

SUNDAY OF THE SAMARITAN WOMAN

Worship in Spirit and Truth

The story of the Lord's encounter with the Samaritan woman contains one of the most misunderstood and misused sayings of Christ in the Gospels. The woman raises the question: which is the proper place to worship God, in Jerusalem or on Mount Gerizim?

Jesus responded, "*Woman, believe Me, the hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, worship the Father... The hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him*" (John 4:23).



In order to avoid discussing her irregular marital status the woman had dredged up a controversy in which Jews and Samaritans had been engaged for over a thousand years. Since the time of Moses, the focus of Jewish worship was the Tabernacle, a moveable shrine which contained the Ark, the Tablets of the Law and other relic of the Exodus. These relics were eventually placed in the Temple built by King Solomon in Jerusalem in 957 BC. It was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BC; the Ark and its contents were lost.

On their return from exile in Babylon the Jews set about rebuilding their civilization, including the temple. The second temple, completed in 516 BC, stood as the focus of worship in Jerusalem for centuries. King Herod restored and enlarged it in at the beginning of the first century AD and it is this temple which Jesus knew. This second temple was destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD during the Jewish revolt and has never been rebuilt.

The Samaritans insisted that worship should be conducted on Mount Gerizim. According to the Torah Moses had prophesied, "*Now it shall be, when the Lord your God has brought you into the land which you go to possess, that you shall put the blessing on Mount Gerizim...*" (Deut 11:29). To this day Samaritans see this as the reason why this mountain was the proper place to worship God.

Worship vs. Prayer

While the Jews had only one temple in the Holy Land, they had many synagogues. Any town might have a synagogue for prayer or study of the Torah, led by a rabbi (teacher), but the sacrifices prescribed in the Torah could only be offered in the Temple at Jerusalem by the priests (the *kohanim*). In some cases grain, meal, wine, or incense might be offered; in other instances bulls, sheep, goats, deer or doves would have to be slaughtered and offered. Sacrifices were generally consumed by fire, at least in part. Portions of some sacrifices were consumed by the priests.

The most solemn sacrifice of the year was that offered on Yom Kippur. Two goats were offered; the high priest slew one and drove the other out of the city, "taking away the sins" of the people. Christ's response to the Samaritan woman concerned the authorized worship of God's people, not personal prayer. Moderns, invoking the Lord's saying concerning "spirit and truth," think it refers to prayer. They see it as a rebuke of ritual or of formal prayers, versus spontaneous outpourings of the heart. Often this devolves into a focus on how God affects "my life," what "I get out of the service," etc. With this mindset, churches design services to be

“appealing,” to “meet people’s needs,” and so on. This in no way relates to what the Lord was saying to the Samaritan woman.

The End of Temple Worship

The Lord was saying that the days of temple sacrifices were drawing to a close. He knew that His own sacrifice was at hand. Christ, the One who truly “takes away the sin of the world” would replace the sacrifices of the temple with the sacrifice of Himself - the ultimate offering for the people. Through His Church Christ’s worship of God on the cross would be accessible to all mankind, not be confined to Jerusalem or Mount Gerizim or any other particular geographic location.

The Epistle to the Hebrews speaks of Christ’s offering of Himself to the Father in terms of the temple ritual. After describing the temple and its rites, the apostle continues: *“But Christ came as High Priest of the good things to come, with the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made with hands, that is, not of this creation. Not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption ... For Christ has not entered the holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us; not that He should offer Himself often... Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many”* (Heb 9:11-12; 24-27).

Our Worship in Spirit and Truth

Comparing the temple sacrifices, the sacrifice of Christ and the Divine Liturgy we see both contrast and continuity. Christ offers Himself on the cross for the sin of the world as the priests offered their sacrifices in the temple for sin. But Christ’s offering is the ultimate sacrifice, made once for all and need not be repeated.

Our worship is rather **the sacrifice of praise**, recalling His sacrifice without further shedding of blood and making its effects present to us as He commanded when *“He took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, ‘This is My body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of Me’”* (Lk 22:19). This connection is especially evident in the Syriac Churches where the Divine Liturgy is called the *Holy Qurbano*, the same term used to refer to the Temple sacrifices (in Hebrew, *korban*). *Qurban* is also the term used for the prosphora among Melkites.

There are a number of elements in the Liturgy which reveal it as worship in Spirit and Truth. It begins, for example, with the priest invoking the Holy Spirit as Christ spoke of Him: the “Spirit of Truth”: “O heavenly King, Consoler, Spirit of Truth...” Confessing Him as beyond any human restriction (“everywhere present and filling all things”) the priest calls on Him to dwell within us and purify us for the work of worship which we are undertaking.

More importantly, **the Liturgy actually is worship in the Spirit**. It is here that we truly receive the Holy Spirit in response to the invocation of the priest. The Spirit reaches out to touch us, transforming our oblations – what the Liturgy calls our “spiritual” or “reasonable” sacrifices” – into the body and blood of Christ. In the Holy Mysteries we receive that touch and are healed. Thus we encounter the Spirit, not as a concept or as an emotional “experience,” but as a living sacramental presence striving to make us holy.

The Liturgy is also worship in Truth: in the One who said *“I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me”* (Jn 14:6). God-centered and God-focused, our worship both flows from and expresses the heart of Christian faith: that God and man have been reconciled in Jesus Christ.

Christ our God, who receive as a sacrifice of praise and acceptable worship this reasonable sacrifice without shedding of blood from those who call upon you with their whole heart, Lamb and Son of God, who take away the sin of the world, the unblemished calf, who did not bear the yoke of sin and was willingly sacrificed for us; who are broken, yet not divided, eaten, yet never consumed, but who hallow those who eat; who in memory of Your voluntary passion and life-giving Rising on the third day have declared us to be partakers of Your ineffable, heavenly and dread Mysteries, Your holy Body and precious Blood.

Ambon Prayer, Liturgy of St Basil