



Pilgrimage:

A Newsletter of Christian Spirituality

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THE SERVICE OF GOD

We live in a consumer-oriented society. Goods and services are offered to us as consumers, and presented in terms of what they can do for us. Advertising is only the most obvious example. Politicians also present their case in terms of the benefits to us. Even actions to help other people are presented to us in terms of what they can do for us: we are encouraged to give blood because we will feel good for having done so.

We are tempted to regard our religion in exactly the same way. We look at it in terms of what we get out of it. All too often, this is also the way it is presented to us: if not with crass promises of wealth, love and worldly admiration, then at least with the claim of satisfying our spiritual needs. The problem is that this makes religion profoundly self-centered. God is made into a means for satisfying our needs -- and no more than that. Hardly a very satisfactory characterization of our Creator and Redeemer! We participate in His religion because it gives us something we want. We give it up if it does not produce according to our needs.

It should not be surprising that Christianity should be so tempted. In America, the churches compete for members in a kind of religious marketplace. The temptation is strong to present religious wares from the strongest marketing approach: appeal to people's needs and desires, and relate the product to them, rather than base its claims on God's Word. The starting point is the perceived needs of the people which this religion can satisfy rather than the truth about God which He has revealed to us.

From the side of the believer, the temptation is equally strong to look at one's parish church in terms of what one gets out of it. Do we feel nourished? Does the worship support our idea of growth in the faith? Are we edified by the fellowship? Do the people seem to be good Christian folk? Does the preaching fulfill our intellectual needs? Are we satisfied with the outreach the parish does? Does it, in short, meet our spiritual needs?

To some extent we always ask such questions, since we are rightly concerned about our spiritual growth. The danger is that this becomes our basic attitude toward the church, our way of understanding our relationship with the church. When this occurs, we tend to be judgmental about what goes on. If the music is not to our taste, we feel justified in complaining about it, since it interferes with our growth. Similarly, if the preaching is poor, or the people unfriendly, or the building ugly, or the vestry pursuing projects which I think ill-conceived, or anything else conflicts with my sense of how things ought to be, then I am offended. And I think my indignation is justified, because I am not getting out of it what I think I deserve.

If our growth is the standard for our religion, then we are justified in complaining. Religion is there for me, so I am the sole judge of the efficacy of this religion. Consumer religion is of its nature purely subjective. It has renounced on principle objective standards of truth. We are religious because it does something for us, not because it is true and thus might make a demand upon us.

We should not underestimate the power and pervasiveness of this kind of thinking. The mentality of the marketplace which is all around us feeds it. There are few of us who are entirely free from it. Often the presentation of Christianity feeds our misconception, suggesting that it is there for the purpose of satisfying our needs. So we are focussed further on our needs rather than upon God.

The fundamental flaw in this way of thinking is the notion that the church is there for me. It is really the other way around: I am here to serve God in His church. The purpose of the church is God's service -- a human service to be sure, but one whose basic orientation is not toward man but toward God. God must be at the center of all that goes on: not in word only but in reality. This means that we must be clear about our position as well.

Christianity's claim upon us is not that it satisfies our religious needs better than any other religion, although this is certainly true (at least, if we have accurately understood our spiritual needs). The real foundation of Christianity's claim is that it is true. Not just that it is good for us or for society, but true. By true we mean that it is true to God's nature, our nature and the nature of creation. Since it gives us the truth about ourselves, it will also be able to satisfy our deepest needs.

Its truth is the result of God's self-revelation. He is the one who has made it true, and in His mercy He has communicated it to us. He cannot lie (such is His nature), and thus His revelation is true. We do Christianity a tremendous disservice, then, when we present it only in terms of what it can do for us. We shift the center from God to man, and thus rather miss the point. Christianity offers us

knowledge (the true nature of God) which can be ours in no other way, and which has the most profound consequences for human life. When we emphasize the way it satisfies our needs, we hide away its true riches: the reality of God and man. If Jesus is the only Son of God, the Truth which is come into the world, then this revelation is Christianity's unique offering to the world.

This means that Christianity is not one religion among many, competing on equal terms in the religious marketplace. Christianity is instead something far more powerful. It gives us the truth about God which is ours only because God has chosen to give it to us. The truth makes demands upon our life: the true God has revealed Himself and how He is to be served. If we accept the truth of this revelation, we must change our lives accordingly. In particular, we will learn to regard our religion as a means for us to know and love God, and center our lives on Him, and not a means for our own satisfaction. We will find that such a life will also satisfy our deep religious needs: but that is consequence and not cause. It satisfies because it is true; it is true not because it satisfies, but because God has said it.

Most Christians probably begin an active Christian life impelled by some desire which we think will be satisfied by Christian life (or at least, by going to church). The providence of God uses such impure desires (most of our desires are after all at least a bit impure) to draw us further into His love. For such we must be thankful. We ought not think too harshly of our beginnings, or of those who are just now coming into His service. But neither can we indulge the selfishness of being Christians for our own sakes when we have learned that we must be Christians for God.

While we all wish to have our spiritual needs satisfied, the key question is whether we understand our Christian life as the service of God. If we are seeking to serve God, then we will trust to Him to see that our true needs are satisfied. If there are other desires which seem to go unfulfilled, we may trust that these are not as crucial as we perceive them to be, and that God is working our redemption through their lack rather than through their satisfaction. We will have a certain humility about the things in the church which we do not like. We will be able to recognize that the others there also strive to serve God as they are able, even if we don't think they do it very well. We will recognize that we do not always do a good job either.

Our thinking must be formed by our desire to serve rather than our demand that our "needs" be satisfied. God in His mercy has made us Christians and brought us into the riches of the faith. He does all this for us: we are not doing Him a favor by being in church. But when we recognize what He has done for us, then we are bound to serve Him thankfully in response to His generosity in revealing

Himself to us. This service of ours is not a means of earning merit, of earning our way into heaven. Rather it is the way we express our gratitude, the way we allow our lives to be transformed by God according to His revelation.

When we are primarily concerned with the service of God, our first interest is with pleasing Him, not self. Our service is the expression of our love: loving Him, we will wish to please Him. Our service takes many practical forms: regular prayer (especially in quiet), corporate worship, cultivation of virtue and battle with sin, loving our neighbor, works of mercy for others. It is not just doing certain things but a way of life: Christian life. To serve God is to love Him wholeheartedly and to love neighbor as self. To maintain such service at the center of our Christian self-understanding keeps us from self-centeredness, and instead helps us to remain centered on God.

There are some red flags which can alert us to our consumer approach to Christianity. One is the occasion when we feel like complaining about something at church, especially if we feel anger or indignation. Usually this means that we are looking at our participation in the parish in terms of what we expect to get out of it, rather than as God's service. Our inclination to complain can grow even to the extent of wanting to find a new parish. Sometimes finding a new parish is warranted (if, for example, the Gospel is not being truly preached), but often it is a sign that we have judged the parish lacking in our own terms. Another sign is a habitual judgmentalism concerning the parish and my place in it. Then we are judgmental as well as self-centered, treating the parish as if it were there solely for me. These habits, which signal our misunderstanding of the faith, often lead us to slacken our devotions: and then it is even harder for us to break out of our self-centeredness.

So we should examine ourselves from time to time to see whether the consumer mentality has infected our Christianity. Are we Christians for what we get out of it (comfort, spiritual experiences, a sense of righteousness), or because Christianity is true? Do we give our lives over wholly to the service of God because that is what He requires of us, or do we do our religious duties because they satisfy our desires? This is of the utmost importance: if we are religious for self rather than for God, we will want Him only on our own terms. When He offers us heaven it can only be on His terms, for heaven is defined by God. If we insist on our own terms we will be in danger of refusing His gift. We cannot have it both ways, much as we try sometimes. To be a Christian is to lose self in order to be saved, to die in order to live. This is at once terribly easy and terribly difficult. By focusing our practice on service rather than satisfaction, God helps us to live to Him (and thus die to self). If we have lived for His service in this life, nothing will be more comfortable than continuing it in the next.