

Worship and the Way of Holiness

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**And a highway will be there;
It will be called the Way of holiness.**

The way of worship that Christ has given to us is the way of holiness.

Ancient Jerusalem was a temple city. On its highest point, its acropolis, stood the temple of the Lord. The street that went up through the city into the temple was called the holy way, the way of the sanctuary. It was the processional way that pilgrims took to meet with the Lord on Mt Zion. Three times a year they would travel along that way, so that they could appear before the Lord in his sanctuary, present their offerings to him there, receive his blessing, and eat the holy food that came from his table. Then they would return to their homes, rejoicing as the bearers of his blessing, proud to be his holy people.

Even though that was a remarkable privilege it had its limitations. On the one hand, the people of God had restricted access to the Lord. They could not enter the Holy of Holies, the place where the Lord resided. The only person who could go there was the high priest, once a year on the Day of Atonement. Yet even he did not see God's glory. It was hidden from him in utter darkness. On the other hand, even though God had established an elaborate system of safeguards to prevent the desecration of his holiness, he could not stop unclean people from coming into the temple and polluting it with their impurity. The problem was this. How could God admit sinners into his holy presence? How could they approach him without desecrating his holiness and being undone by their encounter with him?

In a vision the prophet Isaiah outlines God's solution to this problem. In chapter 35 he prophesies that the Lord would create a supernatural holy way by which he would come to redeem his people from captivity and bring them home to himself.¹ He would build this way by opening the eyes of his blind people so that they could see what he was doing, unstopping their ears so that they could hear what he was saying, healing their crippled feet so that they could travel along with him, and loosing their dumb tongues so they could sing his praises. This wonderful way would exclude all godless, unclean and predatory people, because it was the way of repentance. The Lord himself would bring his ransomed people along that way into his holy presence, so that they could see his glory and rejoice in his life-giving splendour.

The vision of Isaiah has been fulfilled by Jesus. He himself is that holy way. By his life, death, resurrection, and ascension, he has opened up a new and living way for us into the heavenly sanctuary, the presence of his holy Father (Heb 10:20). That way is set out for us travel on in the divine service. Every Sunday we travel with him on that

¹ For an analysis of this chapter, see John W Kleinig, "The Holy Way. An Exegetical Study of Isaiah 35:1-10," *Lutheran Theological Journal* 17/3 (1983), 115-20.

holy way. His holiness shapes our way of worship, for by it we share in his holiness.² This means that those who know nothing of Christ's gift of his holiness cannot make much sense of the holy liturgy, for worship has to do with our reception of his holiness and our enjoyment of its benefits.

I have two main reasons for speaking to you on the unfashionable theme of holiness in worship. First, we westerners have, I think, largely lost our sense for what is holy. We have become blind to its beauty and deaf to its vocabulary, because we have reduced holiness to morality and morality to legality. This struck me first most forcefully when I visited New Guinea some years ago. There I met with a former student who had learnt Hebrew from me before going to study at an American Lutheran seminary. When I asked him what he thought of his time there, he remained silent for a while before answering, "John, for them nothing is sacred any longer!" That remark came as a rebuke to me, for I belong to a generation of Lutherans who have, by and large, lost their reverence for God's holiness. That loss has impoverished our theology and diminished our piety much more than we ever realise. Second, the church is called to bring Christ to a generation of young people who have never been initiated into the mystery of Christ's presence in the divine service by the careful preaching and teaching of God's word. Strangely, many of them have an immense longing for holiness and fascination with the glimmers of it that they have experienced. Even though they are haunted by its loss in their lives, they, sadly, look for it everywhere except in the church. They therefore are ripe for initiation into the mystery of holiness as it is disclosed in the divine service.

My topic then is holiness and worship. I shall speak about our journey on the Way of Holiness as we take part in the holy liturgy and show how we borrow holiness from Christ as we go with him along that holy way.

Stepping onto the holy way

The divine service starts with the **Invocation** and the rite of **Confession and Absolution**. These two liturgical enactments take us from our earthly journey and set us on the way of the Lord, the holy way that leads from earth to heaven.

That journey begins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. These are the most holy names that were spoken over us in baptism. They make us holy people, saints, holy members of God's holy family. The journey therefore begins with God, and not with us. He reaches out to us in baptism. Through baptism Christ cleanses us by the washing of water with the word (Eph 5:26) and sanctifies us with his Holy Spirit (1 Cor 6:11). Baptism joins us with Christ; it gets us going on a journey with him, his holy way. And so every Sunday we start there once again with him at the beginning of our holy journey.

For us that journey has to do with **Confession and Absolution**. Since we are by nature sinful and unclean, we cannot safely barge into God's holy presence, for the light of his holiness would destroy us in the darkness of our impurity. If we came

² For a summary of the Scriptural teaching on holiness, see John W Kleinig, "Sharing in God's Holiness," *Lutheran Theological Review* 8:1/2 (1995), 105-18.

before him as unclean sinners, we would desecrate his holiness and be undone by it. God makes his solution to that problem available to us through our union with Christ in baptism. Christ has taken on our sin with its impurity and put our old polluted self to death by his death, so that he could share his own perfect purity and holiness with us. As we confess our sins we put them on his shoulders. Then we receive the holy absolution, the word that pardons and cleanses us, the word that makes us pure in heart and righteous before God the Father, the word that unlocks the door of heaven for sinners and admits us, covered with Christ's own holiness, into the Father's presence.

So as we begin the service we start once again on the holy way of the Lord by recalling our baptism, returning to our holy Father in repentance like the prodigal son, and receiving full cleansing from all impurity. As we come into the Father's presence in the heavenly assembly he regards us as people who are clothed in Christ and decked out with his holiness. He welcomes us warmly and says, "You are my beloved sons; with you I am well-pleased."

Standing on holy ground

When we hear of the holy way we think most naturally of the way that we must travel as we go from earth to heaven. And that is not wrong! Yet that is not its main direction, for it is, first and foremost, the way by which the triune God comes from heaven to earth, to join us in our journey from birth to death, and to admit us to heaven, already now, here on earth. Like Jacob's ladder, it brings God and his angels down to us. We therefore do not need to travel on the holy way in order to become holy; we travel on it because we are already saints. Like the angels we stand in God's presence and share in his holiness by our involvement in the divine service. There divine service brings the triune God to us here on earth. By faith we all have the same holy status as the angels and form one single community with them.

We acknowledge our heavenly location in three ways. First, we enter the presence of the Father with prayer and praise in the **Introit**. Second, we do not approach him directly as if we had a legal right to do so, but in the **Kyrie** and the petitions of the **Great Gloria** we come as beggars to the risen Lord Jesus and plead for mercy from him. We have nothing to give and everything to receive. All that we ever receive from God the Father comes to us through Jesus, our intercessor and advocate. Apart from him, we do not have a leg to stand on before God the Father. Jesus alone is holy. We borrow our holiness and everything else from him. He takes up our cause and ushers us as his holy blood brothers and sisters into the presence of the holy heavenly King. Third, as we stand before God the Father in the heavenly sanctuary we join the angels in their song of praise by singing the **Great Gloria**, the song that the angels sang to invite the shepherds to join with them in celebrating the reunion of heaven and earth by the incarnation of God's Son. Together with all the angels and the whole company of saints we form a single choir that stands before God and proclaims his glory and peace to the whole world.

Hearing God's most holy word

Something unexpected happens once we come into the heavenly sanctuary. We don't immediately present our offerings to God. Instead, we listen to his holy word. This has always been and still is the most controversial feature of the divine service, something so countercultural that it makes little sense to our natural sense of religiosity. Why is hearing God's word so important for us? Why do we spend so much of our time with God by listening to the three **Readings** and the **Sermon**? Why is our travel on the holy way largely a journey in hearing, an exercise in attending to God's story rather than learning what we can from our own experience?

In 1 Timothy 4:5 St Paul gives us the reason for this accent of hearing God's word. He says, "Everything that is created by God... is consecrated by the word of God and prayer." God's word makes and keeps us holy. Through faith and its enactment in prayer we borrow holiness from God. We do not ever possess God's holiness, just as we never possess love, or life, or light, or friendship; we have it only as we keep on receiving it from God, drawing on it from him and our contact with him. He shares his holiness with us through his word. That's why Christ prayed this prayer for his disciples the night before he died, "Holy Father... sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth." His word makes us holy; his word keeps us holy.

Luther uses two startling pictures to explain the connection between our holiness and the word of God. First, he compares God's word with the miracle-working 'holy relics' that were so popular in his day. People believed that these relics made the churches that housed them much more holy than those that had no relics. They therefore flocked in pilgrimage to these places to see these relics and to touch them. In contrast to this Luther claims that God's word is our 'most holy relic,' the most holy thing that sanctifies everybody and everything that it touches (LC 1, par 91-94; see also AE 41, 148-51). In fact, nothing is holy apart from it. His word sanctifies the waters of baptism so that it becomes a washing of regeneration; it sanctifies the bread and wine as the body and blood of Jesus. God's word sanctifies everything for us.³

Second, Luther compares God's word with the most holy anointing oil that was used to consecrate the tabernacle and the priests in the Old Testament (AE 41, 149; cf. AE 38, 185). God's word is our most holy anointing oil because the Holy Spirit anoints us with it. By hearing God's word and trusting in it, we receive the Holy Spirit every Sunday, the Spirit that makes us holy. God's word consecrates us as his holy temple, the place where he resides on earth; it also consecrates us as his holy priesthood, people who do his holy work here on earth. All this is ours by faith in God's word. That is why the hearing of God's word is introduced by the **Collect** and accompanied by the confession of our faith in the recitation of the **Nicene Creed**. The faith that keeps on hearing God's word receives the holiness that Christ provides through it.

Presenting our holy offerings

As holy people who share in Christ's holiness we have a holy vocation (2 Tim 1:9), a heavenly calling (Heb 3:1). We have been called to serve the triune God as his holy priests, people who bring others and their needs to God, people who bring God and his blessings to others. This means that we can use our holy status and our access to

³ For a summary of Luther's teaching on holiness, see John W Kleinig, "Luther on the Christian's Participation in God's Holiness," *Lutheran Theological Journal* 19/1 (1985), 21-29.

God's grace for the benefit of others. Most people on earth do not have faith in Christ and access to God's grace through their faith in Christ. But we do. We can therefore stand in for them and represent them before God the Father as we present our holy offerings to him for ourselves and for them. These offerings are most pleasing to God, because they are produced by the Holy Spirit and offered to God the Father together with Jesus our great high priest (1 Pet 2:5). They are holy because they are sanctified by the word of God and prayer (1 Tim 4:3-5).

As holy priests we present three kinds of offerings to our heavenly Father, offerings with our hearts and hands and voices: the offering of ourselves, the offerings of what we produce by our work, and the offering of our mouths. In the **Offertory** we forgiven sinners present ourselves and our bodies as living sacrifices for re-creation and renewal as God's holy servants. In the **Offering** we present some of our money as a communal offering for consecration by God and use in his holy service. In the **Prayer of the Church** we present our intercessions for the church, the world and people in need. This, says Luther, is our 'unique office and function' as God's holy priests; by our intercession for the world we become 'the gods and saviours of the world' (AE 24,87).

These three kinds of offerings are presented together with Christ. They are our priestly service in the holy liturgy, our holy service of God on behalf of all humanity and for its well being, our service for the world.

Eating the most holy food

In the royal courts of the ancient world the king's courtiers often stayed with him in his palace during their period of service. They lived with him in his palace. Every day, or at least once a week, the king would meet with them to brief them and solicit their advice before decisions were made. In these meetings they would petition the king for what they needed for themselves and their areas of responsibility. In keeping with their status as honorary members of the royal family, they were the king's guests who ate the food that came from his table.

The Israelite priests were regarded as the courtiers of the heavenly king. For the term of their service at the temple they were his guests. He fed them with the most holy food that came from his table: the meat from the sin offerings and the guilt offerings, the bread from the grain offering, and the showbread that had been set before him in the Holy Place. Through their consumption of this most holy food they shared in God's own life-giving holiness. That was the high point of their service, their greatest privilege.

Our weekly journey on the holy way of Christ culminates in a holy meal, the Lord's Supper.⁴ There the risen Lord Jesus is our host and we are his holy guests. There he feeds us with the heavenly food that he himself provides for us his royal priests. He does not just give us his most holy body to eat, like the meat from the sacrificed animals in the old covenant, for the sanctification of our bodies; he gives his own most holy blood to drink for the sprinkling of our hearts, our conscience, our inner

⁴ See John W Kleinig, "The Lord's Supper as a Sacrificial Banquet," *Logia* 12/1(2002), 11-16.

being, so that we are holy through and through, fully consecrated for holy service. No Israelite ever drank the most holy blood from any of their offerings. It was used to make atonement for their sins. We however drink the most holy blood of Christ, the blood that atoned for our sins, the blood that frees us from the stain of sin, the blood that protects us from the powers of darkness, the blood that fills us with the Holy Spirit, the blood that transfuses us with the divine life of Christ.⁵

This holy heavenly meal takes us beyond the limits of time and space into the heavenly sanctuary. As members of the holy heavenly choir we, like the temple singers in the Old Testament, stand before the triune God and sing our song of praise out far and wide into the world around us. We join the angels and the whole communion of saints and sing the holy hymn of adoration: “Holy! Holy! Holy!” And even more than that! As we go to receive the Lord’s Supper, we leave our seats in the nave, the part of the church that symbolises this world, and we either approach or enter the sanctuary itself, the part of the church that symbolises heaven, the holy realm of God. So we earthlings come to heaven itself without leaving earth. We receive the most holy gifts of Christ’s body and blood in the presence of God the Father, for they come from him and bring his Holy Spirit to us.

This meal is our theophany, the appearance of the triune God among us for our salvation, the revelation of his hidden glory, the visible manifestation of his holiness. Here God’s holiness is offered to us physically as a gift, lavishly and safely, graciously and wholesomely. Like Simeon we hold the holy Son of God, the one who alone is holy, in our hands and see his glory with our own eyes, the eyes of faith. Here the high holy God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, comes to reside in us so that our bodies become holy places, living temples of the living God. Here we see the beauty of holiness most full in this life.

Through our reception of Christ’s most holy body and blood we become God-bearers, little christs, theophanic people, the light of the world. Luther uses a very vivid picture to illustrate this reality. In the Roman Catholic Church a consecrated host is often placed in a jewelled golden monstrance and carried out into the streets for all to see in a procession on the Feast of Corpus Christi. We, says Luther, are the ‘monstrance’ of the triune God, for we take him with us wherever we go and show his hidden glory to the world around us (AE 21, 457).

Walking in the way of holiness

The divine service involves us in a regular act of pilgrimage from earth to heaven and back again. There are two sides to that journey. With Christ we travel from our earthly homes to our holy place of worship, the assembly of the saints in the presence of God. Then we return along the same way from that heavenly place to our earthly location. Yet our journey along the holy way does not end when we come home; the triune God goes with us his holy people everywhere in our daily lives. That’s why he commissions us as his priests, at the end of the service, to bring his love and his blessings to the people that we meet as we go about our ordinary business.

⁵ See John W Kleinig, “The Blood for Sprinkling: Atoning Blood in Leviticus and Hebrews,” *Lutheran Theological Journal* 33/3(1999), 124-35.

Luther has much to say about this part of our journey on the way of holiness, our holy service after the divine service. The most holy God does not just accompany us in our daily round; he uses us to do his holy work in the world. He puts us to work with him in his three ‘holy orders’: the family (which includes the work place), government (which includes all aspects of civil life), and the church (AE 37, 364-65). Here in these holy orders we who are holy in Christ do holy work. Our work is sanctified by God’s word, prayer, and our faith in Christ. In this way we who have access to God and his blessings in the divine service bring him and his blessings to those who are as yet far from him and his grace.

The service therefore ends with a short **Prayer** for God’s provision for us in our service of him and with the bestowal of his blessing on us in the **Benediction**. By that blessing he commissions us to do his holy work in the world. It protects us from Satan and all the powers of darkness; it equips us for holy service in our station and vocation; it empowers us to walk day by day in the way of holiness as the bearers of God’s blessings and singers of his praises to the people around us.

Worship as the way of holiness

The prophet Isaiah envisaged that God himself would create a holy way by which he would redeem his holy people from their polluted environment and bring them to himself, healed from all their disabilities. His prophecy was fleshed out most wonderfully by the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus. By his incarnation he purified and sanctified the whole human life cycle from the womb to the tomb.⁶ By our union with him and our faith in him he leads us along the holy way that he has created for us. In our journey with him he shares his own holiness with us through his holy word and his holy sacraments. They are our most holy things, our means of sanctification. Through them he walks us on his holy way. He uses them to make and keep us holy. We cannot therefore enjoy his holiness unless we travel with him liturgically along that divinely instituted holy way in the divine service. By our regular journey with Christ from earth to heaven in the divine service, our life journey is assimilated to Christ’s holy journey from earth to heaven and included in the journey of his holy church through human history to its heavenly home. We no longer travel through life alone but walk with Christ and all his saints on the Way of Holiness.

Our involvement in that sanctifying journey is summed up best for me by part of the rite for **Confession and Absolution** that we use in the Lutheran Church of Australia. In it the pastor puts a simple question to the congregation before he absolves them and admits them to the Lord’s table. He asks, “Do you promise, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to live as in God’s presence and strive daily to lead a holy life, even as Christ has made you holy?” In the divine service Christ makes and keeps us holy. He covers us with his own holiness. Since we are holy, we who have open access to God and his grace live in his holy presence already now here on earth. We therefore are called to walk daily with Christ in his holy way and manifest his holiness in all our behaviour. It’s so simple and yet so profound. The right way of worship is the way of Christ, the

⁶ See Luther’s remarks on this in WA 37, 57: 11-25.

way of his holiness and of our participation in his holiness by hearing his word and receiving his body and blood.

It is as Isaiah prophesied in 35:8-10:

**And a highway will be there;
it will be called the Way of Holiness.
The unclean will not journey on it;
it will be for those who walk in that Way;
wicked fools will not go about on it.
No lion will be there,
nor will any ferocious beast get up on it;
they will not be found there.
But only the redeemed will walk there,
and the ransomed of the Lord will return.
They will enter Zion with singing;
everlasting joy will crown their heads.
Gladness and joy will overtake them,
and sorrow and sighing will flee away.**