

July 12, 2009

2Sam. 6:1 David again gathered all the chosen men of Israel, thirty thousand. 2 David and all the people with him set out and went from Baale-judah, to bring up from there the ark of God, which is called by the name of the LORD of hosts who is enthroned on the cherubim. 3 They carried the ark of God on a new cart, and brought it out of the house of Abinadab, which was on the hill. Uzzah and Ahio, the sons of Abinadab, were driving the new cart 4 with the ark of God; and Ahio went in front of the ark. 5 David and all the house of Israel were dancing before the LORD with all their might, with songs and lyres and harps and tambourines and castanets and cymbals. So David went and brought up the ark of God from the house of Obed-edom to the city of David with rejoicing; 13 and when those who bore the ark of the LORD had gone six paces, he sacrificed an ox and a fatling. 14 David danced before the LORD with all his might; David was girded with a linen ephod. 15 So David and all the house of Israel brought up the ark of the LORD with shouting, and with the sound of the trumpet. 16 As the ark of the LORD came into the city of David, Michal daughter of Saul looked out of the window, and saw King David leaping and dancing before the LORD; and she despised him in her heart. 17 They brought in the ark of the LORD, and set it in its place, inside the tent that David had pitched for it; and David offered burnt offerings and offerings of well-being before the LORD. 18 When David had finished offering the burnt offerings and the offerings of well-being, he blessed the people in the name of the LORD of hosts, 19 and distributed food among all the people, the whole multitude of Israel, both men and women, to each a cake of bread, a portion of meat, and a cake of raisins. Then all the people went back to their homes.

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Every once in a while one of you brings someone with you to church. Not often enough, I might say, but it does happen from time to time. Other times, a new face appears in the congregation all on its own, without having a friend bring them. And standing up here looking over the congregation as we pray and sing and worship God together, I can always tell whether our visitors are people who have been to church much before.

Because they are very confused. Stand up, sit down, kneel. Sing, talk, listen, silence. Red book, green book, read from the leaflet. Eat a circle of styrofoam that's called bread, drink all from the same cup of wine, but just a little bit of each. And unless the visitor happens to come on the first or fifth Sunday of the month at the 10:00 service, they also find themselves in the midst of language that hasn't been used outside of the Stratford festival for four hundred years.

Has it ever occurred to those of us who have been doing this our whole lives how completely bizarre it is? Worshipping God is a human activity unlike anything else we do in the rest of our lives.

Now there are some who would say that this is a problem, that we need to update our liturgy and make it more accessible to people, more like their day-to-day lives so that when they come through the doors they can understand exactly what we're about and what's going on.

Up to a point, I would agree. We need to make what we do something that people can relate to their daily lives. If they don't understand it, it can't touch them. But I'm not sure I would agree that worship should be just like everything else we do, because frankly, it's not. While it's of course true that God is always with us, this hour or so that we set apart every week to come together in praise *should* be special, *should* be different from the rest of our lives. Because what we seek here, week after week, is an experience of the presence of God. It is special, it is different.

The first reading this morning is a bit strange, too. David was the newly-crowned king of Israel. He had begun to establish Jerusalem as his capital city, which in the ancient near east meant building defensive walls round its perimeter, building a palace in the centre of the city with its own defences, and turning the place into the cultural and commercial centre of the land. But for David, Jerusalem could not be the capital for the children of Israel, the chosen people of the Lord God, unless it was also the religious capital, as well. And so the Ark of the Covenant was to be brought to the city.

If you've seen your Indiana Jones movies, you know what the Ark looks like. A big box, about the size of our altar, covered in gold, with large cherubim at either end, the wings of the cherubim extending back over the box. The Ark contained the actual tablets of the Ten Commandments God had given to Moses, and was also known as the

presence of God. The Ark went everywhere the army of Israel went, and the Philistines had managed to capture it once in battle. Not that they wanted it particularly, but like capturing the enemy's flag, it was deeply demoralising for the Israelites. Until the rumours started filtering back over the battle lines about how the Philistines were all getting sick with some kind of plague and dying. After seven months, the Philistines decided they'd had enough of this Presence of the Israelites' God, and they left the Ark in the middle of the wilderness, for the Israelites to claim it again.

So now David decides to bring it into Jerusalem. A huge procession is formed, the Ark carried by the priests all the way to Jerusalem. Then the King of the land, all dignity forgotten, puts on the religious garment, the ephod, essentially an apron kind of affair that was usually worn over other robes but in the way that David wore it, left little to the imagination. And David is taken up by some kind of experience of God, some kind of religious experience, and he begins to leap and dance and sing before the Lord God for sheer joy at the privilege of being able to do this small service for the Creator of the universe.

Bizarre, strange, weird. But I wonder whether someone watching what we do here every week might not think the same of us.

Worship of God takes many different forms. Whether it's wild leaping and dancing as David did, whether it's arms raised up to heavens and speaking in tongues or contemplative silence, whether it's the same words following centuries-old patterns or spontaneous prayer, all of it can still be worship.

But David shows us a couple of things about what true worship involves. First, true worship is God-oriented, unconcerned about what other people might think. Second, true worship is sacrificial. And third, true worship is joyful, passionate, and extravagant.

There is one line in today's first reading about David's wife, Michal. She was the daughter of the former king, Saul, and she'd been forced to marry David by her father as a reward for David's victories in war. She was a bitter, bitter woman, and as she stood at her window and watched her husband, mostly naked, jumping around like a madman, all she could see was a fool who was ignoring the duties of a proper king, a man who'd lowered himself in the eyes of his subjects.

David didn't care what he looked like to others. He was so caught up in expressing his love of God that what other people thought about him didn't matter. And shouldn't that be the pattern not only for our services of worship but for our whole lives? Now I'm not saying that we should be abandoning the traditions of Anglicanism, that we should all become arm-waving Pentecostals in order to be faithful. But I am saying that if we are worried about what someone might think about our clothes when we come to

church, or concerned with someone else's reaction when we choose to kneel or stand for a certain part of the service, or worried about what someone behind us is thinking as we struggle with what page we're supposed to be on now, we can't be worshipping God. When our whole being is focussed on God as we worship, all that stuff doesn't matter so much. We simply come, and place ourselves in God's presence, and using words that have succeeded in evoking that presence of others we pray and we sing and we are fed with the body and blood of Christ. We worship focussed on God, not worried about other people and what they might think.

Worship is sacrificial. This huge procession of king, priests, musicians, soldiers and regular people came to a halt every six steps, we heard this morning, so that a proper sacrifice could be made to God. This was to recall that after working for six days, God decreed a day of rest. So true worship demands a sacrifice of our selves to God. Every six steps... sacrifice. What if we took that seriously? After every six steps, we said, "Jesus, I give my self, my time and talent and treasure to you"? Or what if we did it after every six minutes or after every six "to dos" are done or after every six hours? Certainly, after every six days, we ought to show up at a worship service and give God our time, our talent, our treasure.

And finally, true worship is full of joy. If there is a single word to describe David in that moment of abandoned praise of the Almighty, I think that might be it: joy. True worship doesn't produce long-faced, bored-out-of-their-minds people. Worship won't make you miserable; if it does, it isn't worship. David worshiped with his whole being – he poured out the deep, passionate love he had for God with all his heart, soul, mind and strength. Is this how we worship God? Because if we can worship that way, we find ourselves fulfilled in ways we might never have expected.

David has much to teach us about worship. It will look strange and bizarre to those who have never experienced it before and the worshipper will not care. It will demand sacrifice, and the worshipper will give abundantly. And it will involve joy and passionate love of God, however that may be expressed in a particular religious tradition.

But finally, what David's life teaches, is that true worship of God never stops. True worship does not stop when we leave this building! True worship cannot be contained here! True worship is a daily dance before God...therefore, when we arise in the morning...we are to worship God...at work, school or play we are to worship God. We worship giving of our whole selves, focussed on God and not on other people, and living out the joy and passionate love that Christ has given to us. In this world, those things will look strange to people who have never experienced them. But I believe that's all the more reason our world and our God need us to do it! Amen.