
The Kingdom of God is Like ... a Throne Room

*Sermon – General Assembly 2015
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Where do we go from here?

Some of you may be leaving this General Assembly
asking that question with regards to our denomination.

Undoubtedly across our denomination that question will be asked many times
in various guises over the coming months –
where do we go from here?

Where will we go from here?
Where will we end up?

Perhaps in response to my initial question
some of you thought about it in a more personal way
and answered **“the airport”**

Given how many of you have flown here
a lot of you will be making your way from here to YVR - to fly home.

I used to fly a lot –

Prior to coming to Regent College
I worked in a Telecommunications company
and so I flew almost every week.

I got very used to the routine of flying.

I'd get up early – dress appropriately
drive to the airport just outside Belfast
check in and wait to be called to board.

Once on the plane I'd settle down
make myself comfortable
and then the flight would begin.

During the flight I'd be offered refreshments, and entertainment
to make my flight as joyous an experience as possible.

Sometime there was a little turbulence but nothing too bad.

More often than enough the flight didn't land on time
there would be a delay.

But every flight ended with the flight attendant
welcoming us to London Heathrow
and we'd all get up
and leave with a casual
“thank you” to those that had served us.

And they'd respond
“we look forward to serving you again.”

I got so used to those experiences.

Today I don't fly that often at all.

Yet – the funny thing is

I think I see similar experiences occurring week after week after week.

It's called **“worship services”**

and I'm not merely referring to the thought that
the shorter the flight the better

Are we – the leaders in our congregations

trying our best to give those that sit in the pews

the most comfortable

enjoyable

pleasant experience Sunday after Sunday.

Today I'd like to suggest ... we shouldn't

b/c the Kingdom of God is like a Throne Room.

Let's pray ...

If we asked our congregants to explain what worship is

what would they say?

I'm guessing that for the most part ...

they would describe the thing we do on Sundays –

What we are doing here this morning ...

This is worship – right?

Let's think about it by visiting two places of worship

The first is high on a mountain top ...
in the story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness.

Matthew tells us ...

Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil.
After fasting forty days and forty nights, **he was hungry.**

The biggest understatement of the Bible I think

Isolated for 40 days
Having no food for 40 days
Jesus would be more than just physically hungry.

He was at his most vulnerable state in his life to this point

weak – mentally, physically, emotionally

The tempter came to him and said,

"If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread."

that's the first of three temptations

this one urges Jesus to take care of his physical need right there and then.

the thing Jesus needs more than anything at that point is food

*“Jesus – serve yourself
take care of yourself”*

What did Jesus do?

In the second temptation Jesus is being urged to doubt

“If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down.”

*Jesus – if you are the center of the universe
the most important person in the world
you can do what you like
surely God will take care of you.*

What did Jesus do?

when I flew I wanted to be served

I wanted to be entertained

I wanted to be comfortable

I wanted to be the center of the steward’s attention

so that my needs were always adequately met

How many churches have morphed worship into a flight experience

In the Presbyterian Record a few months ago

there was an article about an Anglican priest
who dressed up as the CAT in the Hat - for a church service

Why – “to create an experience”

To be inviting, welcoming
to be SEEKER-SENSITIVE

**“We take the Eucharist seriously”, he said
– “but with humour”**

My biggest concern for that service
is who is the focus of that worship?

Who is the worship centered around?

Surely a truly seeker-sensitive worship service
should have the focus on the TRUE SEEKER
the one who is seeking us!

I love the image John sees in Revelation 4
of the throne in heaven – the second place of worship I invite us to visit today
where he describes the elders and the four living creatures
surrounding the throne

John is describing a scene where
all of God’s people
join with all of God’s creation

gathered in the throne room at the center of the universe

and they gather in a circle around one throne that
sits at the very center of life itself.

and John describes something profoundly simple
that happens there ...

Whenever the living creatures give glory, honor and thanks to him who sits on the throne and who lives for ever and ever, ¹⁰ the twenty-four elders [the people of God] get off their thrones [that surround the throne at the center of the universe, and they] fall down before him who sits on the throne and worship him who lives for ever and ever.¹

And then John says ...

They lay their crowns before the throne

John is describing a worship experience

where the people of God

the leaders of God's people

the teaching and ruling elders of the PCC

are getting off their thrones

getting on their knees

and laying their crowns before Jesus

They lay their symbols of power, and authority, and autonomy

¹ *The New International Version* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), Re 4:9–10.

before Jesus

Why?

Let's go back to that third and final temptation

where the devil appears and takes Jesus to a very high mountain
and shows him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor.

He shows Jesus all the treasures of the earth

everything that the world has to offer –

everything that a person could possess for himself
and says to Jesus

"All this I will give you, if you will bow down and worship me."

Jesus I'll give you everything you could ever dream about having and more
if you grab that guitar and sing a praise chorus to me.

Despite many people describing worship in terms of their Sunday morning experiences

I'm guessing none of us here think that the devil
is tempting Jesus to sing a song

So what does the devil want ...

what is this worship he wants from Jesus?

The devil wants everything from Jesus

not merely his singing voice

the devil wants Jesus to prostrate himself before him

to literally lie face down, arms out wide
in an act of complete and utter submission

An act that says ...

I not merely proclaim my love **for**
and my belief **in**
but EVERYTHING that is me
I lay before you

Perhaps that's why the great former Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple defined worship this way ...

"To worship is to quicken the conscience by the holiness of God, to feed the mind with the truth of God, to purge the imagination by the beauty of God, to open the heart to the love of God, to devote the will to the purpose of God."

*to worship is to devote the will of my entire life
to the purposes of God.*

Temple's definition describes a movement ...

that perhaps begins in a place like this
begins but doesn't end here

we gather for the purposes of preparing for the week that lies ahead
we are gathered today to prepare for the year that lies ahead ...

So - where do we go from here?

We go – not to give our congregations a first class flight experience
but to gather them
week after week
in the throne room of Heaven

to reprostrate ourselves - along with them
before the living God
bringing more than our voices
but our lives
offered in service of Jesus.

In his book “Worshipping God” RT Kendall says

“what we are individually, 24 hours a day,
is more important than what happens in church once a week.”

That’s good but then he continues ...

“The secret of acceptable worship lies in how we are at home, or at work, and when we are alone and nobody knows what we are doing. Acceptable worship – worship that is acceptable by God - lies in our total lifestyle.”

Worship that is acceptable by God –
lies in how we, the leaders of our churches
lead and teach our congregations
to live their lives

in accordance to God's word – everyday

What might that look like?

When we gather on Sundays

one of the distinct traditions of our denomination
is that the Word is central to that gathering.

Gathered in the throne room of heaven
around The Word of Life himself
what might He say to us
about leading his churches
in response to where we go from here?

Being Presbyterian we love committees

and as such we end up attending tonnes of committee meetings

On my way home from Presbytery etc I tend to listen to Praise 106.5
and often I hear sermons from the book of Revelation

Sermons that love to use the graphic apocalyptic imagery
in order to “supposedly” predict the future

Seldom if ever do I hear a sermon from two of my favourite chapters
in the whole NT.

Rev 2 & 3

where Jesus writes seven letters to the seven churches
in Asia Minor.

What if these seven letters were being sent to the universal church of Jesus Christ
to all churches everywhere
in all times

What if these seven letters are telling us right here right now
where we go from here?

What is Jesus saying to us?

What does Jesus want us to do?

What does Jesus want the PCC to be?

What are the priorities that Jesus calls us to this coming year?

**You have forsaken the love you had at first. ⁵ Consider how far you have fallen!
Repent²**

**I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or
the other! ¹⁶ So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to
spit you out of my mouth.³**

**These are the words of the Son of God, whose eyes are like blazing fire and
whose feet are like burnished bronze. ¹⁹ I know your deeds, your love and faith,
your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at**

² *The New International Version* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), Re 2:4–5.

³ *The New International Version* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), Re 3:15–16.

first.

²⁰ Nevertheless, I have this against you: You tolerate that woman Jezebel,⁴

In 1963 the Anglican Church in Canada asked Pierre Burton to write a book about the church, primarily to offer his critique of what he saw was going on in the church. Burton entitled his book *The Comfortable Pew*.

Burton discovered a lack of passion, which he described as the virus of apathy.⁵ He unpacked this further by critiquing that churches had become like businesses, seeking growth, financial security and focusing on their own survival. In essence, he suggested that the church had become comfortable, standing aloof, seeking success in worldly terms.

This had become the churches' gospel.⁶

Burton claimed,

"it has all but been forgotten that Christianity began as a revolutionary religion whose followers embraced an entirely different set of values from those held by other members of society. Those original values are still in conflict with the values of contemporary society; yet religion today has become as conservative a force as the force the original Christians were in conflict with. ... [The church] ought to be making front-page headlines regularly by advocating what is absolutely counter to the general thrust of society; but it does not do so."

⁴ *The New International Version* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), Re 2:18–20.

⁵ Pierre Burton, *The Comfortable Pew: A Critical Look at the Church in the New Age* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Ltd., 1965), 29.

⁶ Unfortunately Burton's claims have been affirmed in a recent article in *The Presbyterian Record*. John-Peter Smit "Taking Pains to Grow" in *Presbyterian Record* (March 2008), 18-22.

Where do we go from here?

What if Jesus is calling us to re-prostrate our lives before him

What if Jesus is calling us to remember what it means to be his disciples
called not merely to believe in Him
but to follow him by obeying His word every day.

what if Jesus is reminding us today that we are not merely a HOLY people
set apart by God
but we are set apart **FOR** God

We are set apart **from** the world –
to go in to the world
living lives that proclaim
there really is a throne room at the center of the universe

and in that throne room there is a throne
and on it sits the Lord of Life
and so our lives are to be lived in worship & service of Him
everyday.

What if before we leave here today

Jesus wants us to open our eyes
like John
and see afresh
the kingdom of God us like a throne room.

Are we ready and willing to respond to that vision?

Amen.