

St Andrew's on The Terrace Sunday 11 August 2019 Pentecost 9
'Pillars of St Andrew's 1: Spirituality communal and individual'
Readings for the Gathering

Hebrew Bible Moses and the Burning Bush Exodus 3: 1-14

3 Now Moses was tending the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian, and he led the flock to the far side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. 2 There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up. 3 So Moses thought, "I will go over and see this strange sight—why the bush does not burn up." 4 When the Lord saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, "Moses! Moses!" And Moses said, "Here I am." 5 "Do not come any closer," God said. "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground." 6 Then he said, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob." At this, Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God. 7 The Lord said, "I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. 8 So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey 9 And now the cry of the Israelites has reached me, and I have seen the way the Egyptians are oppressing them. 10 So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt." 11 But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" 12 And God said, "I will be with you. And this will be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain."

Gospel Jesus Is Tested in the Wilderness Matthew 4: 1-10

Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. 2 After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. 3 The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread." 4 Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" 5 Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. 6 "If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down. For it is written: "He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone." 7 Jesus answered him, "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" 8 Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour. 9 "All this I will give you," he said, "if you will bow down and worship me." 10 Jesus said to him, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'"

Contemporary reading 'Sacred Ground' by Joy Cowley in *Aotearoa Psalms*

We are standing on sacred ground

Let our hearts take off their shoes/ and come bare, trembling with awe,/ into the Presence which burns too bright/ and too close for ordinary vision./ Only a naked heart can see/ that all round us, each clump of grass,/ every leaf, twig, stone and flower,/ is a blazing torch, incandescent/ with the one fire that has no name/except "I am".

And only a naked heart can know/ that it too, is a burning bush,/ all of us caught in the one fire,/ "we are" burning into "I am"/ brighter than a galaxy of suns.

Words cannot contain the moment:/ but let's take with us/ the feeling of awe and wonder./ Tomorrow's path might be dark, / difficult and sharp with stones, / but in this sacred place we feel we may never wear shoes again.

Reflection for the Gathering

PART I WORSHIP – COMMUNAL SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

Some of you may not know that there are six Pillars underlying the work here at St Andrew's. They are aspirational statements of what St Andrew's hopes to achieve. They form the basis of our annual reports and are one of the documents given to new ministers when they are called here.

Although I have asked successive Parish Councils many times, I am not sure what metaphor the concept of Pillars represents in this case – so these pillars hold up the floor like concrete foundations? Or, are thee pillars holding up the roof like the Corinthian and Doric pillars of ancient Greece or the pillars outside on our own porch?

The heading above them is "Strategic Plan", but they are only the first part of any plan – they are the goals towards which strategies might aim. So far, we do not have written strategies or procedures to reach these aspirational goals.

The first pillar in this row of six pillars is printed on the front of the order of service today. (We will work through the other five in August and October.)

1: Worship and Spiritual Practice

We aspire to:

St Andrew's will provide a range of worship experiences.

We hope that: *Our worship will enable people to express Christian faith*

*in ways that are participatory, intellectually honest,
creative and contextual.*

We claim that our *Worship activities value the contributions from many
from inside and outside the St Andrew's community.*

Also we aspire to *The St Andrew's community working to include in its life, corporately and individually, spiritual practice
appropriate to our life and times.*

This first pillar has from the beginning I believe had the first three sentences which concern worship. Only recently spiritual practice, communal and individual, has been added in the last sentence.

We confidently aspire to a range of worship services. We do offer a range of services though they lie within a fairly limited arena or formal worship within this space. Other types of worship experience happen on Ash Wednesday, Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. Sometimes alternative styles of worship happen but usually apart from Ash Wednesday mostly on the Sunday morning at 10am.

Worship is a tricky concept for a progressive church. This is because worship is defined as the reverence or adoration of a deity, with words like *adoration, idolatry, devotion, praise, thanksgiving, praising, praying to, glorifying, glory, exalting, extolling, homage, respect, honouring, esteem; rare laudation, and magnification* listed as synonyms.

This will be a perfectly adequate definition for those of you content with a traditional orthodox view of God as a personal deity, almighty and omniscient. But if you don't see God like that anymore – perhaps seeing the divine as a Life Force or a Presence deep within yourself, or as something like a still small voice, then some of these synonyms become problematic – the ones like 'rare laudation' and 'homage', 'magnification' and 'glorifying'. Other synonyms still work - we may well 'adore' the way that that Presence (with a capital P) within makes itself felt on a daily basis; we may well 'respect' its working within us and the world and we may pay attention to the movement of the spirit within us and outside us with 'devotion'.

The list of synonyms for worship sounds like a list of hymn titles usually found in the front section of any hymnbook – hymn titles you will recognise if you have a past in the church: "We praise, we worship thee, O God", today's opening hymn for example; also "let us with a gladsome mind, praise the Lord for he is kind"; "O Lord thou art my God and King, thee will I magnify and praise," "Praise to the Lord, the Almighty, the king of creation"; "God is a name my soul adores" and "Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty." Are some from that beginning section of the traditional hymnbooks.

These hymns use 'vertical theology' – the direction of the hymn is as the definition of worship suggests, sung from human beings on the earth to venerate and praise the God in heaven above.

There is another nuance however, to the definition of the word 'worship' – the word is thought to come from the concept of naming how *worthy* the object given the title 'Your Worship' was or is. The phrase 'His/Her Worship the Mayor' doesn't suggest we adore or glorify the Mayor but rather that the person chosen as Mayor is worthy of that office. Also, the Worshipful Company of Grocers and other livery companies in the City of London are not about the extolling of virtue or praising of craftsmen of the old guilds. Instead, membership in the days of the older guilds was a sign of one's worthiness in one's craft and the name Worshipful Company has stuck.

This definition involving worthiness may be of use to us today. Now, when we come into this place every Sunday at 10am, we come, as our forebears did before us, to honour worthiness. We could say we are giving 'worth-ship' to what is of ultimate concern to us. This will include the many different ways of thinking about God and the divine or sacred which exist in this congregation, just as worship has traditionally done.

This Gathering may also symbolise for us these days our honouring of truth, or love, particularly of the importance of justice for true peace. The way we conduct this Gathering 'honours' and deems 'worthy' the practice of hospitality and inclusivity. We 'esteem' diversity as an essential part of being community. As the Pillar itself states, we celebrate and seek to maintain as we worship here the *Christian faith*. And we value the fact that that Christian faith is experienced *in ways that everyone can participate in, which are intellectually honest, creative and contextual*. We 'give worth' to *contributions from many from inside and outside the St Andrew's community*.

And in the process, we celebrate the worthiness of beauty, companionship, community, honesty; we 'praise' them in different ways, we 'give thanks' for them, we 'esteem' them and 'honour' them and 'respect' them.

An important connection of this contemporary view of worship with the traditional view is that we spend this time occupied with thoughts and feelings which are about something other than ourselves. We are giving worth to concepts and activities which are larger than the human scale of our lives. Beauty and Truth are much, much larger than we can ever dream of or think. Justice and Peace are concepts which bear endless attention, discussion and action. Love is always needing our attention and effort and discipline and is always much more than just the sum of the parts.

This hour or so (such a small space out of the 168 hours we live each week – 60 or 90 minutes)¹, this hour or so, should always remind us we are not the centre of the universe. In previous times, we were reminded about that in church by the image of an all-powerful, somewhat grumpy and unpredictable God which scared little children and turned independent thinkers into truculent non church goers. Sometimes that made us feel comforted and protected but also made us feel small and insignificant and childish.

Now, if we exercise the honour, the respect and the esteem which we find in the worth-ship definition, we can allow more gently the idea that we are only part of the great Wholeness of the cosmos; that we are small though significant; that we are not the sole arbiters of our destiny; though we too are worthy of consideration and unconditional love.

If we are indeed being intellectually honest we will recognise that for some, in erasing the grey-haired God sitting on the throne of judgment, an arrogance has crept into our self-understanding. We have decided **we** are the enlightened ones who know what's what; that ancient texts cannot inform us about our human condition in any way helpful to such sophisticated scientific people and that we have **all** the knowledge needed about what suits us and fits our situation in 2019.

Above all, this space (whether you think of it traditionally as worship or as worth-ship) this space is to be entered with true humility and genuine respect for the spiritual aspect of our lives and the life of our world. As Philip Brooks puts it: "The true way to be humble is not to stoop until you are smaller than yourself but to stand at your real height against some higher nature that will show you what the real smallness of your greatest greatness is."² In worship which is any use to us we measure ourselves again that "higher nature" and so are appropriately humbled.

The burning bush moment which so powerfully introduces the great "I Am" or "I will be what I will be" into the Hebrew narrative is a consummate moment for worship which offers that kind of comparison. Moses turns aside from his regular work, attracted by a holy strangeness in the moment. He recognises the numinosity of the moment as he takes off his shoes – a metaphor Joy Cowley translates into the uncovering of the naked heart within. Only with that naked heart, as Joy Cowley puts it, can we approach the burning bush moments of our lives, whether we encounter them in church or in the deserts of our lives. As Elizabeth Barrett Browning puts it.

"...Earth's crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God;
But only he who sees, takes off his shoes,
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries,"

In worship, we can arrogantly and blindly use the moment for our own delicious delight or see who and what we are in a seminal moment of truth

All this humble recognition of our real worth to be held in tension with the Presbyterian emphasis on the true preaching of the Word. Many a preacher and many a parishioner in Presbyterian circles has fallen into the trap of always being in critique mode when it comes to the interpretation of Scripture for the benefit of our spiritual journeys. Parishioners can keep deep truths unavailable to their hearts by straining the words spoken through intellectual filters; preachers can fall into the trap of always wanting to preach a popular reflection which will satisfy the contemporary fashion of the day.

Each can forget that the person, the words written and spoken are only vehicles through which the spirit should be able to move and inspire freely and creatively. As Joy Cowley reminded us, that spirit's movement can be perceived only by those who see and take off their shoes so their naked heart can know that they too are a burning bush, in which the great 'I Am' can be encountered.

Worship is a communal spiritual practice, but it is not fully achieved simply through the meeting of a human community. There is an added dimension which we would be foolish to ignore.

Now we are going to partake in two communal spiritual practices, the singing of a hymn and the affirmation of faith. Then I will introduce an individual spiritual practice which you might like to try at home. Let us sing about being "in this familiar place" then remain standing for the affirmation.

PART II SPIRITUAL PRACTICE: THE EXAMEN

¹ It is because 1 hour is such a small part of 168 hours that I do not feel apologetic when the Sunday Gathering goes past the sacred 60 minutes!

² "Phillips Brooks (December 13, 1835 – January 23, 1893) was an American Episcopal clergyman and author, long the Rector of Boston's Trinity Church and briefly Bishop of Massachusetts, and particularly remembered as lyricist of the Christmas hymn, "O Little Town of Bethlehem". (Wikipedia)

Spiritual practice is not eternal practising until one wins the gold medal in a sort of Spiritual Olympics.

Spirituality is “the quality of being concerned with the human spirit or soul as opposed to material or physical things”. In the phrase ‘spiritual practice’, the meaning is that of spiritual **habit**. A spiritual practice is a habit of cultivating that concern with the human spirit or soul. Today, as someone has defined it: “Modern spirituality is centered on the “deepest values and meanings by which people live.” It embraces the idea of an ultimate or an alleged immaterial reality. It envisions an inner path enabling a person to discover the essence of his/her being.”

For secular people who claim to be spiritual and not religious, that person goes on... “Not all modern notions of spirituality embrace transcendental ideas. Secular spirituality emphasizes humanistic ideas on moral character (qualities such as love, compassion, patience, tolerance, forgiveness, contentment, responsibility, harmony, and a concern for others). These are aspects of life and human experience which go beyond a purely materialist view of the world without necessarily accepting belief in a supernatural reality or divine being.”

For those who have always believed in a transcendent God and still do, continuing and refining their spiritual practice through life is relatively easy as it is a growing progression without an abrupt change in basis.

For those for whom the orthodox transcendence of the divine is a problem, more difficulties arise. The challenge for the church in these times, I believe is to help people whose views of God have changed top yet continue to find the new steps they need to take on their spiritual journey.

I offer to both groups within this community today “The Examen” as a possible spiritual practice or habit which you might embrace. This is an ancient resource of the church which can still be useful today. Originated by St Ignatius Loyola, founder of the Jesusuit order, it uses the habit of reflecting on the day to achieve integration and wholeness.

The bookmark in your order of service today is a less traditional format of the traditional examen. If you prefer the traditional format you will be able to find many examples on the internet and in spirituality books based on the work of Ignatius of Loyola.

Can I ask you to take the bookmark in your hand, and with an open willing heart follow through the steps with me. First, sit comfortably with a straight back and feet flat on the floor. Take a few quiet, deep breaths in your own time.

This exercise is carried out at the end of the day. We are not yet at the end of this day so I invite you to use yesterday as the day you will examine for yourself. Can I reassure you that though the words examen and examine and examination are being used, there will be no test afterwards!

First slowly and gently you take a tour of your day yesterday
 When you find something to give thanks for, give thanks in your heart.
 When you find something needs forgiving – do so in your heart
 If someone did something to you which needs forgiveness to heal it,
 ask in the quietness of your heart for that forgiveness and let it go.

Now, cram all the people you love or for whom you have a concern into your heart and love them quietly and silently. Do not fall into petition or asking for things, just surround them with love.

Then in the final act, let all those faces go and simply enjoy sitting in the quiet feeling the Love around you.

When you are ready come back into the room.

I hope you find this practice helpful in your continuing spiritual practice as an individual.
 I hope you also find continuing participation in this communal spiritual practice we still call worship here on a Sunday is also an activity which brings you to a full sense of who and what you are and to a full and free life.

So may it be.

Susan Jones 027 321 4870 04 909 9612 minister@standrews.org.nz