

Loving God through Religious tradition

Spiritual Pathways: Worship as a Way of Life

The aim of the series is to help us recognise God's loving presence in our daily down-to-earth experience of life and how we can practically respond to his love.

The question we are asking ourselves is: How can I experience God in my life more powerfully?

Our pathway today is Loving God through Religious tradition.

Opening Youtube clip: Mr Bean in Church

Religious tradition gets a bad rap these days... Our church services and regular spiritual practices are called 'empty', 'stale', 'old' and 'boring'.

People want to throw off the shackles of religion - the routines, rituals and commitments just aren't meaningful.

My aim today is to convince you that, when done well, religious traditions are actually the most exciting, vital and profound things we can be involved in. Do you think I can do it?!

What do I mean by Religious Tradition?

Religious tradition refers to the symbols, rituals and routines we do throughout our life in worship - to let the reality of God shine through in ways we can taste, hear, see, smell, feel and participate in.

Many of you have spent your whole lives following religious traditions - going to church, taking communion, observing sabbath, saying grace, reading scriptures and praying at certain points in your day, lighting a candle... maybe some of us have spent time in other church traditions, which follow different traditions. Religious traditions are the regular things we do to acknowledge God's presence.

The key reason we do these things stems from our belief that God wants to reveal himself to us... How do we open our hearts and lives up to his presence?

God is Spirit and He reveals himself in the physical...

In the Bible - God meets with his people in a creative variety of ways: a voice, a thunder storm, a burning bush, through signs and wonders, in prayer, in dreams and visions, through his law, through wise living, through temple practices, through angels, through the temple itself, through writings, through songs, through stories...

Ultimately God reveals himself in Jesus Christ: ... God in Jesus became a human being like us, sharing fully in all the hopes and fears, joys and sorrows of our lives, to let us know that God loves us, forgives us, makes us whole, desires to give life in all its fullness.

We know once and for all that God wants to reveal himself to us...

We faithfully carry out our religious tradition, and a key aspect of that is meeting together to worship. Jesus says 'For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them.' Matthew 18:20

We are trusting that the things we do together in worship allow the spiritual reality of God to shine through in ways we can taste, hear, see, smell, feel in and participate in.

We are wanting to respond in worship through our senses and our intellects. In movement and stillness, through touch and sight and sound, through smell and taste. We are gifted with many ways to worship. We use symbols and rituals trusting that God reveals himself through them.

The Purpose of Religious Tradition

The purpose of religious tradition - create an open listening space using ritual and symbol to give our attention and devotion and to receive and be transformed by God.

Three Essential Ingredients of Religious Tradition:

1 - everyone is included

God welcomes everyone who seeks to worship in spirit and in truth. So it is important that people do not feel unwelcome by the use of language or by any aspect of our practice which excludes on account of gender, race or culture. Nor should it be the case that our worship can only be understood by people who have grown up in church. It also means that that planning and leadership of worship shouldn't be confined to the ministers. We should encourage each other to be actively engaged in

worship in songs, responses and open prayer, and any other worshipful activities we do together.

2 - historical heritage is honoured

We drink deeply from the well of biblical faith. We build our faith practices on the foundations of scripture.

We draw on the experience and creativity of our mothers and fathers in the faith. We recognise that we are part of a long lineage of Christians who have worked things out before us. We do well to honour them and to learn from them.

3 - openness to the new

Religious activity should keep us open to change, to the new, in our worship. God meets us out there on the borders as much in what is familiar and reassuring.

Richard Rohr - 'Liminal space, the place of transition, is a unique spiritual position where human beings hate to be but where the Biblical God is always leading them. It is when you have left the tried and true, but have not yet been able to replace it with anything else. It is when you are finally out of the way. It is when you are between your old comfort zone and any possible new answer...'

Churches of Christ prefer not to call themselves a denomination. They prefer to call themselves a Christian movement. Recognising that we need to be open to the new. Are we actually making this a reality?

This is a joyful space, a profound space, a sensitive space and a dynamic space. Not a boring space...requires careful attention - it shifts with time.

Our Bible Reading: Matthew 9:

Remember Bob Dylan's song 'the times they are a-changing'? With the coming of Jesus - times were changing - they really were.

That was his answer to the questions and criticisms bubbling up, not surprisingly, when his movement didn't look what people expected a movement of God to look like. These questions related to Jesus' unorthodox religious activity...

Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?

Because while other religious leaders of the day saw their role as keeping themselves in quarantine, away from possible sources of moral and

spiritual infection, Jesus saw himself a doctor who'd come to heal the sick. There's no point in a doctor staying in quarantine. Then he'll never do his job.

Why does Jesus and his disciples not keep the regular fast days, which in Israel in those days, commemorated all the tragic things that had happened in their history since the glory days of King David?

Because while other movements including John the Baptist were waiting for the new day to dawn, Jesus knew that with his coming the new day had risen. While John the Baptist and the pharisees were lighting candles to remind them of the light of previous times, Jesus was opening the curtains to let in the light of the day that he knew was dawning even though they weren't aware of it.

Jesus gives three pictures to show how impossible it is to combine the new thing he was doing with the old way things used to be.

You can't be gloomy at a wedding feast - with the groom's arrival, the time for celebration had come.

If you're mending an old garment by sticking a patch on it, make sure the patch is already seasoned and has done all the shrinking it's likely to do. Otherwise when it shrinks it just makes the hole worse than before.

If you put new wine into old skins that will no longer stretch, there will be a messy explosion. You need the stretchy new skin for the new wine to ferment in.

What these three picture stories have in common is Jesus' insistence that the new and the old won't mix. This doesn't mean that the old was wrong. Jesus came, Matthew insists, not to destroy the old ways but to fulfil them. It simply means that God's new movement is happening and the religious rituals and practices that were appropriate in waiting are now no longer needed.

In the middle of all this newness, sits a surprised and grateful man. Matthew, the writer of this gospel, adds his own salvation story into the middle of this debate as an example of the new thing happening in Jesus.

The times were indeed changing. God's new world was being born, and from now on everything would be different.

Notice how our three essential ingredients come into play during this debate over religious traditions - Jesus is fulfilling God's purposes by moving towards a bold new inclusivity - sinners and tax collectors are allowed to join in, and are transformed by it. Jesus' ministry is thoroughly grounded in the Jewish faith. There is no rejection of heritage here, but there is certainly an openness to the new.

The question for the disciples of Jesus and the teachers of the law and for us too is whether we are open to the new, or whether we keep sneaking back to the old one where we feel more at home.

Pitfalls

Going through the motions: Without careful attention - ritual can become an empty exercise - playing church - without careful attention to God - not understanding the meaning behind the practice - degrades into superstition - if I don't do this, maybe God will punish me.

Not giving space or opportunity for spontaneity: Seeking to manage, confine and control the work of God through religious rituals and structures.

Clinging too tightly to your particular rituals and practices:

We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. 2 Cor 4:7

Our religious tradition is vital, but it is only a container which holds the great treasure of life with God - attentive and responsive to his movements.

If we cling too tightly to the container, you might not recognise its empty, God's no longer there.