

40 Days of Fitness

A daily devotional by Rev Garry Hardingham

DAY 26 – The Church of Idolatry.

But when Christ came as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation), he entered once and for all into the Holy Place, not with the blood of goats and calves, but with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption. Nor was it to offer himself again and again, as the high priest enters the Holy Place year after year with blood that is not his own; And it is by God's will that we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

Hebrews 9:11-12; 9:25; 10:10

Yesterday we affirmed Luther's position that we are saved by faith alone, not by our actions. But how does this apply to the stuff we "do" in the church every week...the hymn singing, the prayers, the sermon and so on?

Luther is absolutely against anything that is considered human work to be a way to salvation. Christians, of course, according to Luther, must do good works. But their good works are done, not for their own benefit, but for the benefit of the neighbour. God does not need our good works, but God sends us to the neighbour in need. So, for Luther and Calvin in the reformed tradition, the liturgical action of the church must be clearly distinguished from God's action. Primarily, this distinction makes it clear that the worthy action of Christ is accomplished, in what the epistle to the Hebrews calls εφάπαξ (ephapax), "once and for all".

And so here we find the biggest difference between how the Roman Catholics view the church and how the Reformed churches view the church. Vatican II says this: "*Liturgical action is an action of Christ, the priest, and his body, the church. Certainly Protestants would say it is Christ himself who accomplishes his work in the liturgy. But that this work of salvation is an opus perficiendum – a work to be completed. Salvation is a work to be completed by the action of the church.*"

Here, in these passages from Hebrews, the presence of God in the church with God's people is not *opus perficiendum*, but *opus operatum* – a work performed once and for all. Jesus' death and resurrection without any ambiguity acquires salvation for sinners. Once and for all!!

So Luther strenuously stands against any understanding of the action of the church as a work. It was for this reason that he opposed the understanding of the Eucharist as a sacrifice. For the Reformers, the understanding of the Eucharist as a sacrifice was making God's gift into a human work and therefore making it an idol. That's why Luther and Calvin both called the sacrifice of the mass "idolatrist".

But we do the exact same thing in the Protestant church when we identify our experiences, how we feel, as being us moving closer to God or when we confuse morality with faithfulness or perfectionism with worthiness. When we criticise or exclude the girl just learning guitar, or the boy loosing the beat on the drums, or criticise the person running the data projector or sound, or even boast about how good our church band is, we walk a fine line between wanted to please God as a response to our gratefulness and turning worship into idolatry.

So, in the Protestant church, in our pietism and rationalism, we have the same problem that Luther and Calvin had in the Roman church. It is a question that hangs over every liturgical action in the Protestant church as well. And we need to find a clear path between response to God's Grace and earning our salvation.

I groaned loudly when I heard a old pianist once criticising a young girl on the flute for mucking up during the playing of "The Heart of Worship" by Matt Redman...Oh the irony!!

PRAYER

Loving God.

Our Worship can never be perfect.

We want to give our best for you in the good ordering of the church,

But admonish us when we turn this perfectionism into idolatry.

Remind us that it is Jesus alone who perfects our worship.

Help us to be open and understanding towards each other in worship.

And recognise that You are with Your church

both in the services that click and the ones that clunk.

Amen