the government of his universe. This surely tells us something about the wonder of God, which this morning ought to bow our hearts in worship.

Features of the Throne

Reading: Revelation 4:9–11; 5:1–14

May God inspire our spirits to join in that heavenly choir. Last week, as we pursued our study of the topic of the adoration of God, we observed that the worship of various people and groups, as recorded and described in holy Scripture, is found to be the response not to some general vision of God's goodness, but rather to some particular feature of the manifold glory and wonder of God.

We drew a practical lesson for ourselves from that simple observation. Whether private or public, our worship too will always be stronger and richer for being not just some general statement that God is good or glorious or wonderful. It will be the stronger for concentrating on some specific details of the goodness, the glory and the wonder of God.

So in chapter 4 we followed John in the vision of the throne of God that was given him, to discover, if we could, what caused the tremendous outburst and response of worship to God on the part of the living creatures and the twenty-four elders.

1. We found that it was the glory and character of God as the moral governor of the universe, and his magnificent liberality. It was as they were surprised by the great hearted magnanimity of God as the sovereign governor of the universe, that automatically they bowed themselves in a response of adoration. To help us enter into their worship John describes the throne that he was allowed to see, so that we might make our deductions about the nature of its government and the nature of him who sits on the throne.

2. We saw that God puts limits upon his judgment. The throne is surrounded by two circles: the one going vertically, a rainbow full circle around the throne; and then twenty-four other thrones, occupied by elders with golden crowns and white vestments, going horizontally round the throne. We perceived, therefore, that whatever proceeds out of that throne must pass through those concentric circles, and in that way God himself has ordered and limited the exercise of the power of that throne. Anything that proceeds out of it must pass through the emerald green rainbow, the token that God himself has limited forever the extent of his judgment; just as God promised Noah that he would never again destroy the world by flood. We thought together of all those other limits that God in his magnificent grace has put upon the exercise of his wrath.

3. Then we saw that God has invited the creatures who sit on those twenty-four other thrones to join him in government. Not that they might be a public front, as a collection of 'yes men', to rubber stamp anything that God might say. This is a sincere and genuine invitation of almighty God for creatures to come and join him in the running of his universe. Whatever

or whoever we think those twenty-four elders are, it is the fact that it goes through the whole orders of creation that God has invited his creatures to take part with their delegated power. Among the triumphs of God's redemption, it shines even more gloriously that all his redeemed people will one day be invited to share the throne of the universe with Christ. God is no tyrant, keeping us in obedience by a form of slavery. This is a God who delights in his creatures and invites them to come and join him in his government.

Before we turn to chapter 5 and consider not only the worthiness of God who sits upon the throne, but the worthiness of the Lamb who one day shall bring all things back into harmonious subjection to God, certain other features about that throne must detain us and I trust will further evoke our worship.

The seven lamps of fire and the sea of glass

John saw that there were not only two circles *round* the throne, there were two sets of things *before* it. 'There were seven lamps of fire burning before the throne, which are the seven Spirits of God. And before the throne there was a sea of glass like unto crystal' (4:5–6 KJV).

What shall that geometric position tell us about the throne itself? If you had gone to visit Solomon in his heyday and had seen him sitting upon his throne, and tried to approach him, you would have found that before his throne and on the steps leading up to it there were ten or possibly twelve, or even fourteen, lions. What do you suppose they would have been there for? Even if you had been the Queen of Sheba herself, coming with all her glory to Solomon, those lions with their majestic visage and their glorious manes would have reminded you of the power and dignity of the sovereign who sat upon that throne.

Those seven lamps of fire burning before the throne and a sea of glass like crystal are the throne telling us of its power. What kind of power? If the Russians wanted to impress you with their power, they would invite you to their May Day celebrations to watch their latest atomic engineering go by. The throne we now approach is not without its physical power. 'From the throne came flashes of lightning, and rumblings and peals of thunder' (v. 5). This is the God who made the atom. If he will impress you with the character of his power, then first let it be seven torches burning with their resplendent light. This is not the 'power of darkness', but *a throne whose power depends upon light*.

The moment we think of that contrast, we think of our own personal experience, of course, and rejoice in him who has translated us from the kingdom of darkness. 'He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son' (Col 1:13).

In the course of history men have often sought to rule their fellow men by keeping them in the dark, and religion has had its day in adding to the tyrannies of the world. There have been centuries when, in the name of religion—and indeed, of Christ and of God—clerics have kept holy Scripture from the people, lest the people should find out what it says—*the power of darkness*.

There are governments in this world who, in order to buttress their power over their fellow men, have taken to the curious activity of rewriting history, lest children in their schools find out the facts of what actually happened and see through the pretence, the lies and the false

ideologies of those who rule them. Now we come to this throne whose power is that you know the facts. It wants you to know the truth and it isn't afraid of your discovering anything.

The seven lamps of fire

There is not one lamp; there are seven. '[These] are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth' (Rev 5:6). We should not immediately suppose that this refers to the ministry of the Holy Spirit, solely in redemption. This is the throne of the universe, and the Holy Spirit's realm of operations at all the levels of creation is to be the spirit of *illumination*.

When Moses wanted a goldsmith to fashion gold objects and a jeweller to engrave jewels, he looked for someone who was exceedingly capable and knew the secret of diamonds and jewels. He must know how to work the gold and make something wonderful out of it. Moses chose a man called Bezalel, because in Bezalel there was the very Spirit of God. God had given to a man some of the Creator's insight into things (Exod 31:1-5). He understood a diamond and could make something of it.

What a magnificent God we have, who rules us not by keeping us in the dark, but has given us eyes to see with so that they may penetrate the very secrets of nature. We may watch the little particles spinning round the nucleus of an atom and begin to penetrate the cell. God didn't need to do it; he could have kept us running about with no more inside our heads than an animal brings to gulping down its dinner. But he wants us to know; he's not afraid that we get to understand how it all runs.

In all the scientific investigation that goes on into how this universe ticks, I have never seen a notice anywhere that says 'Beyond this point, trespassers will be prosecuted. Do not come any further'. What a time we're going to have in heaven, aren't we, following God in the eternal magnificence of his creative power. It is a fact that men and women take the very insights and illumination that God has given as to how nature works, and use it in foolish pride as a basis for denying that there is a God there at all. Of all the provocations that daily come upon the Almighty, surely this is one of the greatest of them. God has invented such a magnificent universe and given the powers to understand how it works, and men and women use it in their folly to deny his existence and throw off his government.

And what shall I say of those greater lights that we see, not in creation but in redemption? God has governed us by translating us into the kingdom of his dear Son; he has called us out of darkness into his marvellous light. Scientists tell us that it is physical light that gives us to see colour. It is light that makes this world not just monotone, but glorious in its variety of colour. God is like that; God is light and he has the power to shine.

You say, 'I'm a sinner, and when God shines upon me his very light hurts my eyes. I prefer to be in the cocoon of my self-deception, to live in the dark of pretence than to be summoned to stand before my almighty Creator. It almost blinds me and hurts my eyes.'

When God became incarnate, he said, 'I am the light of the world' (John 8:12), and his *shining* frightened men and they took up stones to stone him (John 10:31). In his mercy for a while he withdrew, until the time came when they lifted him up upon a cross. In the darkness of that cross sinful eyes may look upon God and not be frightened. There you find a God whose light exposes us, yet he himself dies for us sinners. This is reality; come and face reality. Come into the light. You are fooling yourself with deception if you live as though you made

yourself. You didn't make yourself, and you know it. Come into the light, face the facts and be reconciled with God.

The sea of glass

Before his throne not only are there seven lamps of fire, there is also a sea of glass (4:6). What shall that tell us about God's power? What you think in that regard will depend upon how you interpret the symbol. You could, I suppose, regard it as referring to the *sea*, the real sea, the Mediterranean, the Atlantic, the Pacific, any sea; and you could further point out the fact that the sea now is like crystal, pure and calm.

And then we should have to say that God has provided it in order that we should contemplate his power, and judge that power by the effect it can produce. He calms the raging of the sea. 'But the wicked are like the tossing sea; for it cannot be quiet, and its waters toss up mire and dirt' (Isa 57:20). We measure the power of the throne by its ability to bring calm and peace.

But notice, it's not just a calm sea; it's a sea, as it were, of crystal, in which there is no mire or dirt. How shall God get rid of the mire and dirt? If it's the wind that rouses the Atlantic, then it's the mire and dirt in their human hearts that rouse the politicians. How shall God get rid of it, so that at length there comes true peace?

I think we must take our symbol a little deeper. In the court of Solomon's temple there was a laver, so that the priests might be purified as they waited in attendance upon God. That laver was so large that they called it a *sea*. In other descriptions of heaven in the book of the Revelation, the Holy Spirit uses the furniture of the temple and tabernacle to illustrate these great eternal realities, so I myself suspect that in this figure of the sea the Holy Spirit is conjuring up in our minds a vision of the great laver in Solomon's temple.

Now it is not simply the sea of physical creation; it is the sea as an emblem of God's great spiritual recreation. It is the washing of water, the regeneration of the Holy Spirit, which Paul makes reference to:

For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another. But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Saviour appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit. (Titus 3:3-5)

This is the power of God to renovate, to recreate, to regenerate, and thus to purify. Happy are those who have already experienced the power of God personally in their lives. Peace is brought about by not ignoring the mire and dirt that keeps the tossing sea troubled; it comes through knowing the power of God, as the regenerating Holy Spirit brings us new life. Happy, I say, are those who already know it. One day the whole world shall know it, for Jesus Christ our Lord, using that very same term, said to his apostles:

Verily I say unto you, That ye which have followed me, in the *regeneration* when the Son of man shall sit in the throne of his glory, ye also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. (Matt 19:28 KJV)

With that very temporal clause he gave us tremendous grounds for hope. There's coming a great day of regeneration.

The living creatures

'In the very midst of that throne,' said John, 'I saw living creatures.' The throne itself was, so to speak, resting on the living creatures.

And round the throne, on each side of the throne, are four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind: the first living creature like a lion, the second living creature like an ox, the third living creature with the face of a man, and the fourth living creature like an eagle in flight. And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all round and within. (Rev 4:6–8)

That adds detail to our understanding of the nature of this government. How does it govern? It governs at all levels by imparting life. I don't know if you have ever contemplated the question of how God persuades an apple tree to grow apples at the same time every year. It's not by sending a 'government white paper' down, saying, 'Apple tree, in the next two or three weeks you will produce some apples. Get going, please.' No, God gets apple trees to produce apples by giving them apple tree life. No apple tree that I've ever heard of has resented having apple tree life, and said, 'Look here, this is a difficult, disastrous situation to be in; to be obliged to produce apples every year. Why don't we break free from this kind of a tyrant?' Of course not. The apples in my back yard are a bit rebellious, but normal apple trees obey the rules, because they have life.

It is a perverse world that objects to God having any laws. Every life must have its laws, and yet within the confines of our planet the highest level of life that God has made, human life, is often to be found resentful of the laws of that throne.

'Why?' you say. 'They must have an utterly perverted notion of what life is, if they think that the laws of the Creator who created their life stand somehow against their enjoyment of that life.'

Yet that is the fact. Happy are those who, being fallen, have nevertheless been redeemed; have entered the light of God; have been born again by the washing of water through the word; have had implanted within them not merely physical life, but eternal life, the very life of God; have begun to live according to God's laws.

How to bring a whole world back to that situation must be the topic of our study next week. But meanwhile, let us notice this.

As the living creatures in the midst of that throne give honour to him that sits upon the throne, this is not the response of slaves, rattling their chains in the prison cells. This is life, going out in sheer delight to the author of life; contingent life; created life that is aware that it had a beginning, that it isn't self-sufficient, and life that has caught the wonder of living. They fall down and worship the Creator, who lives for ever and ever (vv. 9–10).

You who have felt in your young brains the thrill of being physically alive, for whom the future is already opening up and you see it with all the potential of life—you didn't make yourself. Oh, that God would give you to see that the very source of your life is him, who lives

for ever and ever, so that your experience of temporary life might lead you on to the reception of eternal life.

The twenty-four elders

And when the twenty-four elders hear those living creatures giving praise to him, they fall down before him that sits upon the throne and cast their crowns before the throne (v. 10). Not 'yes men', but creatures who have seen that their very government, the exalted position that they hold in creation, has not been extorted from the Almighty by a series of human strikes and sit-ins.

The fact that they are alive; the fact that they enjoy government with God, was God's own idea.

'And if it's his idea,' they say, 'to place us in such exalted enjoyment; if it was his unsolicited idea to put us in the very government; then we fall down and cast our crowns before his feet.'

What raised the wondrous thought,
Or who did it suggest,
That blood-bought saints to glory brought
Should with the Son be blest?
Father, the thought was Thine,
And only Thine could be—
Fruit of the wisdom, love divine,
Peculiar unto Thee.²

² George V. Wigram (1805-1879).

The Worthiness of the Lamb

Revelation 5:1–14

In the pursuance of our general topic of the adoration of God, we have spent our last two weeks listening into and observing the worship of the living creatures and of the four and twenty elders. We have found their worship to be not simply a general expression of the praise of God, but a response to a particular glory, namely his character as the moral governor of the universe. It has been therefore, a response to the character of God as governor and to the nature and principles of his government.

The setting

Today, we must spend one more time listening in to this glorious expression of worship; for if in chapter 4 the heavenly beings spell out the worthiness of the Creator, in chapter 5 the centre of their worship moves to consider the Lamb of God and his worthiness.

In particular, the worthiness of the Lamb of God to have all the finances, all the economic power, all the managerial responsibility for the leading companies and the smallest companies of this world, placed in his hand. The worthiness of the Lamb to take over earth's resources, and to be the one who dictates the principles upon which the vast riches of this universe and all other universes shall be developed and exploited. He is the one who shall apportion the dividends of all the income of the universe. And not only the riches of the vast galaxies, but the riches of every individual's life and personality and potential. Nor is he worthy only to direct the material and aesthetic riches of the vast universes, but to receive the outcome of all those activities—the honour and the glory of a spectacular universe, spectacularly won.

As we listen in to the worship of the twenty-four elders and presently hear the voices of every creature in creation, I trust that we are not engaged in some escapist activity, building for ourselves within the recesses of our own minds a rosy picture of daydreams. We are talking of this literal universe in the context of the exceedingly vast problems that confront us still in knowing how to run our earth. We are in a world that weeps for the folly and the irrationality that keeps it under the threat of cosmic violence; a world where brother struggles with brother, and some have and some have not; a world of tears and frustration.

The grounds for their worship

Therefore, to trace the flow of thought that moves the worship and the hope of the elders and the living creatures, let us just remind ourselves that when we broke off our study last week we had been considering the sentiments that were bowing their hearts to worship the Creator.

Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honour and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created. (Rev 4:11)

As we listen to those words of joyous worship, we shall perceive that by their inner logic, they are simultaneously not only an expression of worship, but an appeal to God to assert the rationality of this universe.

It was made by a Creator for his pleasure and glory

It was made for his pleasure primarily, and it can never work harmoniously until it fulfils the pleasure for which it was made. As we listen to their worship, we might find their worship searching our own hearts and motivations. Have there not been moments when we thought that the world was made for us? Even since we have been redeemed, there have been times when we've thought that our redemption is solely for our personal benefit and gratification. Even our hopes of heaven have been largely coloured by 'what I shall get out of it when I get there'. Written into the very fibre of our being is that dark fault that has come into creation through original sin. We imagine in our hearts, even if we never say it with our lips—though often we show it by how we live—that the goal of life is our own personal satisfaction.

But a universe made by a Creator cannot run that way. It was made primarily for his pleasure and glory; and not until my little life and the whole of creation perform the function and purpose for which we were made, can this world know peace.

Therefore, the worship of the elders is but a cry that God will eventually intervene; and if there are no other means, then God the Creator must use his great power and rid the universe of those whose self-will and self-seeking destroy it. If God were to rise up this very minute and do that, I know no ground of complaint that any one of us should have. Let a person be clever enough to make a car or an aeroplane or a computer, and you will find that that person will insist that the car or the aeroplane or the computer goes exactly where he wants it to go. If his Mini-Minor takes it into its head to go five times out of ten where its owner wants it to go, but five times out of ten insists on going against its maker's will and asserting its own will, the owner in the last analysis has no compunction about putting it on the scrapheap. And there is an eternal scrapheap.

The nature of the book

But as we move into chapter 5, we find that a question is exercising the hosts of heaven. There upon the throne sits the almighty Creator, and in his hand he holds a book. Whatever the contents of that closely-written book, we subsequently learn that the effect of undoing its seals and releasing its message is to set loose on earth the judgments that eventually shall bring rebel mankind to his knees and restore the earth to God, its rightful governor.

What those judgments must be, we cannot now consider this morning. Their first stage will be simply the removal of God's restraint upon the wickedness of human beings, so that self-seeking becomes large, and proud and overambitious schemes of aggression shall deluge our world with war. If God does not restrain these crude passions, famine and disease and grizzly death await multitudes of men and women. Now that men have their hands on the fundamental building blocks of creation, the kind of grizzly death that could await our planet is painfully evident to all of us. What if God should lose his patience and let human selfishness go unrestrained? It would not lead, as some people seem to think, to an immediate paradise; it could easily lead to an atomic hell.

A strong voice is heard proclaiming, 'Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?' (v. 2). Who is worthy to release the judgments that shall eventually bring rebellious mankind to its knees and restore the world to its rightful owner?

You say, 'Why all the fuss? Why bother to search for anybody? Is not the almighty Creator himself worthy and entitled to do it? Didn't he make it? Why should he not himself rise up and deal with the rebel world?'

He certainly has the right, but learn something about the character of God. We've said it before; we'll say it again: the God who sits on the throne of the universe is no vulgar tyrant. If and when it becomes necessary for him to judge our world, then God himself has established the principle. Mankind will be judged by a man; judgment will be by peer, as the lawyers say. 'The Father judges no one, but has given all judgement to the Son' (John 5:22). The one who one day shall execute the final judgment shall be the man who walked our world and wept in our houses and travelled in our boats, the perfect man, Jesus Christ. God will not be slandered that he has acted the bully. It will be Jesus of Nazareth who shall sit upon the great white throne; he who conquered was first tempted in all points, like as we are (Heb 4:15).

Who is worthy to open this book?

Now listen again. The cry that goes out is not, of course, 'Who is *able* to open the book and break its seals?' If it came to pushing the appropriate button that should set in motion the atomic fusion that would destroy our planet, I nearly said, 'any fool could press the button'. The cry is not 'who is able', but 'who is *worthy*?'. What a staggering thing that is: the responsibility to take over the government of the universe, and in all justice to execute the judgments of God and bring back a rebel world to God's sovereignty. Who is worthy to do it?

And no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to look into it, and I began to weep loudly because no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to look into it. (vv. 3-4)

It wasn't because John was particularly sentimental that he wept so much. It was the thought of the world going on forever as it is, and the thought that God has made a marvellous universe, but somehow is incapable of getting it to run as it should. It was to see nature in her labour pains, surrounded with blight and blast and mildew; human bodies wracked and tortured with disease and God's greatest experiment apparently gone wrong that caused John to weep. To watch the creation of creatures, to whom God has had the courage to give free

will, out of control, who wouldn't shed a tear at the thought of the present frustration and sin continuing forever? The dazzling stroke of divine courage that God dared to give creatures free will; and then to watch and see them ruining the very universe for which they were made, So one of the elders took John's hand, and said 'a solution has been found'.

And one of the elders said to me, 'Weep no more; behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals.' (v. 5)

And you will say, 'Mr Preacher, tell us who that is.'

Well, obviously it is the Lord Jesus.

You say, 'That's the trouble with the book of the Revelation; it never says things clearly. Why on earth didn't it say, "The Lord Jesus has overcome"? Then we should all have known what it meant. This difficult book at the end of the Bible is full of curious symbols, and very often it doesn't tell you who the people are that are represented by the symbols.'

Well no, it doesn't; but perhaps that's not the right way to read it. Perhaps you're expected to know who it is; so that the Holy Spirit doesn't say, 'It is the Lord Jesus Christ that has conquered.' We all know that. What the Holy Spirit is concerned to do is to awaken your imagination to perceive what this person is like. Who is this Lord Jesus that has conquered—how shall I conceive of him?

The Lion

If you want to picture him, think of a lion. Think of that kingly beast, shaking the very jungle with his roar and subduing every other animal to fear, and you will have pictured something of the power and the royal dignity of Jesus Christ. We speak rightly of him as the *lowly* Jesus, but let us never forget his imperial majesty.

Shall it be then, that the answer is this, that one day the lion came out of his lair and roared; that every other human personality was so overcome that it cringed in the dust, unable to do anything else? God could have used that solution, couldn't he? But what use would it have been? In one sense, our rebellion is no problem to God. Were he to turn on one little tiny bit of his power, God could get us to do his will. But what use would it be to cure the rebellion by destroying the very free will that he was trying to redeem?

Indeed, should he please, the Lion of the tribe of Judah has the power to dissolve our universe and start afresh. In some sense that would be a very attractive solution, wouldn't it? Certainly it would demonstrate God's power. But then there would be another sense in which that would be a defeat. We know that God is all-powerful to create and all-powerful to destroy; is he not attractive enough to win the hearts and allegiance of the men and women he has made? Shall the devil prove himself to be more attractive and wiser in their eyes than God? Ah, some of you knew the day when it seemed so. In a world gone from God and openly blaspheming his name, you found it more attractive than God.

The Lamb

In the great battle of the universe, can the God who was almighty to create attract and win back the loyalty of his creatures? So when John looks round to see the Lion of the tribe of Judah who has conquered and can solve the problem, he sees not a lion, but a Lamb (v. 6).

Don't mistake the symbol. I say it reverently; it's not a lamb with wobbly knees, bleating out a few pathetic protests to a godless world—'Don't be quite so wicked, please'. It is a Lamb 'with seven horns and with seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth.'

Still in possession of ultimate power and possessed of divine wisdom, see how he solves the problem. How shall he win men and women back to God in redemption, rid nature of her curse and at last fulfil the Creator's purpose? The angels have been watching the progress of our planet, amazed at the courage God had in creating a human race like us, and wondering what answer he would find to salvage it and bring it back. With relief and joy they see the Lamb triumph and go forward and take the book. He has been found worthy to do it. They begin their worship and the living creatures join them, and the elders fall down before the Lamb with their incense. The ground of his worth is this, 'Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, *for you were slain*' (v. 9).

Oh, what mystery: is this God's Son hanging, spiked hand and foot? Is that all man's wisdom can do, to invent a cross and a death by crucifixion? Say, is that a something to be proud of, and when you've finished you have a human form mangled on a cross? Is that God's Son?

Someone will say, 'We never thought God could be like that. We thought he was a tyrant, a divine bully.'

In the cross of Jesus Christ, we discover what God is like; he would rather die than we perish. And in that moment you will see the wisdom of those seven eyes and perceive the power of those seven horns, for here is a power beyond nature's atomic power, beyond the power of the mightiest archangels. This is the power of a God who will be loyal to what he made; a God who is prepared to suffer for mankind's redemption.

The worship

This is no fairy story. It has worked millions upon millions upon millions of times, and admiring angels have seen it as prodigal after prodigal has come home, thinking the best they could be was hired servants. 'I thought once that you were an old spoilsport, Father, but I find you as you are, waiting to welcome me.' For not only was he slain, but his worthiness lies in the fact that he has brought men and women back to God. And not only brought them back to God and rescued them from the pangs of hell, but he has made them something for God. He has made them into men and women who will love to obey God.

By your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth. (vv. 9–10)

He has made them into a kingdom and they serve God, not merely with the obedience of people that have been subdued; they serve him with all the grace of priests. From now on they shall learn the art of living in God's universe and handling its resources—its riches, its power and all that is delegated to them—as priests who have learned first to live for God and then for their neighbours, and finally to enjoy the whole process themselves.

And as the elders add their worship, says John,

Then I looked, and I heard around the throne and the living creatures and the elders the voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands. (v. 11)

And one day, creation itself shall be set free from its bondage to corruption (see Rom 8:19–21), to serve God in every department under the hand of redeemed men and women who have been conquered by the Lamb of Calvary and turned into a kingdom of priests. ‘Worthy is the Lamb’, and rightly do we allow our hearts to be projected into that coming day when all shall be fulfilled and the victory complete. But does there not rise in our hearts one practical question?

If the worthiness of the Lamb shall finally be seen in this, that he has redeemed men and women and made them obedient to live daily as priests for God’s pleasure—am I one of those redeemed? Is it obvious, as I go into the world, in how I handle my home, my money, my personality, my energy, my time, and pursue my ambitions?

Would any angel examining me from afar this coming week fall down before God and say, ‘How marvellous; what a victory the Lamb of God has wrought in this life? See how [he] lives for the glory of God, for God’s pleasure and for the good of men. Oh, how worthy is Christ for having produced such a result in that life.’

But my dear Christian friend, Christ is staking everything he has on his ability to do that with your life. Worthy is the Lamb, because he has made us a kingdom and priests to our God. God grant that the vision of his purpose, one day to be fulfilled, shall begin to be translated into the practicalities of our lives.

The Adoration of Christ (1)

Reading: Leviticus 2:1–16

When anyone brings a grain offering as an offering to the LORD, his offering shall be of fine flour. He shall pour oil on it and put frankincense on it and bring it to Aaron's sons the priests. And he shall take from it a handful of the fine flour and oil, with all of its frankincense, and the priest shall burn this as its memorial portion on the altar, a food offering with a pleasing aroma to the LORD. But the rest of the grain offering shall be for Aaron and his sons; it is a most holy part of the LORD'S food offerings. When you bring a grain offering baked in the oven as an offering, it shall be unleavened loaves of fine flour mixed with oil or unleavened wafers smeared with oil. And if your offering is a grain offering baked on a griddle, it shall be of fine flour unleavened, mixed with oil. You shall break it in pieces and pour oil on it; it is a grain offering. And if your offering is a grain offering cooked in a pan, it shall be made of fine flour with oil. And you shall bring the grain offering that is made of these things to the LORD, and when it is presented to the priest, he shall bring it to the altar. And the priest shall take from the grain offering its memorial portion and burn this on the altar, a food offering with a pleasing aroma to the LORD. But the rest of the grain offering shall be for Aaron and his sons; it is a most holy part of the LORD'S food offerings. No grain offering that you bring to the LORD shall be made with leaven, for you shall burn no leaven nor any honey as a food offering to the LORD. As an offering of firstfruits you may bring them to the LORD, but they shall not be offered on the altar for a pleasing aroma. You shall season all your grain offerings with salt. You shall not let the salt of the covenant with your God be missing from your grain offering; with all your offerings you shall offer salt. If you offer a grain offering of firstfruits to the LORD, you shall offer for the grain offering of your firstfruits fresh ears, roasted with fire, crushed new grain. And you shall put oil on it and lay frankincense on it; it is a grain offering. And the priest shall burn as its memorial portion some of the crushed grain and some of the oil with all of its frankincense; it is a food offering to the LORD.

In the course of our study of the topic of worship in these past weeks, we have more than once observed that worship is always the stronger and the richer for being not simply a general response to the general goodness and glory of the divine persons, but rather a particular and specific response to one or more of their particular glories and excellencies that we have noticed.

To help us perceive the particular glories of Jesus Christ our Lord, and the wealth of wonder that is in him and in his sacrifice, the New Testament here and there points to the

ancient Jewish ritual, to parts of holy Scripture that are not frequently read because, as they stand upon the page, they seem to be obscure and quite irrelevant to our modern times. They were not, of course, the simple invention of a pagan people; these were rites and ceremonies and symbols that God himself created in his divine wisdom. They served the people of that far-off day in their worship and approach to God; but the New Testament quite clearly indicates that, as well as serving those ancient people in their worship, they may serve us in this day as symbols. Knowing that in the fullness of time he would send his Son to be our Saviour, God himself devised that the Old Testament ritual should be a kind of prototype of Jesus Christ our Lord.

As we look back now from our age to the age before he came, we might see eloquent evidence that this Jesus Christ our Lord is no sudden will-o'-the-wisp, but that he was indeed the Lamb foreordained before the very foundation of the world (1 Pet 1:20). God himself spent ages upon ages in preparation for his coming, so that men's minds might be prepared to understand him and to enjoy him when he came.

Thus it is, for instance, that in the New Testament we read that Christ is our Passover lamb (1 Cor 5:7). We are aware at once that we do not need a literal Passover of a woolly lamb, nor its blood sprinkled upon the doorposts of our houses in the manner of the ancient Israelites; but we do understand that what that Passover was to the Jew in the far-distant age, Jesus Christ is for us now. Just as that Passover lamb and its blood saved Israel from the wrath of God against a guilty world, and set them free for a new life and opened up to them a glorious future, so Jesus Christ and his death does for us. He saves us from the wrath of God and opens up a future for us, and eventually 'an inheritance [in heaven] that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading' (1 Pet 1:4).

Of course, there is more in the work of Jesus Christ our Lord than saving us from the wrath of God. So Paul exhorts his fellow Christians in these terms:

Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. (Eph 5:1-2)

Live and serve your fellow men and women as Jesus Christ did. How did he live? He 'loved us and gave himself up for us', and in the process he did something else that was indescribably marvellous: He gave himself as a *burnt offering* and a sacrifice wholly acceptable to God for a sweetsmelling savour. Paul is pointing us once more to ancient Israelite ritual, for one of their main sacrifices was a sacrifice where the whole of it was burnt upon the altar; and in the technical language of their ritual, it ascended to God as a sacrifice of a sweet smell.

'Think of it,' says Paul, 'and you will perceive what was going on when Jesus Christ walked this earth. Watch him in his infinite compassion seeking the lost; sitting by a well, tired, hungry and thirsty, but overcoming nationalistic prejudices and religious bigotry to reach out to a Samaritan woman and bring her the thirst-quenching draught of God's Holy Spirit' (John 4).

'It was wonderful,' you say, 'for that woman.'

Yes, but it was also wonderful for God. As he looked down on that well in Sychar's little village, he saw his magnificent regal Son going out of his way, sacrificing his time and comfort

to put the needs of that one stray, forlorn woman before his own pleasures. The whole activity came up to God as an offering of a sweet smell, and God was delighted.

We made it very difficult for Jesus Christ, God's Son, to serve some of us, didn't we? What with the kicks and the ingratitude, the stubbornness and the wilfulness; and yet as he gave himself for us, it did more than just release us from the wrath of God: it filled God with utter delight. It is within your compass, my good Christian friend, and mine too, this coming week so to sacrifice ourselves for others that we shall not merely do them good, but in the process be offering to God a sacrifice that delights his heart.

We shall think on another occasion of that particular sacrifice in Israel's ritual that so vividly portrays Jesus Christ our Lord.

The meal offering

This morning, let us think of that sacrifice that accompanied all others, the meal offering, and ask ourselves what its prototype can tell us of the glory of Jesus Christ our Lord. The symbolism is not difficult to interpret, for this offering was made up of two major constituent parts. There was on the one side, flour, or bread. Corn in some form or other formed its first constituent and the other major constituent was oil.

Flour

If we search the New Testament for guidance as to how to understand that symbolism, we shall not have far to seek. On the very night in which our Lord was betrayed he took bread, and he said, 'This bread is [or represents] my body' (see Luke 22:19, for instance).

Or again, the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 15 uses the analogy of wheat or some other grain that falls into the ground and then rises again in greater glory. Paul uses this as an analogy of the human body; the body of our Lord and eventually the bodies of all believers who die, whose bodies are put in the ground, and who shall yet rise again.

That is why the third division of this sacrifice is the offering of firstfruits; and the New Testament takes that offering of firstfruits and once more uses it as an emblem and symbol of our Lord, and tells us, 'But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep' (v. 20).

Corn, flour, bread: consistently in New Testament symbolism it represents the body of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Oil

I shall not need to spend time with you to demonstrate that Zechariah uses oil explicitly as a symbol of God's Holy Spirit (ch. 4).

I hasten to put those two symbols together: body represented by bread, and spirit represented by oil. When those two symbols are combined, it forms a vivid if simple picture of the human personality of Jesus Christ our Lord. Or of any human personality; for what is human personality, if it is not made of these two constituents at least—body and spirit?

Frankincense

In this symbolism, you will notice, there is another element called frankincense. It is not merely the clock that forbids me to speak about it; it is the fact that in the ancient Jewish ritual that particular part of the symbolism was regarded as being utterly for God, and no other was to attempt to use it.

So let us take these two symbols, flour and oil. They will point us to the personality of Jesus Christ our Lord, and to those excellencies in him that qualified him to be our redeemer. Let us celebrate again in our hearts the wonder that he, the transcendent Lord of time and space, ever condescended to become human. The Word was made flesh and had a human body, as we have a human body (John 1:14). He was born of the virgin, man of very man, as well as God of very God.

Body

Because our blessed Lord had a body, immediately that speaks to us. We have bodies, don't we? Sometimes we're proud of them; sometimes all too aware of them, because our body is one of the great elements in our behaviour. If you want to know why I behave so oddly at times, you would be wise to consider whether it isn't my poor specimen of a body that's gone wrong. A great deal of human behaviour is based upon the body, isn't it?

The physicians and surgeons have been able to show us that in a remarkable way in more recent times. The now outmoded operation of leucotomy upon the brain transformed a person's personality and behaviour. Let the adrenal glands or the thyroid get in disorder, and the effect it will have upon our behaviour is most unfortunate. Sometimes, you know, we don't make enough allowance for the fact that we have bodies, and some of the peculiarities of our behaviour depend upon that very thing. And for some of our good points as well, but it's humiliating to be reminded of it, isn't it?

Here's a man who is valiant for the Lord; he would face Goliath himself and testify boldly for the Lord. He exhorts his dear sister in the Lord to be bold in her testimony for the Lord too, but if she saw a giant her legs would quiver. He thinks it's because he is so remarkably spiritual that he has this great courage. Perhaps it is. But it could be that his genes were jolly good genes; his nerves are the nerves of a rhinoceros, and his skin as well! This poor woman has been afflicted with weak nerves all her days, and for her to do so much as give a gospel tract to somebody takes her an enormous amount of courage. It could be that she's the more spiritual of the two. Because of the fall, men and women were born with imperfect bodies that make us less than we would like to be.

And then we look at Christ. Praise God for that marvellous gift. See him, God incarnate, with a perfect, unfallen, holy, sinless body: perfect in all his ways. God has pledged to us that he will not rest content until one day he has conformed us, even as far as our bodies are concerned, to Jesus Christ our Lord.

Spirit

But it wasn't merely that our Lord Jesus had a perfect body. The other element in the symbolism reminds us that human behaviour is not just accountable for in terms of *physical* mechanisms. There is a *spiritual* part to human personality and in Jesus Christ our Lord it was utterly sinless, and therefore in majestic and perfect control of his physical body.

You will remember how all three Gospels tell us that in the wilderness Jesus Christ was tempted. The first temptation came at him at the level of his bodily appetites, and after forty days of abstinence he was hungry.

There's nothing wrong in being hungry. There is nothing wrong in any of the physical appetites that God, by his creative wisdom, has placed within the human personality. The wrong comes when a person allows his physical appetites to become master; to control him instead of him controlling them. What should have been a delightful thing, placed within the human personality by God for our enjoyment, becomes a hideous master. In the process, it takes that person away from God and dumps him as a wreck sometimes on society's scrapheaps. Who among us has not known physical appetite of one form and another carry us away, like straws in the wind, and make us something less than a human personality and perilously nearer to an animal?

We look at our Lord, and see how he was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. 'In every respect [he] has been tempted as we are' (Heb 4:15). He was tempted, then, on this matter of the control of his body and his physical appetite, and remained sinless.

And you say, 'It was easier for him than it would be for me.'

No, it wasn't. You've never been tempted to make stones into bread. I've frequently been tempted to do all sorts of things and have fallen—I say it to my shame; but I've never in all my history been tempted to make stones into bread, for the simple reason that I haven't got the power to make stones into bread. Christ had the power to make stones into bread, and therefore he knew temptation larger than any of us know.

Do not suppose that he was sinful because he was tempted. Adam was not sinful when he was tempted. There is no sin in feeling the pangs of hunger; no sin in feeling the power of any physical appetite. The sin would be in indulging the appetite against God's will. Mark his superb triumph: the complete control by his spirit of his physical body.

And after fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. And the tempter came and said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.' But he answered, 'It is written, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God."' (Matt 4:2-4)

Because of it we are saved; for if in that moment he had dithered and fallen, he never could have been our Saviour. We would have been lost and something less than human beings for all eternity. It is with tremendous admiration that deepens into worship, that we consider him.

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. (Heb 4:15)

Today we go out into the world, human beings with two feet very much on the ground, a physical mechanism that is full of desires and appetites. Some of us have a very unruly mechanism that has been wounded and put off balance by the fall. We have to struggle with it day in and day out; a mechanism in which we have known so much defeat. But let us pause for a moment and consider him, that perfect specimen of humanity, and rejoice. The very fact that God has sent him to be our Saviour is the guarantee that one day we shall be like him. Meanwhile, as we face this coming week's battles, and try by God's grace to live as redeemed human beings should live, we have one in heaven who understands the battle and can grant us the help and spiritual strength we need in time of need.

Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. (v. 16)

You say, 'Mr Preacher, it would be far easier if God were not to wait. Why doesn't he give me a perfect body right now?'

It would be easier, wouldn't it? But that is not God's intention yet. God willing, we shall see on another occasion that it is God's intention to go about our redemption, first by renewing us in spirit, and then finally renewing us in body.

But the struggle is not in vain, as by God's Holy Spirit we learn to struggle to attain control of our physical bodies and their mechanisms, their desires and their appetites. By God's gracious Spirit and by the intercessions of Jesus Christ, our perfect advocate, those very struggles themselves are beginning to produce a renewed humanity within us. As we learn the lessons necessary to control that lovely new body that one day we shall be given when the Lord comes, may God fill our hearts with admiration for his Son and a burning desire that we shall live like him.

The Adoration of Christ (2)

Leviticus 1:3, 8–10, 14; 2:4, 11–14

Our lesson this morning is based on the book of Leviticus. Let us therefore read some excerpts from chapter 1 and chapter 2, and may God give us good understanding of his word.

To help us be more specific in our adoration of our Lord Jesus Christ, we turned last week to consider the symbolism of the Old Testament sacrifices. Those sacrifices, we found, had a double purpose. In their own day, they served the needs of the Israelites as they approached God to worship him. At the same time, they were designed of God, who foresees all that should happen, as a pointer towards the coming sacrifice of Jesus Christ our Lord, to act as a kind of magnifying glass through which we shall see more detail in the person and work of Jesus Christ our Lord than otherwise we might see. Putting those two aspects together, we may immediately learn some exceedingly practical lessons about our own worship.

In spite of the fact that he had been redeemed by the Passover lamb from Egypt, as the Israelite approached God he would be made aware of his own personal sin, and then of national sin. He would need a sacrifice to cover his sinfulness, and therefore God gave him these sacrifices. God has given to us the sacrifice of Jesus Christ our Lord. It is not, of course, that we constantly have to repeat that sacrifice, for the New Testament is abundantly clear that, whereas those Old Testament sacrifices were constantly repeated, the sacrifice of our Lord was offered once and for all. Since it brings complete and utter forgiveness to those who trust him, 'there is no longer any offering for sin' (Heb 10:18). And yet, as his redeemed people we come into the presence of God, it is inevitable that the nearer we come the more we shall be made conscious of our sinfulness.

Incidentally, that is why the exercise of worship is an exceedingly practical thing and promotes, like nothing else, the ongoing holiness of the believer. Even though you are surrounded by all his manifold gifts and are a little grateful for them, if you stay at a distance from God you will never become so aware of your sinfulness as those who constantly come near the divine presence. The nearer we dwell with the Lord, the more the light of his own presence will convict and expose us of our inadequacies. It is therefore an important duty as well as a benefit to constantly come near to the Lord to worship him. Being made conscious of our sin, God will point us once again to the sacrifice of Christ that covers all our need as sinful people coming near to worship their God.

It is with relief, then, that we turn from those many aspects of life in which we fail; from those many features about our characters and personalities that are ill adjusted and bad. We gladly turn from them to the contemplation of our Lord Jesus and his perfection. You see, the

nearer I come to Christ, the more I shall appreciate my own shortcoming; but the more I appreciate my own shortcoming, the more I shall appreciate him.

When I listen to a piece of music, so long as it isn't too *high brow*, I am delighted with it; but with that delight peculiar to an innocent who doesn't know much about the difficulty of actually playing the piece. You who are experts will know how difficult it is to get your fingers round such and such a phrase of that particular music, and how easily you could come unstuck and make a fool of yourself if you were trying to play it in public. So, when you hear a past master playing it, and the way he makes even that difficult phrase seem as easy as could be, you are open-mouthed in your admiration. You saw the difficulty that I didn't. And only those who are trying to live a holy life will begin to appreciate fully the marvellous expertise of Jesus Christ our Lord, going through life and its difficult patches in a way that somehow made it look easy, and our hearts are drawn out in admiration and worship of him.

Confessing our sin

And therein lies another of God's practical secrets; another reason that makes the worship of our Lord an exceedingly wholesome as well as practical thing. We all fall and fail, and feel miserable with ourselves. Therefore, if we've any conscience left at all, we turn to reflection about it and to humble confession before God.

That is good, but it can be taken to extremes. Our enemy, the devil himself, is not unaware of our efforts to be godly, and if he cannot trip us up by sheer worldliness and carelessness, then he will spoil us by pushing us over the edge of some extreme or other in our spiritual exercises. He commonly does it with younger believers. Like all of us, they fall and fail and then they feel miserable about it. Some of us are a bit hard-skinned and don't feel as miserable as we should; but they feel miserable, and therefore they start to confess their sins before the Lord. Today and then tomorrow and then tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow, until their exercises before God are one long series of ugly things, telling God at length how bad they are. In the end it leaves them worse than when they started, for it's what you constantly think about that you become like. Get obsessed with your faults and failings and you'll become very good at faults and failings.

Occupation with Christ

God's way is better. As we approach the divine presence, aware of our faults and failings he 'puts into our hands' that great sacrifice for sin and points us back to our sinless Lord. 'Please now, I've had enough of listening to all your badness. Please change the tune and don't go on forever talking to me about your ugliness. I know it and I don't like it. Talk to me about the excellence of Jesus Christ your Lord. Have you not seen that where you failed, he was perfect, and do you not admire him for it?'

As we change the centre of our preoccupation from our sinful selves to the perfect Christ, our hearts begin to respond in admiration to him and presently, and little by little, we find ourselves becoming more like the one we constantly think about and the one we admire.

It was not only when the Israelite was aware of his sinfulness that he offered these sacrifices; he offered sacrifices when he came to express his gratitude to God. When he came

to bring his thanksgiving, God directed that he should offer certain sacrifices, which gave the man something to do. It 'filled his hands' and he had something to offer. So it is surely with us, when we come in our holy exercises of thanksgivings and praises.

In public as in private, one of the reasons why so many are slow at engaging in prayer and praise is that common human weakness: when we would like to give thanks, we don't know what to say. We'd love to praise the Lord and stand up in the middle of the congregation and praise him, but we don't know what to say.

'I'd like to tell them all how grateful I am, but I stutter and I stammer and I don't know what to say. I feel a little bit odd and something less than sincere, so I don't do it.'

If I might descend from high heights and come down to lowly matters, it is the same sometimes when you get a Christmas present. This Christmas I'm sure you husbands will get one from your wives, all wrapped up with blue ribbon. When you open it, there is a tin of talc from Boots, and of course now you've got to be grateful for it! Do you feel a little bit awkward? You don't know what to say.

'Oh, I am delighted!' Of course husbands have means at their disposal to express their gratitude, but what do you say? 'Oh, I'm glad'? That doesn't sound too good. 'Well, I'm deeply grateful'?

What else can you say? I'll give you a hint, if you want something to say. Shake the old talcum powder and start talking about that! Look at what she's given you—the beautiful tin, the flowers on it. Open the lid and sprinkle it, 'Oh, it smells delightful.' Rub some on your hand and see how smooth it makes it. Talk about the gift and then you'll have forgotten your own embarrassment. You'll find plenty to say.

As we come to God, perhaps it does embarrass you to get up and say, 'I'm glad and I'm thankful'. Well, stop talking about yourself and your feelings and talk to God about the gift he's given you. That's the highest way you could possibly express your gratitude to God. It will, of course, demand that you know about the gift. But once more, as you get to know about the gift and stop talking so much about you and your reactions and what you feel, and put the greater emphasis on the magnificence of the gift, God is beginning to correct that fatal flaw in our make-up that makes us self-centred, even in our religious exercises. What we desperately need is to be taken out of ourselves and our self-centred preoccupations, so that the focus of our thinking is not ourselves so much as Jesus Christ our Lord.

Do not say that worship is a waste of time or that it is something impractical. In the ongoing salvation of our personalities, worship is perhaps the most important thing. For that reason, then, we come to these detailed pictures of our Lord to see details in the gift that otherwise might escape us.

The meal offering

We thought last week of the flour and the oil of the meal offering that together begin to talk to us of the person and the personality of our Lord Jesus. *First*, of its constituent parts: the bread, the flour, the corn, speaking of his body; the oil, speaking of his spirit. They pointed us to our Lord with his human body, utterly sinless and unfallen; 'that holy thing' that was born of the virgin Mary (Luke 1:35). It was a genuinely human body with its appetites and instincts,

yet his was unfallen and sinless. We have never seen with our physical eyes a perfect human body; all we have seen have been more or less wrecks. In Jesus Christ we have a perfect human body, but a body and appetites that were under the perfect control of his spirit. He was a veritable king of his life; not the miserable slaves that we often are, dragged along by our bodily appetites; but one whose spirit, filled with the Holy Spirit, was perfectly in control. Praise God, one day we shall have a body like his.

There are two other divisions of this particular offering. They speak to us still of Jesus Christ our Lord. What shall they tell us?

The *third* of them is easy to interpret, because it was offered particularly as the offering of *firstfruits* (Lev 2:12, 14). The New Testament is our guide in the interpretation, for it says, 'But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep' (1 Cor 15:20). Marvellous as his body was when he lived in Nazareth, the third division of this sacrifice will point us to his risen, glorified resurrection body with all the exceeding wonder of it. More of that in a moment.

Before we come to that, there is a *second* part to this offering. We may start with the simple observation that, of the three parts of this sacrifice, the first represents the raw material: the flour and the oil; the second is that raw material processed, cooked, baked, or fried in some manner or other.

That bids us again for a moment to descend to humble matters. Humble, but basic and very necessary and full of art: the cooking that goes on in our households. What a necessary thing it is, and how carefully it needs to be done if it is not going to end in disaster.

The flour might be the very best, the currants and sultanas and the oil and the margarine of the highest quality; but who would want to eat them in their raw state? Good as they are and perfect of their kind, before they shall become completely palatable they must be cooked somehow. When at last the cake comes out all nicely risen and looking very brown and tempting, you will observe two things. It's the same stuff as went in the oven that comes out; and yet, though it is the same, it is very different. Most of the time it comes out so much more wonderful. Sometimes it comes out differently, and it is discreetly and quietly given to the dog, which is sad.

It is sadder still when it happens with a human life. What is a human personality?

'Well, its constituent parts are body and spirit,' you say.

Very good, but that's not all a human personality is. Upon birth there comes another process, designed to complete and to perfect that human personality. That is life's *experience*, that tests and 'cooks' and 'bakes' and 'fries'. It's doing something to the personality every day of the week and every year of one's life.

You point me to a young girl. How beautiful she is, in the flower of her life, delightful. You point me to her mother. She is still beautiful, of course. The sun has done its work and there's a wrinkle or two, but why is it that sometimes Mother is much more easy to get on with than the daughter? And why would you go to Mother in your troubles for advice and not to the daughter? Why does Mother remain calm in a difficult situation and prove to be a tower of strength to her family, whereas the daughter couldn't possibly?

And you say, 'The key is in what life has done to Mother. It has ripened and matured her until there is something in her personality now that wasn't there at the beginning.'

That was what life was meant to do, and it's a delightful thing when it goes well. It is a disaster when it goes wrong. Who hasn't known of a young man in his youth, full of promise, but see him thirty years later and, what's gone wrong? Life's been a success for him, and instead of making him more mature, more humble, more likeable, it has turned him into a hard, proud, arrogant man. The 'cooking' has been a disaster.

I speak here with great compassion. Who hasn't known of a life that began well, but there came life's difficulties and problems, bereavements, tests and disappointments? Days when friends and fellow Christians seemed to leave him in the lurch, when God himself seemed not to answer his prayers, and the man is now an embittered, sour, very difficult and touchy character. A personality that has gone wrong in the cooking.

My dear fellow Christian, how is life 'cooking' you? Is the old self-raising flour doing its job? Are you daily enlarging with a greater breadth of mind and kindness of spirit and sympathy and strength, or is life on the way to making you silly, proud, arrogant, jealous, embittered? Don't look at my 'cooking' too closely. Give the great Cook another hour, please; for there are days when I don't taste very nice.

But everyone who is conscious that he's a long way to go before his personality is as pleasant and presentable as it should be will turn now with relief, with admiration and wonder to Jesus Christ our Lord. Did he go through the process? Surely he did.

In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence. Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered. (Heb 5:7-8)

We understand, of course, that from the very beginning he was perfect in the sense of *sinless*; but there are different kinds of perfection, are there not? The little child Jesus was perfect in body and perfect in spirit; yet Luke records of him, 'And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favour with God and man' (2:52). Eventually the heat came on his life in those early days of his ministry, with the crowds flocking round him to listen to his preaching. Such popularity has undone many a preacher, but not our Lord. Surrounded by the insistent crowds, Mark tells us how eventually he went away into a quiet place and prayed (1:35).

When they came seeking him with all the insistent demands that a crowd will exert, he left them; not mistaking the crowd's popularity for the will of God. 'I must preach in other places, for that is what I came for,' he said (v. 38). If popularity could not divert him, neither could its opposite. Many instances will now begin to spring to your mind. My dear fellow Christian, take every one of them and treasure it and admire it, and turn it into the worship of Jesus Christ our Lord. Tell God what you found in him: that's worship.

I must select but one. There came the night in which he was betrayed—that dark, execrable, filthy act. A man, who had eaten his own bread, 'lifted up his heel' (John 13:18) against him. The whole thing had been exposed by our Lord offering Judas again the sop of his friendship (Matt 26:23). Judas took the sop, but not the friendship. He arose, and as he was making for the door our Lord rose from his seat and said some words to Judas before he went out into the darkness.

The apostles weren't quite near enough, so they didn't hear what he was saying to the traitor as he went out to organise Calvary. They had to guess from the tone of his voice and

the look on his face. I come as near as I can get because I want to know what this dastardly deed of betrayal has done to Christ. Has it embittered him? Has it at last provoked blind revenge in his heart? *Has the cake been floored by the cooking?* Well, we can't hear what he says, but he's saying it with a tone of voice and gesture of body that some of the disciples decided he must have been saying, 'Give something to the poor' (John 13:29).

Can you imagine the tone of voice in which he would normally have said to his disciples, 'Give something to the poor'? With divine generosity and compassion and kindness he would have said it many times, and they couldn't see any difference in his tone of voice and gesture as he said his last goodbye to the traitor. What a 'cake', utterly unspoiled in the cooking. I pray that life will treat me so; but how shall it, except by his grace and strength?

Firstfruits

And so the *third* and last division of that sacrifice bids us see our Lord as now he is: risen from the dead and become the firstfruits of them that slept. No longer a piece of corn, nor even that corn ground into flour; but this time a full ear of corn, vigorous in the flush of its growth, still green and full of sap with the blossom upon it. And not just one grain but a whole host of grains; a lovely picture of our Lord's resurrection body. Artists may depict the beauty of an ordinary human body; it is a magnificent thing to see it in health and in its prime. But our present body is but a bare grain of wheat, compared to the full ear of corn, with its many hundred-fold potential, of our body when it is made like his glorious body (Phil 3:21).

As we leave that marvellous topic, perhaps one thing touches our hearts more than any other. The Israelite was instructed that, as he took that ear of corn, green and full of sap and beauty, he was first to beat it and bruise it, and then he was to scorch it in front of the fire. Why? It was to be an apt symbol of this. The Lord Jesus, who now reigns with the Father and with the Holy Spirit, sits at the right hand of God in his glorious resurrection body and bears still within his personality the results of his experiences here on earth. He understands us even now, and can succour us with his sympathy.

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. (Heb 4:15)

But it tells us more. Whatever the mystery of death; though disease ravages this body, hardening of the arteries destroys our brains, and old age perverts our personalities and destroys our memories; that does not mean life has been in vain and all its lessons are lost. For in this thing our Lord Jesus is our example too. Having learnt all those rich lessons of life, he became perfect through his sufferings, and carries them with him still in glory. It tells us that, for us too, life's lessons and all their benefits shall be preserved through death and into resurrection, to our eternal enrichment.

In what pessimistic mood would some of us sit here this morning, whose hairs are more than a little grey, had we not before us the example and the forerunner, Jesus Christ himself, truly human, sinless, triumphant, and now eternally glorified.

About the Author

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