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Proverbs 1:20-33

James 3:1-12

Mark 8:27-38

I led the music team in Tawa for 12 years, on 'duty' almost every week for the whole of that period. It was a challenging role, requiring concentration and thinking ahead throughout the service.

I was often asked by members of the congregation, "When do *you* get to worship?" My answer was that I did indeed worship: that I worshipped through offering my service of music to God, to the members of the team, and to the congregation.

I would, I hope, have had the same response if I was responsible for, say, shoveling coal into a boiler during the Sunday service to keep the church warm.

I still think that response was right in many ways.

But it was also wrong. And the way in which it was wrong became apparent when I later came to read Richard Foster's book *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home*. In the opening chapter, he tells this story (which you may recall me telling before):

One day a friend of mine was walking through a shopping mall with his two-year-old son. The child was in a particularly cantankerous mood, fussing and fuming. The frustrated father tried everything to quiet his son, but nothing seemed to help. The child simply would not obey. Then, under some special inspiration, the father scooped up his son and, holding him close to his chest, began singing an impromptu love song. None of the words rhymed. He sang off key. And yet, as best he could this father began sharing his heart. "I love you," he sang. "I'm so glad you're my boy. You make me happy. I like the way you laugh." On they went from one store to the next. Quietly the father continued singing off key and making up words that did not rhyme. The child relaxed and became still, listening to this strange and wonderful song. Finally, they finished shopping and went to the car. As the father opened the door and prepared to buckle his son into the car seat, the

child lifted his head and said simply, "Sing it to me again. Daddy! Sing it to me again!"

Foster goes on to say:

Prayer is a little like that. With simplicity of heart we allow ourselves to be gathered up into the arms of the Father and let him sing his love song over us.

Christina Walker, a pastor at a Bible chapel in Illinois, has made the following comment about this story:

Any of us can be like that child who expressed the desires of his heart in response to his father's love. In this way our prayers become a response to God's grace and love. I think what I've been taught is backwards. It's not our prayer life determining our relationship with God, but instead our relationship with God inspiring our prayers.¹

Adapting Walker's phrase, where I was off-beam with my Tawa response was that I believed my worship life determined my relationship with God, rather than my relationship with God inspiring my worship life.

One helpful way of thinking about the Christian life, and the life of the church, is to reflect on a balance between the dimensions of Up, In, and Out. The "Up" dimension is all about our relationship with God, modelled on the intimacy Jesus had with God the Father, his life of worship and prayer, his times of retreat and mountaintop experiences, and his reliance on the Father during times of challenge as in the wilderness of temptation, in the garden of Gethsemane, and on the cross.

"In" is the dimension of our relationships with our fellow believers, modelled on Jesus' relationships with his chosen followers; and "Out" is about our reaching out to the hurting world around us, again modelled on Jesus' concern to proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom and to bring that proclamation to life in action among the crowds.

¹ <http://byhisgrace.typepad.com/cwalker/2009/03/prayer.html>

Mark 8:27-38 – Peter’s confession of Jesus as the Christ; and Jesus talking about his death, self-denial and taking up one’s cross – may not immediately strike one as reflecting this principle, but on reflection I believe this passage is an ideal expression of “Up” in particular.

Peter declares that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ. This is no small thing. The Messiah was the one the people had been longing for; the one who would take them out from under the yoke of the oppression of their Roman overlords; the one who would rule and judge them under God’s authority; the one who would once again lead the people to fulfil their vocation as the people of God for the sake of the world.

“Who do you say I am?” asks Jesus; and Peter replies, “You are the Messiah, the Holy One of God”.

There is a reminder for me here that an important part of the “Up” dimension of our life lies in our knowing who we are in this “Up” relationship with. The “Up” dimension begins in our identification of God, who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It is the naming of the one we worship; it is the declaration of who this God is; it is the proclamation of what God has done for us. It is as we are brought to our knees before his awesome majesty and holiness; it is as we are struck silent by the wonder of God’s creative power and imagination in creation’s vast beauty and microscopic intricacy; it is as we erupt into words and songs of thankfulness and praise as we recognise his providing, his rescuing, his healing and saving work; it is as we come in tears, our heads bowed, as we recognise that again we have failed to be faithful to this, the one true God.

Then we read that Jesus began to teach them that he must suffer and to die. And Peter doesn’t understand, and reacts in his typically hot-headed manner, rebuking Jesus for talking in this way. And then it is Peter’s turn to receive a rebuke: “Get behind me, Satan! You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.”

And this reminds me that another important part of the “Up” dimension is being concerned, not with merely human concerns, but with the concerns of God. We need to remember who we’re in relationship with. And if God is God in any meaningful sense of that word, then this relationship cannot be driven by what we feel we want, but must be concerned with God’s purposes.

The “Up” relationship also involves correction and discipline. Whatever we’re doing in expression of this relationship with God needs to open us to hearing the corrective voice of God, gradually growing us into the holy ones we are supposed to be, prophetically warning us of the consequences of following our whims, steering us back when we’ve gone off course, and giving us the means by which we can return to right relationship with God.

Finally Jesus says, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

This reminds me that the activities in our “Up” dimension must be expressions of a whole-hearted, all-of-life, loyalty and devotion to God and Jesus the Christ.

And if that is to be real, then there are times when it is going to be costly; it is going to involve sacrifice; it might require the exercise of personal discipline. It might mean giving way on something we want, something we like, something that makes us feel good. For this needs to be about *God*, first and foremost, and not about self – because “Up” is all about God, that one who *is* the first and foremost!

Up, In, and Out can be depicted as a triangle: each part needs the others so that each part reinforces the others. As we think about our “Up” dimension, we realise that we need the “In” dimension with it, because, for example, without one another we can easily delude ourselves that we’re hearing God correctly; and because we can easily slip into idolatry, using our “Up” to worship someone or something other than God. Doing “Up” *together* means that other’s experiences and understanding of God can help strengthen our

own relationship with God. The intimate linkage between “Up” and “In” is also illustrated as James observes with dismay: “With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God’s likeness.” It is astonishing how prevalent sins of speech are within the family of Christ. Many of us are very careful not to swear and not to take the Lord’s name in vain, many of us are careful to avoid talk that might be regarded as impure; but so often we seem to think nothing of half-truths and untruths, innuendo, gossip. We seem to think that it is OK that our speaking is employed to manipulate others; we seem to think it OK that our speaking seeks to enrol others in our disputes with people who are not present to defend themselves. We may not be using curse words, but we are often far from blessing others with our speech.

“Up” and “In” are vitally linked. In the same way, if there was no “Out” with our “Up” then we’re failing to be obedient and loyal to the purposes of the one we’re in the “Up” relationship with: the God who loves us and whom we love desires to have that same relationship with all the world – illustrated by Wisdom’s crying out in the public square and at the city gate – and God asks us to be part of bringing that relationship about. Our “Up” is self-centred if there is no “Out”.

It should be no surprise that Eucharist symbolises, enacts, and trains us in the balance of “Up”, “In”, and “Out”, in holding together worship, fellowship, and sending.

The three dimensions I’ve talked of are naturally described from *our* perspective – the relationship with God is “up”-ward relative to our place; the relationship with fellow believers is with-”in” the church; the relationship with the world is “out”-side of us. However, that natural perspective needs the rebuke and correction Jesus gave Peter. We must never forget that it all has its beginning and its purpose in the action and grace of God in Christ Jesus. In all things we must try to balance our natural perspective with the

perspective of God. Our human concerns must always give way to God's concerns.

Before we can engage in "Up", we need to remember that our "Up" can only happen as a response to the prior reality of God's "Down", the astonishing truth of God's love and regard for us, supremely expressed in Jesus going to suffer and die for us.

This is the Father's love song to you, to me, to which we might well respond, "Daddy, sing it to me again!"

Sources:

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