

SOME STEPS TO PERSONAL SPIRITUAL RENEWAL

Part 3

Weekly Corporate Worship

23 October 2005

The Rt Revd Michael Marshall

Notice now the emphasis upon corporate worship. There are two sides to all of us – two complementary aspects to being truly human: that which we share corporately with the rest of humanity in our community life and that which is unique and personal to each one of us individually. A rounded life requires that we express both sides of ourselves.

So it is with worship and prayer. Corporate worship is best undertaken where people gather together, sometimes in large numbers or just sometimes as Jesus himself tells us with 'two or three gathered together' in his name. We learn from the New Testament in the Book of Acts that the very early Christians on 'the first day of the week – the day of Resurrection – would come together for the Lord's own service – 'the breaking of bread,' or the Eucharist – the 'Lord's own service on the Lord's own day.' We see from the Book of Acts that the Jewish Christians continued to worship God in the Temple or the synagogue for a service of readings from the scriptures (Old Testament); singing of psalms prayers, and expounding the scriptures. But this was followed by the breaking of bread' in their homes as the Lord had instructed them when he instituted the Lord's Supper on Maundy Thursday evening and instructed his disciples to continue doing this 'in remembrance' of him.

Later, when most Christians were no longer Jews, and much later still when churches were built, these two acts of worship were joined together in a single service. Still to this day there are two parts to our service of the holy Eucharist: there is what we call 'The Liturgy of the Word' followed by the Liturgy of the Holy Communion or the Breaking of the Bread.

The Liturgy of the Word In so many ways the shape of the first part of the Holy Eucharist resembles very closely the worship in the Jewish Synagogue, which Jesus himself used to observe on the Sabbath. We call this '*The Liturgy of the Word.*' It consists of Prayers; Bible Readings, Psalms and hymns and a sermon, following very closely the shape of the service in the Jewish Synagogue. (We read of how Jesus was asked to preach when he went to the Synagogue at Nazareth at the outset of his three-year ministry. St. Luke 4:16-18) Furthermore, St. Luke tells us that Jesus went to the synagogue 'on the Sabbath day, as was his custom.' The service at which he would have preached would have been very much like that as outlined above.

Ever since the days of the apostles (Viz Acts 13:2), Christians have used the word 'Liturgy' to describe the corporate worship of God by the whole Christian body – the

Body of Christ, as Paul insists upon calling members of the church. The word is taken from a Greek word used in the Greek City State, describing the different 'work' that different citizens did on behalf of the rest of society. Each member of society undertook certain work on behalf of the rest of society, with a sense of corporate responsibility to the rest of society. In such a view of corporate responsibility the 'dustman' was as important as the judge or politician. The very early Christians seized on this concept as a way of expressing the corporate worship of the Church. So, writing at the close of Domitian's persecution, in the autumn of AD 96, St. Clement, Bishop of Rome wrote a letter to the Corinthian Church: 'Unto the high-priest (=the celebrant-bishop) his special "liturgies" have been appointed, and to the priest (= presbyters) their special place is assigned, and on the levites (=deacons) their special "deaconings" are imposed; the layman is bound by the ordinances of the laity. Let each of you, brethren, make Eucharist to God according to his own order, keeping a good conscience and not transgressing the appointed rule of his "liturgy".' (This letter was written to the same group of Christians at Corinth as Paul wrote his letters to, when he pleaded that everything in church should be done 'decently and in order.' It is worth comparing this passage of Clement's letter with Chapter 12 of Paul's 1st Letter to the Corinthians).

So when we come to Church for the Eucharist, there is a definite shape to the service – a shape which has been largely unchanged since the earliest days:

Introduction – Opening hymn, song or psalm – preparation for worship with an act of confession and absolution.

Readings from scripture, punctuated by hymns or psalms or spiritual songs

Exposition of Scripture – sermon or address

Extended time of prayer for the church, the world, our families, the sick and needy; the departed and all in the communion of the saints.

After the Liturgy of the Word, there follows the Liturgy of the Eucharist – the Break of Bread. The shape of that liturgy will be outlined in the next chapter.