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## Worship: the source of renewal

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# WORSHIP: THE SOURCE OF RENEWAL

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We began in Mesopotamia. We return there once more (perhaps it would be well for us to call Mesopotamia by its modern name: Iraq).

As we began this conference we considered a mountain rising from the plain of Shinar; now we go to a place in northwest Mesopotamia called Haran. We find there a family marked by tragedy and loss—a son had died before his father, and later at a great age the father died. Into that sad scene God enters abruptly, without warning, and says to Abram:

Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who curses you I will curse; and by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves.

(Genesis 12)

God intervenes further to divide an already broken family. And with that sudden act, the whole historical sweep of biblical history begins, continuing down to our own day, spiritually in our churches and in our hearts, politically in Israel and Lebanon. God called Abraham into his service, and Abraham in bold obedience set out. In that dramatic call, not just one man but a whole people—Israel, Abraham's descendants—is chosen to play a decisive role in God's purpose in history. And Christians also claim in their own way to have Abraham as their father too. It was the start of an epic

journey. The promise includes receiving a land, becoming a great nation, and mediating blessing to all the people of the earth.

That momentous call of Abraham is the beginning of an epic journey in search of religious truth. Abraham becomes the pattern for all earnest seekers who set out in quest of meaning. He becomes the model for us all, as the writer to the Hebrews understood:

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place which he was to receive as an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was to go. (Hebrews 12:8)

That act of faith by Father Abraham inspires us to pray still in the words of that splendid prayer by Eric Milner-White which we have in Morning and Evening prayer and an appropriate prayer for us as we conclude this conference.

Lord God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. (251)

So there is the model for our consideration today: *the pilgrimage*. Like our forebears millennia ago, we are the pilgrim people of God. Our life is characterized by movement, and therefore our worship is not static, fixed, unchanging, but is characterized as rites for a people on the move.

The first characteristic of the life of faith which the pilgrimage teaches is *impermanence*.

In our worship we are beginning—in some places anyway—to recover the symbolic value of processions. There is the procession with palms on The Sunday of the Passion, perhaps beginning outside the church or going from the church outside and then back in again. There is the procession with the cross on Good Friday. In the Easter Vigil there is the procession into the darkened church, led by the candle—the light of Christ. There is the procession to the font for baptism and the renewal of baptismal vows, and there is the procession back to the altar for the celebration of the Holy Communion. Every Sunday we have an entrance hymn and the entrance of the ministers (and sometimes—but I hope not every Sunday—the entrance of the choir too.) We are learning from new rites and new buildings that physical movement is desirable in a service to show its shifting focus—from font to pulpit to altar. We don't enter a church and gaze in one direction at one object or one person all the time. For the liturgy is a kind of drama. Things happen. People move about and at least our eyes must follow the movement. Processions are a sign of a people on the move who have no fixed and permanent place for worship or for living. Processions are little pilgrimages which we take in and around a church building. They point us to the larger pilgrimage on which we are venturing: the journey of life.

Whether we like it or not, we are in the midst of a changing world—as we have been since Eden. Even in church there is no escape from change. There are changes in liturgical forms and practices. There are new words to get used to; there are new books to become familiar with; there are new ways of doing things which we may never have heard of before let alone ever dreamed that we would be doing. There are new ways of doing old things, and there are new ways of doing apparently quite

new things. We don't like change, and we often don't welcome it; but we cannot stop it whether we like it or not. Change is a fact of life.

A new liturgy may require a renovation of a church building to make it more suitable for the new spirit and the new actions. Renovation requires us to think anew, to reconsider what we had come to know very well. Thinking is hard work, so it is no wonder that we do not like change because change requires us to think again about what we had thought had long since been settled.

Processions remind us of another aspect of our physical life which we often would rather ignore since it cannot be changed or helped. It is the process of aging. We are all growing older, for that too is part of life and growth. The familiar evening hymn has us sing, "Change and decay in all around I see," and we see the change not only around us, out there, but we learn with surprise that we are part of it. There is change in us too. Processions remind us of our passage through this world.

There is nothing here that will last which we can cling to; there is nothing to settle into too comfortably. Processions remind us again and again of the impermanence of all we see—including ourselves. "Behold, I am doing a new thing," God says to Isaiah (43:18), "now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?"

We look back longingly at what we sometimes call the age of faith which with great vision and skill and daring built the great churches and the monumental cathedrals, which still awe us jaded and cynical moderns. Those splendid, overwhelming monuments of the soaring human spirit have lasted these many centuries in their massive solidity. But traditionally on the roofs of those great monuments there was a significant decoration: an angel. One sees it imitated in North America too in New York City on the magnificent Cathedral Church of Saint John the Divine and also on Riverside Church. (An Anglican cathedral and a Baptist church.) An angel on the apse: amid the noise and decay and beauty of New York; over the magnificence of the cathedrals in—we like to think—quieter medieval Europe.

I was walking around Riverside Church one day on my way from a class at Union Seminary, pleased by that angel up there on the apse. Suddenly I saw it for what it was: not a pleasant decoration, not a relic of a past age which thought that it could find angels everywhere. But a reminder of the end of time. Those angels have trumpets, and on churches built in the traditional direction—like St. John the Divine—with the altar facing east, the angel on the apse looks eastward toward Jerusalem, toward the rising sun, trumpet ready, looking for signs of the Second Coming.

An angel on the roof of the apse says, All this solid splendor you delight in here, the mighty stones, this massive 'Gothic pile' as the English are fond of calling a great church, *all this is only temporary*—though it last a thousand years. The immense building itself looks for its own destruction when time itself is done, when the heavens roll up like a scroll, and when the new heaven and new earth appear. The worship of the church—its liturgy, its Scriptures, its buildings—preaches against permanence and security. The temporary may serve for centuries, like the Gothic cathedrals, but it is temporary nonetheless. The impermanence of all that we see, including ourselves, is the first lesson that the pilgrimage teaches us.

With those great but temporary buildings, we come to a second characteristic of the life of faith which the pilgrimage teaches us. And that is *continuity*. As we make our journey, we stimulate an awareness of the past out of which we have come. Ours is a

long history, and the permanent buildings of ages past tell us of that. They give us a sense of a rich continuity. We have come from somewhere: we are a people with a history. We move today with centuries of tradition and discovery behind us.

This sense of continuity recalls us to the sources of our faith. Since we are on our way, we cannot settle in the present as if we have always been here where we find ourselves today. We cannot become too comfortable here. We are reminded that we have a long history behind us out of which we came, and during that long history we have learned things, many things. We have accumulated a great variety of experiences by which we have learned about God and the world. And all that past, which lies behind us, is not obsolete or out of touch with modern life. In fact, because of our history, the past may mean more to us now.

In that remarkable book *Orthodoxy*, written in 1908, G.K. Chesterton makes a provocative observation about Christian creeds.

I have alluded to an unmeaning phrase to the effect that such and such a creed cannot be believed in our age. Of course, anything can be believed in any age. But, oddly enough, there really is a sense in which a creed, if it is believed at all, can be believed more fixedly in a complex society than in a simple one.

The complication of our modern world proves the truth of the creed more perfectly than any of the plain problems of the age of faith . . .

That is why the faith has that elaboration of doctrines and details which so much distresses those who admire Christianity without believing in it.

When once one believes in a creed, one is proud of its complexity, as scientists are proud of the complexity of science. It shows how rich it is in discoveries. If it is right at all, it is a compliment to say that it's elaborately right. A stick might fit a hole or a stone a hollow by accident.

But a key and a lock are both complex. And if a key fits a lock, you know it is the right key.<sup>1</sup>

You and I, pilgrims, are part of a tradition which is "rich in discoveries," and we can rejoice in its complexity. The richness of that tradition is enshrined and celebrated in the liturgy.

When we worship, we are thus called to be faithful to the broad Christian tradition which flows like a mighty river out of the discoveries of the past. But here is the paradox: the tradition to which we are called to be faithful is a tradition of growth. Ours is a long history, but it is always growing and changing and developing.

This tradition out of which we come and which we carry with us, therefore invites us to explore. It not only calls us back, it sends us out now and it sends us on. It does not beguile us into contentment with what we now have. It urges us to further discovery and exploration. For there is more to be sought and more to be found and more to be made ours.

The continuity of the tradition will not let us rest in what has been accomplished so far. There is a rest, the writer to the Hebrews assures us, but it is still ahead: "there remains a sabbath rest for the people of God" (Hebrews 4:9). The rest is promised, and

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1. Gilbert K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (London and New York: John Lane, 1908), pp. 150-152.

the promise is sure. But the rest is not yet our possession.

So as we look expectantly and even impatiently to the future we learn, as we move through this world on our pilgrimage, that although things change, not everything is in flux. We are on a pilgrimage to a goal: the promised rest of God. St. Augustine prayed at the beginning of his *Confessions*, "You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until we find our rest in you." We find that perfect rest not in this world but in God.

We are inescapably children of tradition, and because of that we are children of hope for our tradition is one of growth toward the goal which God intends for his creation. *Hope*, then, is the third characteristic of the life of faith which the pilgrimage teaches: Impermanence, Continuity, Hope. These three are related to the time through which our pilgrimage passes: past, present, future. In worship, the focus is on the present. But when we worship, the past lives again and we are present *then*. The barrier of time is collapsed, and past and present flow into one another without distinction. Our tradition is alive now, here, in us as we worship. And as we worship here and now, we not only participate in the past, we participate also in the future, which we glimpse and share and taste now, already. In the Holy Communion, we sing in the Offertory, we have "a foretaste of the feast to come." When we worship, past and future are gathered into the present, and we experience beforehand the perfection of eternity which has no past or future but which is always the present.

T.S. Eliot in "Little Gidding" (one of his *Four Quartets*) speaks of returning to a place and knowing it for the first time. Eliot wrote,

We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.<sup>2</sup>

We move in a circle which is not a circle. In the Holy Communion we do that. We return week after week to that familiar family meal and we are often surprised by new insights which we find there. We return to the Lord's Supper and know it for the first time.

We do that with respect to the Service itself. We return to it again and again and yet find it ever new, discovering new things we never knew before, finding new depths to our experience.

We do that with respect to time when we celebrate the Holy Communion. In the Holy Sacrament we return to the past and know it for the first time, saying, "So that's what it was like; so that's what it meant." We do it with respect to the future too and find excitement there even though by anticipation we have known and seen and tasted it before.

We do it with respect to ourselves, finding in ourselves new depths and new possibilities we had not dreamed of.

We do it with respect to the world and, because of what we have seen and heard and learned and done in the Holy Communion, we return to the world as if for the first time and see it with new eyes, with a new compassion, with a love which we did not have before. So our relationship to the liturgy, to ourselves, and to the world is

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2. T.S.Eliot, *The Collected Poems 1909-1962* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1963), p. 208.

deepened and renewed; and worship, especially the Holy Communion, becomes the center and source of our renewal, for in worship we meet God.

It is that encounter with God which commands our attention. Worship summons us to change because our encounter with God convinces us that he cannot be content with things as they are. Worship challenges us to grow because our encounter with God who is life cannot leave us untouched. When we are confronted by his life-giving power, our lives cannot remain the same. Worship does more than simply suggest or teach or urge. Worship in fact requires our renewal because we cannot worship the living God and not be made new. We cannot be washed with his holy water and cannot eat his life-giving meal and remain as we were. We are changed by our encounter with God. Our relationship to him is changed. Our relationship to each other is changed. Our relationship to the world is changed. We are changed by that encounter precisely because it is an encounter with God.

St. Paul in Romans 11 exclaims,

O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!  
(Romans 11:33)

And in words which are echoed in the concluding doxology of the Great Thanksgiving,

For from him and through him and to him are all things. (Romans 11:36)

The New English Bible has a still more striking translation:

Source, Guide, and Goal of all that is—to him be glory forever! Amen.

Source, Guide, Goal: the beginning, the middle, and the ending. The Triune God is the place from which our pilgrimage begins, the guide along the way which we travel, and the end toward which we constantly move.

Yet the Source is that which draws us on, and the Goal is that which we now glimpse and taste, and, as in the mystery of the Holy Trinity, the three are one. This vision of God unifies and expands at the same time, so that the three are one and the one is three. Worship—encounter with almighty God—heightens our perception so that we see beyond the immediate, so that we see *through* the immediate, to still more, to ever new visions of grander things to come, new possibilities we have not even dreamed of before.

One day in the heart of the afternoon, Abraham the Pilgrim was sitting in the shade of his tent, and some visitors appeared in front of the tent. In a dream-like and mysterious sequence of events he sees three men approach; then the three seem only to be two, and then they are only one. And they are not actually angels after all, but God himself.

That is like what happens to us when we worship. We have our eyes opened to new horizons; the familiar becomes strange and the unfamiliar is made known.

The central image which we considered at the beginning of this conference was expressed in spatial terms: a mountain on a plain in Mesopotamia—a point we can more or less locate geographically. The central image I suggest to you as we close this conference is expressed in temporal terms: not a place but a movement through time—a pilgrimage.

Or, since it is difficult for us to think in other than pictorial terms, that picture of the

Mesopotamian ziggurat was vertical, up and down (or, as evangelicals insist, down and up; from the source, lifting us to the summit.) This closing picture of Father Abraham's archetypal journey is horizontal, moving through time from the past through the present into the future; from then through now, toward what will be. (And surely you noticed that the vertical movement together with the horizontal movement forms a cross. Together, the two pictures give us a fuller understanding of our encounter with God.)

Abraham's journey, which we are to imitate, as the Bible sees it, is not a nomadic wandering, not an aimless drifting across the ancient Middle East. It is a pilgrimage: it has a definite purpose and goal. It is a journey which is going somewhere. The end is yet to be revealed, but there is the confidence that God is leading, and he knows where we are going into the veiled way of the future.

We fare forward like medieval pilgrims going to a shrine which they have heard of but have never seen. They are quite sure the destination is there, but they are not sure exactly what it will be, nor are they sure what they will encounter on the way. So the invitation to go on a pilgrimage is a call to adventure and to risk, but it also promises great reward. With such a high calling before you and wish such a faith stirring within you, you cannot stay in one place. We must constantly be moving on until we find our perfect rest in God, who is our Source, our Guide, and our Goal.

Then the praise which sounds throughout the land will be taken up and purified and combined with the praise of all the universe hymning God who will at last be all in all.

With that vision before us, we recognize with Saint Augustine, in words which we know from the General Thanksgiving in the Anglican Prayer Book and which Lutherans have often borrowed, that we must show forth that praise "not only with our lips but in our lives" by giving up ourselves to his service and by living before him in holiness and righteousness all our days. For it is only in such lives of perfect service that we can begin to declare the praise of the God of justice and love, who created the universe and who still sustains us and all things. Thus our encounter with God in worship is the constant source of our continual renewal.