

A beautiful service of worship is not the solution to the problems of the present age.

As Bishop Kennedy said in Time magazine several weeks ago:

"The Church with ~~the~~ most beautiful liturgy is the Russian Orthodox, and they sat by while Communism took over their country".

## "THE WORSHIP OF GOD"

TEXT: "God is a Spirit, and they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth" (John 4: 24)

INTRODUCTION These words are familiar to all of you. Taken together they form one of the great statements, one of the great sayings in the New Testament. Suppose we look at the situation out of which these words have come before we consider their meaning for us today.

DEVELOPMENT Jesus was on his way from Jerusalem to Galilee. In order for him to get there, he had to go either through Samaria or around it. It was shorter for him to go through Samaria, but it was safer for him to go around it. You may remember why. The Jews and the Samaritans were not on the best of terms. For years there had existed a real rift between these two peoples, both Semitic in origin, both going back to Moses in their religion. The Samaritans had built a temple on Mt. Gerizim to rival the one built by the Jews on Mt. Zion in Jerusalem. The Samaritans believed and claimed that this was the only place where a man could legitimately worship God. The Jews and the Samaritans hated each other. There had been occasions when some Jewish pilgrims, on their way through Samaria to national festivals in Jerusalem, were waylaid and failed to arrive for the celebrations.

In spite of this unfriendly situation, Jesus and his friends chose to go through Samaria and not around it. Jesus, being what He was, could not detour. He could not walk a trail that prejudice had blazed; he could not perpetuate a problem that had been created by man's narrowness and resentment. They came to the little village of Sychar. There was a well in the town. It was noon; it was hot. Our Lord was tired and thirsty. He sat down by the well to rest. His friends went to look for food. While He rested there, a woman came to the well to draw water. Jesus reached out to her in conversation. He asked her for a drink. She was shocked at this because Jews ordinarily didn't have any dealings with Samaritans. She recognized him to be a Jew by his accent.

They talked. Jesus, as he so often did, directed their conversation to deeper levels of thought - from relatively superficial things, like a drink of water, to more profound things, like the living water which is the fountain of all life. One thing led to another and soon Jesus found the woman revealing things to him about her past life. When the conversation began to get too personal and Jesus began to talk to her about her own domestic life and marriage, the woman brought up the old controversy regarding the Jews and the Samaritans. This is so easy to do, isn't it - to avoid something that goes right to the heart of your own situation and which may be difficult to face.....to avoid it by skirting off in other directions, raising questions to which there seem to be no answers. In this case, it was the old question: which is the right place to worship - on the mountain in Jerusalem (Mt. Zion), or as her fathers had taught her, on the mountain in Samaria, (Mt. Gerizim)?

Jesus had an answer to that question. He said this to her: "The time is coming when ye shall neither on this mountain, nor yet at Jerusalem worship the Father. The hour cometh and now is when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the father seeketh such to worship Him. God is a spirit, and they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth".

This then is the biblical background out of which these words have come.

WHAT JESUS WAS SAYING

Now, if I understand all of this correctly, it appears that Jesus was attempting to say certain things about our worship of God. Two things stand out.

For one thing, he was saying that it doesn't really make a great deal of difference where you worship God - on this mountain or on that mountain, in this temple of worship or in that temple of worship - for God's spirit is everywhere. The important thing is that you worship Him somewhere - this God who is spirit, this God who is present in all places, animating and sustaining all lives, not just Jews and Samaritans, but Greeks and Romans, and people in all parts of the earth.

Where you worship him...this is not the important thing in religion, and Jesus is saying that it's time that you came out of those shallow pools of religious controversy about secondary things in religion and began to deal with the primary things. Isn't it true that if a man worships a small, local God, his worship will be small, shrinking his life to fit the pattern. However, on the other hand, if he worships God the Father, the spirit, his religion will undercut barriers and will help him to pass over them into the lives of other people so that instead of his religious separating him from others, it will help to draw him closer to others.

This, then, is one of the things that Jesus seems to be saying to us: detach yourself from the little local pattern of worship, from the parochial fragmentation which we have known for so long within Christendom, and reach out for the great thing - the spirit of the living God who is the Father of all men - rich and poor, black and white, Catholic and Protestant.

A second thing that enters into the picture here has to do with our approach to worship. How do we approach our experiences of worship? Do we prepare for them in any way? "They that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth". The emphasis, Jesus would remind us, must be on the inner attitude, not so much on the outward show of things.....on the sincerity, the honesty of our approach to the worship of God. The chances are we give more thought and attention to the outer preparation...

Whenever I hear people say that they get so little out of public worship I'm always tempted to ask them if they're putting much in to it....whether they're putting much into their preparation for it. I think you know how it is. We come in to our churches and expect God to speak to us every time we do. We do nothing to prepare ourselves, to condition our inner lives for this to happen. Our Sunday mornings are apt to be rushed. We sleep late. The newspapers and a second cup of coffee means that we have to rush in order to make it on time. We come in here breathless. Some come in here to rest. They're tired out. Saturday night was a late night. When they ought to be centering their thoughts on the great things of the spirit, their thoughts are miles away, perhaps thinking about some thing they should have done earlier in the week. It's no wonder then that they fail to receive any spiritual uplift. We don't prepare ourselves for anything to happen.

I suppose that sometimes those who are in charge of preparing the worship services err in another direction. Here in the church we try to arrange the service of worship carefully giving attention to the small details that can sometimes make the difference between a triumphant, uplifting service of praise and a service on the other hand that doesn't get off the ground, that doesn't soar, that doesn't lift the spirits of anyone. For instance, we want the lighting to be conducive to a worship atmosphere - not too bright, not too dark. We want the temperature to be below 70 degrees. If it's too warm, people get uncomfortable. We want the music to

be uplifting. We want the ushers to be warm, cordial - the ushering to be smooth and efficient. We want the flowers to be fresh. We want the communion linen to be spotless. We want the church to be clean. We want the service to be no more than sixty minutes. We want the bulletin to be attractive. And yet, all the time I have to keep reminding myself that while it is important to have all of these details of worship in good order, the real thing and the important thing is what happens in the lives of those who gather here to worship. Unless the conduct of that worship relates to the conduct of the worshipper, unless the content is reflected in the lives of the worshipper, it will have little value, meaning or validity.

Jesus, again is drawing our attention to the things that are of primary importance when it comes to this matter of worship.

#### THINGS THAT SEPARATE

We live in a time when Christian forces are coming together - working together and witnessing together. Mergers and unions are taking place. A new climate of cooperation among all churches of Christendom is being felt. I read recently in one of our papers where Dr. Sockman was quoted as saying that the merger of all major Protestant denominations in this country would come to pass by the end of this century. He went on to say:

"Christians all believe in the same Christ and we ought to get around our differences of theology and practice. Only a united Church can speak forcefully to a divided world".

The signs are unmistakable. The churches are coming together. Whether this trend continues depends to a large extent on the people down on the grass roots level, in the local congregations, to let loose and to give up some of these secondary things that have kept us apart in order to achieve something far greater.

One of the most disheartening things in the world today is the friction and tension the misunderstanding that grows out of our differences as Christians. As we sit quietly here this morning, think about some of those things that separate us. One man says, "You have two candles or six candles on your altar, we have sixty or we have none". Another man says, "You pray directly to God, we ask the saints to intercede for us with God". One persons says, "You say that a person is baptized if water is sprinkled on his head; we say that he isn't baptized unless he is totally immersed from head to foot in water". One person says, "Our church uses wine at the communion table; you say it must be grape juice". One person says, "You have Bishops, and you insist that there must be Bishops if there is to be a Church; we have no Bishops and will have none of them". And so one could go on and on

You may not agree with me, but I'm as sure of this as I am of anything I know. Jesus would say to us that these things, important though they may be in their place, are not the things that really matter when it comes to a person worshipping God. What matters is the reality, the sincerity of your gratitude, your desire to commit yourself to the God who has revealed himself in the life of Christ. This is the thing that matters, and when these secondary things begin to divide and bring about failures of misunderstanding, illwill, and friction, then we are falling short of God's will.

I think these words of Jesus, arising out of religious tensions, if taken seriously, can lead us out of those present day tensions and lift us above our local patterns and practices into the higher realm of worship. And anything that we can do in this local congregation to lift the level of man's sight of God and his worship of God will be our contribution to this movement of the churches toward greater unity. One man has compared the movement of the churches toward greater unity to a

circle. On the circumference are the various denominations. At the center of the circle is Jesus Christ. Each of the denominations is desperately trying to get closer to Christ. They find, however, that they cannot get closer to Christ without getting closer to each other. Alfred Lord Tennyson over one hundred years ago wrote some lines that come to mind:

"Our little systems have their day;  
They have their day and cease to be;  
They are but broken lights of Thee,  
And Thou, O Lord, art more than they."

Remember, when you are tempted to place your attention on relatively unimportant things in religion, remember the words spoken by our Lord at the well of Samaria:

"God is a spirit. They that worship him must worship  
Him in spirit and in truth".

LET US PRAY: Help us, O God, to find in the little local things that we love so much open doors and windows to the wider ways of thy spirit in our world. Deliver us from thinking that our way is the only way. We ask this in the spirit of Jesus Christ. Amen