

Home Worship February 2018 [adapted from Leslie Chambers' Home Worship February 1997]

February 4 Noun or Adjective

Readings: Matthew 5:43-48; Luke 10:25; 1 John 3:18

We speak of a Christian nation, implying that the principal faith taught in the country is Christian. We must not, as many do, presume that a Christian country acts in a Christian way. Many in the country may not be Christian. The Anglican Church is the state Church – the Church of England, but it would be wrong to assume from that that everyone living in England is an Anglican.

We all tend to use language in a general way – a kind of shorthand; and the result is that many of our assumptions are wrong. With all the many foreigners in our country, and their subsequent religions and creeds, it would be wrong of us to speak of England as a Christian country. We might speak of it as a religious country, but even that statement will not stand the test today.

So to say I am a Christian does not tell us very much; it merely states that you are not of another religious persuasion. And it certainly does not mean I am Christian in my attitude. Indeed, the indefinite article between the questions – “Are you **a** Christian?” and “Are you Christian?” is very pointed indeed. Many might claim the former, to be a Christian, but not exercise the Christian ethic in their attitude. Was it not the case of the Samaritan in the parable? He was outside the pale, but his actions showed that his faith was true, for he was exercising the highest ideals.

We need then to examine the criteria which mark off the Christian from others; and let us state at the beginning that it has nothing to do with labels. The epistle speaks of love, not being a matter of words or talk, but genuine - showing itself in action. Love in action - that is the criterion. What we do, more than what we say, shows whether or not we are Christian. No doubt what we say, more determines if we are **a** Christian.

Christian is a rather important word: it can be a noun, a naming word – Are you a Christian? It can be an adjective, a describing word – Are you Christian? And we might say that in its adjectival form it is the more powerful, and the more searching. Are we Christian? Or simply a Christian? Do we just speak the Christian language, or do we seek to live out its principles in life? As Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, said long ago, “I may not only be called a Christian, but also found to be one”.

Love in action as the criterion of life – Christian in action and deed, and not only in words – is a message that is found throughout the Writings of our Church. What is the New Church? It also is noun and adjective. It can also stand for an institution, for a denomination, for a mere label: but it can also express the very spirit that must infill the life. The ideals we find in the New Church must not become mere words or talk – they must be seen as love in action. There must be a living fulfilment in the action of life, for only in that way will the Church of the Lord grow.

The New Church is inclusive – not exclusive. It is open to all no matter the denominational label. But the criterion for entrance into the New Jerusalem, is to walk on the road towards the New Jerusalem. It is not simply to pick up a book, and shout “I have found it”. It is to live out what one has found – to make the adjective – the describing word, be a true manifestation of the noun, the naming word; that we are Christian, we are New Church, we are children of our heavenly Father.

February 11 **Good Shepherd**

Readings: Psalm 23; John 10:1-16

Perhaps there is no more impressive image than that of the Lord as the Good Shepherd. Is that why Psalm 23 is such a favourite? Jesus is the Good Shepherd; the shepherd cares; he leads his flock into pastures new. He leads so that they do not fall into harm. It is said that the Eastern shepherd goes before the flock. In the West the shepherd leads from behind urging the flock to go ahead.

In life we all need help and support. This we find in family and friends. They go alongside us in life. Within the Church we find those who help us on our spiritual journey. Here are folk acting as shepherds. The Good Shepherd is there to support – he is concerned for the flock. Jesus hints that he is prepared to help those who are not of his flock, because his concern is for all mankind. Here is the hint of intimate knowledge, for the shepherd knows the sheep by name. He calls them and they follow.

It is a measure of the Lord's concern for us all that he is the good shepherd. He feeds and protects; he is as a model for us to follow. Little do we realise how much others need our help. There are times when we see it clearly, in the case of someone in hospital. But folk can be ill of mind and spirit. They can be lacking in confidence. They can be without hope. They can be in the depths of despair. They can be like lost sheep - no flock to be a part of, no life to share with another. In such states the shepherd-like qualities in us must show themselves. The sense of hope, concern and vision for the future. And these qualities we see symbolised in the shepherd who cares for the sheep. The one who cares for young and old.

Jesus said, "*I am the Good Shepherd*". He is the supporter and protector of all. But he equally offers a way, a direction that we also in his name may offer to others. We need those shepherd-like qualities in us as we are to share our faith with others. We are also to be as sheep ready to follow the Good Shepherd, when the need arises, if we would be of the kingdom.

We read in the Word of God not only of the Good Shepherd, but the Bad Shepherds. These bad shepherds are those who care only for themselves. They fail in their duties because they are not interested in what happens to the flock. If the wild animal attacks, they flee in order to save their own skin. We equally can be bad shepherds if we lack concern for the spiritual things of our life.

We have the dual task to perform, being shepherds and sheep. A collection of qualities for the maintenance of a good spiritual life; here is the shepherd in us. And all the qualities we possess make us sheep, building the gift of charity, which expresses itself in our concern for our neighbour, and the willingness to be a child of God. The Lord is our example and we are to follow Him. He is the Good Shepherd. And we have to shepherd the qualities of good within us, so that we may better serve the needs of our neighbour in the Lord's name.

February 18 **True Worship**

Readings: Psalm 84; Psalm 122

Arcana Coelestia: 7038

The dome of St. Peter's basilica dominates the skyline of the 'eternal city'. If I had felt like a dwarf against the statue of David, I certainly felt like a dwarf walking up the steps to the great basilica. The size of the building is your first impression – and it towers over you. But for me this was no church, as I know a church building. There was nothing of the intimacy of a chapel or a church building. Here was a magnificent hall that puts to shame the halls, or entrances, of any of the stately homes here in England.

To me, St. Peter's is a place for celebration rather than for public worship. It is the ideal meeting ground for Christians to gather in large numbers to celebrate but not for intimate worship. I could see it well as a place of pilgrimage – each visitor to St. Peter's touching the statue of the saint – a statue whose legs and feet have worn smooth over the years, with the silent homage given.

To sit in front of the altar is to sense the grandeur of western Christianity. For here Christianity began. There may be a reflection of the Eastern Greek Orthodox Church in some of the mosaic work of the various domes – but principally here is our western style Christianity. It is reflected in all our cathedrals. Round the base of one dome I could read a Greek inscription, and on the outer dome, a Latin inscription. I did not see any Hebrew – but I guess it was there.

A Church for celebration – rather than for personal worship. I suppose this has always been so. The large building lends itself well for the united congregation; but is a little out of place for the regular worshippers. I noted at times in the basilicas I visited, that as I was walking round viewing history, in some corner, almost remote from me, a service of worship was taking place.

When we think of worship, what strikes our mind? Is it the intimacy of the chapel – or the united service: each appears to play its part – but I guess the intimate has the greater impact upon us. Is this what the Psalmist felt? Or again was it the feeling of the pilgrim going to the great temple in Jerusalem? Maybe he was reflecting on the visit, but thinking of the homely synagogue at home.

Worship is a personal affair – it is our offering to the Lord what worth we have. It is offering to the Lord our life, in dedicated service. The Psalmist knew this well. He speaks of the altar as the central point of our worship; the reminder of the presence of God in our midst. And he speaks equally of the altar in our life. Is this dedicated to the Lord or to our own achievement, or position in the world?

Our altar of the spirit is that to which all our thoughts return, and from which they take their life. The birds are said to shelter in the house of God. All our thoughts of life find their home in the house of God – whether externally in worship, or within the spirit in worship. And those thoughts find security - that habitation, that home - as they are reflected in life itself. We say all religion has relation to life – and we are expressing the supreme truth. We worship the Lord in life. We express the meaning of religion for us in the daily runs of life.

We can make our life a place of worship, or a den of thieves, or some place that comes only to life in the great celebration. All of us are invited to worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness, in those precious states of mind on which our life is truly formed. From that house of prayer our thoughts take wing, and our worldly life is filled and influenced by such aspirations as our soul yearns.

February 25 Language

Readings: Genesis 11:1-9; Mathew 13:33-42

How do we learn our native language? Babies listen to sounds, store them in the memory, eventually putting meaning to them, and when they are ready, they speak. Speech is the form of communication best known to us – it is there long before school or reading books. From the odd word come sentences and then conversation. Communication is there without the long process taken to learn a foreign language.

I remember it said that you have mastered the language when you can think it. I am conscious that my son Philip can walk through the door, speaking Spanish; come into the living room and speak English; and then turn on the radio and listen to the news in French. It is as though the mind just knocks the switch from one language into the other – but then he is a linguist.

So it would appear that we learn to speak our native language unconsciously – effort is required when we want to speak in another language. So why all the various languages? In his simple way the writer of Genesis accounted for all the languages with the myth of the tower of Babel. Here he expressed a reason for the languages, which cause confusion. Everyone desired their language, their interpretation, their understanding to be accepted, for they felt only they were right.

It is said that we English are lazy when it comes to learning languages. And there is much truth in this. I recall in France ordering a cup of tea, and the waitress asked if I wanted cream. Before I had time to speak a Japanese girl said, “Do you want cream?” She understood the French girl and communicated to me in perfect English, yet her native tongue was Japanese.

We know that we can communicate with others through signs and gestures. But that does limit the extent of the conversation. A smile may convey the thought that you are friendly. You might know a few words of the language, but that does not get you into conversation. Language demands understanding and appreciation. Think of the phrase, “So and so can sew really well”. In the written form you can see the difference; the spoken form leads to confusion.

What about language in heaven? Is it all gesture? Do we know through affection what the other is saying? Do we have to go to a heavenly school to learn how to speak, or are we aware in the same way as with our native language? The following are extracts from *Heaven and Hell*:

Angels talk with each other just the way people in the world do, and of various things. (234)

There is a single language for everyone in heaven. They all understand each other no matter which community they come from. The language is native to everyone. It actually flows from their very affection and thought. (236)

Angelic language has nothing in common with human language – the Angels cannot produce a single word of earthly speech. (237)

Angelic speech corresponds to their affections. (238) Because of this an angel can say more in a minute than a human being can say in half an hour. (340)

In heaven we shall speak to one another and have a greater awareness than we do now, of the love and affection and attitude of the person to whom we are speaking. Perhaps if folk on earth spoke to each other with affection, it might be a much better world.