



June 11th

THE NEW SHOFAR

Whenever the method of worship becomes more important than the Person of worship, we have already prostituted our Worship. — Judson Cornwall

Don't let your life give evidence against your tongue – St Augustine

Someone once said the seven last words of the church would be these: *We never did it that way before.* It is a fact of life: people resist change. A Holden driver is not interested in test driving a Ford. A John Deere tractor farmer would never think of buying a Ford Tractor. This next one is very obvious: but no real AFL supporter is going to swap their footy team to follow Collingwood.

Surprise, surprise. Similar locked-in positions are true in the church. Those who have had their hearts lifted by traditional worship will resist new forms. Those who have found comfort and strength from a particular version of the Bible will remain suspicious of modern translations. Those who have been raised in a rules-oriented church will find it difficult to get used to a more open “grace-governed” church family. When we hold something dear and precious, like our religious faith, we resist change. The more precious the tradition, the more we dig in our heels against change.

Is change the right word for what Jesus is demanding?

The word “change” means something akin to *an act or process through which something becomes different.* But that is risky when it comes to talking about matters of faith. It is not “new” we want. What Jesus was demanding was a *revitalization*... the action of *imbuing something with new life and vitality.* Or *renewal* which is something more akin with the overall Gospel message... make it like new, refurbish; begin (an activity) again; replenish, replace with a fresh supply; restore (a living thing) to a vigorous or flourishing state (Oxford dictionary).

In the Acts of the Apostles, the new Jewish sect made up of the followers of Jesus who was crucified, set about the *reconstitution* of the Israel God had established in calling Israel and making a covenant with them. All Jesus was doing in his ministry among them was calling them to *repent* – return to that way of life under God for which they were created. They had wandered from doing the will of God, to shaping their religion to suit their own preferences, their own desires.

The scribes had forgotten how religion is not the same as faith

This realization helps us understand the difficult time the Pharisees had with Jesus. They had been raised in their traditions and steeped in the ways of the past. The routine was majestic and comforting. There was security in the familiar. Ritual and faith were seen as one and the same.

Jesus came onto the scene and people began to flock to Him. But Jesus was unorthodox in His ways. He spent time with sinners and tax collectors and even defiled himself by eating in their homes; He healed people on the Sabbath day (considered work by the Pharisees), He ignored the rituals that were the foundation of religious life. The Pharisees didn't like

this. After all, the other prophet of the time, John the Baptist fasted, as did his followers. All in accord with the traditions.

But what does the Bible say?

As he normally did, Jesus responded to criticism about his alternative understandings of the demands of ritual, law and custom by quoting the prophets. Hosea 6.6 is probably the best known...*what I demand is steadfast love and not sacrifice.* This text is quoted twice in Matthew's gospel. **Micah 6:8** records God saying very similar things...*He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does Yahweh require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?* One last example of more than one hundred similar reminders from God in the Bible warning of the dangers of measuring faith in terms of worship or an inflexible following of the Law: **Isaiah 1:11**... *“What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says Yahweh; I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of well-fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats.*

The value of those sacrifices and offerings are being challenged here by God and the people stand accused of turning their liturgies into activities that are more about making them satisfied, are more concerned about meeting their expectations than meeting the fundamental demands of God.

Worship is not entertainment – it is a moment of us encountering God

I grew up in the era of the Latin Mass and confess to never really understanding all of the strange words, actions and confessions. Back then it did not seem to be a significant concern. We were taught that liturgy was about allowing ourselves to be drawn into the divine presence in acts of praise, worship, confession and commitment. It was about what God was doing with my sacrifice of time, in the prioritising of God over whatever else I was wanting to do that day. We worshipped God in whatever was happening. We made the effort. We struggled at times to make sense of it all and we were all given the opportunity to go deeper and deeper into what was happening.

Church worship was about encountering God. Sacred time that was not to be measured by style or performance. We forget that when we go to church (small “c”) we go as a part of the Body of the risen Christ, joining with others as the spiritual temple from which the source of living water springs forth: incorporated into Christ by the Holy Spirit, we are the temple of the living God. That is the primary form of worship – our lives, who we are before what we might be doing or not doing.

Mother Theresa never failed to challenge me and something she said fits in well with what we are pondering today... *How sad it is when someone comes to you looking for Jesus and all they see is you.* She urged us to look beyond the person celebrating, beyond the ritual itself, the words, the music, the processions and the like, and instead search for the Living God we are there to worship. Jesus might also be tempted to quote Billy Graham if he was to speak to us today about worship... *The highest form of worship is the worship of unselfish Christian service. The greatest form of praise is the sound of consecrated feet seeking out the lost and the helpless.* Search for God while he is to be found and the failings in the human side of worship will not be of major concern.