

The Mystery of Christ and the Divine Service

John W Kleinig

Document Status: A paper presented at Higher Things Conference
St Louis, July 19-22, 2005

“Blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear” (Matt 13:16).

Dare to be part of a mystery, the greatest mystery of all, the mystery of Christ and his real presence with us! In Colossians 3:1 St Paul urges you to set your minds on higher things, heavenly things. And he gives a strange reason for this. He says: “your life is now hidden with Christ in God” (3:3). You have hidden lives; you are mystery women and men, people who lead double lives.

Some years ago I saw a rather gripping Australian film called **The Last Wave**. It was set in Sydney and told the story of well-educated, secular young man who had become aware of the supernatural realm from his association with a group of urban Aborigines. In the middle of the film, he visited his stepfather, an Anglican priest, and tried to get help from him in dealing with his experiences. In exasperation he said to the hapless man, "Dad, you never told me that there were any mysteries." Indignant, the father replied, "That's not true! I've tried to explain the mysteries of Christianity to you again and again." At this the son exclaimed, "You never explained them, Dad; you explained them away!" You explained them away! That's even worse than explaining a joke!

We modern people tend to confuse mysteries with secrets. And so we try to figure them out and explain them away. But a secret is not the same thing as a mystery. Even though a mystery has to do with something that is hidden and unknown, it differs from a secret in one important way. A secret remains a secret only as long as you don't know it. Once it is revealed it ceases to be a secret. Take the date of my birth! I can keep it secret from you if I chose. Then as soon as I tell you when I was born the secret is gone. A secret remains a problem until you solve it. Take the secret of flight! That was solved by the invention of an aeroplane. But a mystery remains a mystery even when it is revealed. In fact, the more you know about it, the more mysterious it becomes. Take the mystery of life, or the mystery of love! You may be able to explain a mystery, but you can never explain it away. A true mystery is not just something that is at present unknown and as yet unexplained, but something that is ultimately inexplicable in purely rational or scientific terms, something so wonderful that it can only be known by experience and then only in part, something that we can only experience as we are transformed by our involvement of it.

Hugh Mackay is a respected sociologist and pollster in Australia. Last year he published his findings from an extensive study of the attitudes of the so-called Generation Y in Australia. He noted that it is the most intensely tribal group of young people in living memory. For me the most interesting finding from his research is his claim that this generation is fascinated by three things - community, commitment, and mystery. I wonder if that is also true for you here in the USA. If that is so, the church should be well placed to commend the Christian faith to them. That, at least, is my

conviction. I fear that we orthodox Christians may, in the past, have, all too often, misrepresented the faith by rationalising it and explaining it away. Yet we Christians are not called to present the gospel to others by explaining it, let alone explaining it away; we are called to be mystagogues, people who initiate them into the mystery of Christ and his gospel, the mystery of God's kingdom. And there's nothing secret about that. It's open for all who have ears to hear and hearts to receive it.

In ancient Greece mystagogues were stewards of a god's house, the caretakers of a holy place, a site or the shrine that was dedicated to a god or goddess. Their task was to show the devotees of that deity around the holy place. As they led them around on a guided tour, they told the stories that were associated with the place. Those stories served to explain the nature of the god that was present there and the rituals that were associated with the worship of that deity. In this way those mystagogues initiated people into the mystery of that god. They revealed what was hidden from human sight but experienced by those who were involved in the service of that god. The mystagogue who had been initiated into the mystery "led" others into that mystery. In classical Greek "mystagogy" was the term for the initiation of people into the experience of a mystery. Paul uses this as a picture for his work as a preacher and teacher. He claims that he and all pastors have been appointed as "stewards of the mysteries of God" (1 Cor 4:2).

When we gather for worship, we are involved in a great mystery, something hidden from our sight and all our other senses, something invisible and yet real. St Paul speaks of it in this way in Colossians 1:25-28:

I became the servant (of the church), according to God's commission that was given me for you, to make the word of God fully known, the **mystery** that has been kept hidden throughout the ages and generations but has now been revealed to his saints. To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this **mystery**, which is **Christ among you**, the hope of glory.

Here the apostle depicts himself as a mystagogue, a person who initiates others into a mystery. That mystery is the dwelling of the risen Lord Jesus with his people in the church. Paul discloses that mystery to the saints, those who are united with Christ and so share in his holiness. He reveals the presence and activity of the risen Lord to them by preaching God's word to them, the gospel that proclaims Christ and brings "life and immortality to light" for its hearers (2 Tim 1:10). Apart from God's word, they have no access to the risen Lord Jesus; they have no knowledge or experience of him. So, for example, we could never discover Christ's body in his holy supper unless his word disclosed it to us. That word initiates us into the mystery of Christ, something that no eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no human heart has ever conceived (1 Cor 2:6-10). The disclosure of his hidden presence gives us a glimpse of glory, a foretaste of heaven here on earth.

The divine service depends upon the hidden presence of the risen Lord Jesus. Apart from him, it does not work properly, nor can it work properly. Jesus works in it and makes it work. We therefore make things difficult for ourselves by focusing on what we do when we assemble for worship. We are, in fact, encouraged to do so by the language we use. Take the term worship! It is an odd English invention that is not found in any other language that I know. It translates Hebrew and Greek words for physical prostration before God and adoration of him. By using it to describe what

happens in our services, we concentrate on ourselves and on our activities, rather than on Christ and his gifts to us. After all, we worship Christ; he does not worship us. And so it should not surprise us that most people regard worship as their doing, a human act, something they need to do in response to what Christ did for them long ago. They get things back to front. The very churches that preach justification by grace often practice justification by works in their worship. In this way the mystery of Christ is obscured; the gate of heaven is shut; we have no access to God's grace here on earth.

In contrast with this common view of worship the New Testament teaches that the divine service begins and ends with Christ, the mystery of his hidden presence with us here on earth. When we gather for worship, Christ serves us and gives his gifts to us. He involves us in his own service of God the Father. Worship is divine service, God's service of us in Christ and our service of God through Christ. We Lutherans confess and teach the real presence of the Lord Jesus, his bodily presence with us here on earth. We do not worship an absent Christ who lords it over us from afar, but Christ who is present with us to serve us. All we receive in the divine service comes to us through Christ, just as we act together with Christ in everything that is done in it. It is all a matter of grace, the free gift of God the Father to us in Christ.

A girl that I catechised many years ago made me aware of this. It happened when I was a chaplain at a Lutheran High School in Brisbane. She had come from outback where there was no church. So when she had to attend daily devotions she had trouble figuring out what was going on. What puzzled her most was the 'empty stage' in our chapel. Why was it that it was kept empty for most of the time? Her question made me realise how observant she was. We kept the stage empty to mark the hidden presence of the risen Lord Jesus.

1. The Work of Jesus in the Divine Service

The work of Jesus as mediator, his ministry, did not end with his ascension. When he ascended he made it quite clear to his apostles that he would be present in the church with his disciples to the close of the age (Matt 28:20). After his ascension he became invisibly present with them in such a way that his presence transcended the normal limitations of time and space and matter (Eph 4:10). In his prologue to the book of Acts Luke goes one step further. He says: "In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus **began** to do and teach until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen." The key word here is "began." Luke claims that Jesus continues his work in word and deed with the help of his apostles and their successors in the church. That's why we read from the gospels in the divine service. Those readings from the gospels do not just tell us what Jesus said and did long ago; they tell us what Jesus says and does each Sunday in the assembly of the faithful. There the risen Lord Jesus interacts with us, like the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, by teaching himself from the Scriptures and hosting his holy supper. That's why his word and his meal are the backbone of the divine service. We have no access to the mystery apart from them.

Jesus himself taught the twelve apostles about his hidden presence and work with them in the divine service in Matthew 18:18-20. He said:

"Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, **I am there with them.**"

Here in typical Jewish style Jesus uses four passive verbs to speak about the work of God the Father in gathering the disciples and answering their prayers as well as in binding and loosing. Since the early church, this passage has quite rightly been used to teach what happens in the divine service. It emphasises four important aspects of worship. First, as the congregation assembles for worship, God the Father gathers them together. The congregation then is God's assembly, his church (cf. 1 Cor 1:2; 2 Cor 1:1), people gathered by him in his presence. Secondly, God the Father gathers the congregation together through risen Lord Jesus as they use his holy name in proclamation and blessing, in prayer and praise. Through Jesus they have access to God's gracious presence. Thirdly, Jesus bridges the gap between heaven and earth for the congregation and connects what happen in these two spheres. Thus, since Jesus is present and active in the congregation, it prays together with Jesus and is involved in his work of reconciliation. God the Father does what the church asks him to do, as it is guided by Christ and his word. Fourthly, the successors of the apostles in the ministry of word and sacrament work together with the risen Lord Jesus in his mission of binding and loosing here on earth. They bind the conscience of people by preaching God's law and announcing God's judgment on sin; they loose people from guilt and condemnation by proclaiming the gospel and pardoning sinners (John 20:21-23). They bind the powers of darkness by rebuking them in the name of Jesus; they loose people from the grip of Satan by proclaiming God's word and enacting the sacraments. Thus Jesus involves the church in his administration of God's grace here on earth. In the divine service he includes the church in his work of judging sin and pardoning sinners. Together with Christ his ministers wield the keys of forgiveness that open the door into the Father's presence (Matt 16:19), for only through the forgiveness of sins can sinners approach God the Father unafraid in prayer. Since they have been pardoned and justified they have unrestricted access to his grace in the divine service. Thus the forgiveness that the ministers of the gospel proclaim in Christ's name is the key to God's gracious presence; it gives us access to heaven here on earth.

2. Access to God's Grace through Jesus

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews teaches us about the role of Jesus as our liturgist, our great high priest. He says in 10:19-22:

Therefore brothers (and sisters), since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great high priest over the house of God, let us approach (God the Father) with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled (clean) from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water."

Through Jesus, and together with him, we earthlings enter the heavenly sanctuary in the divine service. By faith in Jesus we enter heaven here on earth. Because we have been cleansed from sin through baptism, we have unrestricted access to God the Father. The way into his presence is now open before us. Together with Jesus we stand with the angels and the whole communion of saints before God the Father. No

Israelite ever had this kind of access to God in the tabernacle or at the temple in Jerusalem. There, once a year on the Day of Atonement, the high priest had restricted access to God's presence in the Holy of Holies. In the new covenant we all serve as priests together with Christ in the heavenly sanctuary. Together with him we have free access by faith to the Father's presence and his abundant grace. Our high priest Jesus bridges the gap between God and us. He brings God the Father to us just as he brings us to God the Father.

There are two sides to his ongoing work as priest in the divine service. On the one hand, Jesus speaks for God the Father and proclaims his word to us; through his word he brings the Father's grace and gives the Holy Spirit to us. We Lutherans call this the **sacramental**, descending side of the divine service. On the other hand, Jesus also represents us before God the Father and presents us together with himself to his heavenly Father; he leads us as we respond in faith to what God gives us and does for us in worship. We Lutherans call this the **sacrificial**, ascending side of the divine service. The sacramental side of worship always comes first. It is foundational. The sacrificial side depends on it, just as you can only hear speech if someone speaks to you, and you can only receive a gift if something is given to you. We can speak to God only because God speaks to us; we can give something back to God only as we receive good things from him.

So Jesus is at work everywhere in the divine service that is done according to his word. There he comes to us and gives his gifts to us; there he speaks the life-giving, Spirit-filling word of God the Father to us in the divine service. Through the word that is spoken in proclamation and enacted in Holy Communion, he brings us grace and peace, pardon and life from God the Father. St Paul speaks about this sacramental aspect of worship in Rom 5:1-2:

"Therefore since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained **access to this grace** in which we now stand."

What is the practical result of our justification? Since we are justified by faith, we now have access to the grace of God the Father. Just think how rare access to a person is. I have met thousands of women in my life but only one of them has access to me as a man. Only four people have such unrestricted access to me and my wife that they have keys to our house.

We have unrestricted access to the grace of God the Father through his Son; we receive all God's gifts to us through him. God the Father holds nothing back from us; he offers us everything that belongs to Jesus: peace and joy, fellowship and love, salvation and eternal life, the Holy Spirit and all other heavenly blessings (Eph 1:4). They are all available to us in faith. We may therefore come as beggars with empty hands to receive what he offers to us in the divine service. It is all grace upon grace, blessing upon blessing. That's why the writer to the Hebrews offers us this encouragement (4:14,16):

"Since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens...let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may **receive mercy** and find **grace** to help in time of need."

Our worship then is, first and foremost, much more a matter receiving rather than of giving. It is God's doing, the work of the triune God, an act of condescension in which God the Father comes down to us and gives us the Holy Spirit through the words and

deeds of Jesus in the divine service. Could you get anything more wonderful than that?

Yet that is only one side of the mystery. You see, Jesus is just as involved in our response to what God the Father gives us as he is involved in the Father's giving of himself to us. Just as Jesus brings the Father to us, so he also brings us to the Father. He does this by giving us the Holy Spirit, so that we, in faith, can respond appropriately to God's grace. St Paul sums up this sacrificial side of the divine service quite succinctly in Eph 2:17-18:

"Jesus came and proclaimed peace to you (Gentiles) who were far off and peace to you (Jews) who were near, for through him both of us have **access** in one Spirit **to the Father**."

We do not respond to God the Father by ourselves and approach him in our own right. How could we ever do that! Since Christ is our high priest who has joined himself to us in baptism and now shares his holiness with us, we join with him in his self-offering to God the Father. We stand in his shoes and identify ourselves with him. We approach God the Father through him (Heb 7:25). We can, in a way, impersonate him. Since Christ presents us with himself to the Father, we, with him, can offer ourselves and our bodies as living sacrifices that are holy and acceptable to God (Rom 12:1-2). Since Christ lives to intercede for us, we can pray together with him, as we do in the Lord's Prayer, and we can be sure that our prayers and praises are pleasing to God. Christ sanctifies us and our offerings with his Holy Spirit, so that we can present them as "spiritual sacrifices that are acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Pet 2:5). They are "spiritual" sacrifices because they are motivated by faith in Jesus and produced in us by his Holy Spirit.

So then, our worship depends totally on Jesus and his presence with us. Without him we have no access to God's grace; through him we have ongoing access to the fullness of God's grace, grace abounding, grace that flows out into us, like a never-ending spring, and through us to the people around us. This means that we have a hidden vocation as holy priestly people. Like Jesus we can bring others and their needs to God the Father in prayer; like Jesus we bring God the Father and his blessings of the people that surround us. We are Christ's secret agents here on earth.

3. Conclusion

We only see a very small part of what happens to us when we go to church. Much more happens in the divine service than ever meets our eyes. In fact, the most important part of the divine service is its invisible dimension, the mystery of heaven here on earth. This is how Luther describes that invisible dimension (LW 24, 67):

Pastors are nothing but channels through which Christ leads and transmits his gospel from the Father to us. Therefore, wherever you hear the gospel properly taught or see a person baptized, wherever you see someone administer or receive the sacrament, or wherever you witness someone absolving another, there you may say without hesitation: "Today I beheld God's word and work. Yes, I saw and heard God himself preaching and baptizing." To be sure, the tongue, the voice, the hands, are those of a human being; but the word and the ministry are really those of God himself. Hence it must be viewed and believed as though God's own voice were resounding from heaven and as though we were seeing him administering baptism or the

sacrament with his own hands... he is certainly present in these, himself working miracles, preaching, administering the sacraments, consoling, strengthening, and helping. We see him as we see the sun through a cloud.

Remember the story of Jacob's ladder! In his flight from Esau, Jacob had come to a place called Bethel. There he fell asleep and had a vision of a stairway that reached up to heaven. Since the angels of God descended and ascended on it, he realised that this place was the gate of heaven. This stairway was remarkable, because God used it to come down from heaven to join Jacob and met with him there on earth. Jacob did not climb up the stairway to meet with God; God came down that stairway to bless Jacob.

Jesus applies that story to himself in John 1:51. He says:

"Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man."

He is our stairway to heaven, the heavenly escalator by which God reaches down to us and brings us to himself. Through Jesus God the Father descends to us in the divine service to meet with us and bless us with his Holy Spirit; through Jesus we ascend to God the Father by the power of the Holy Spirit. In the divine service we receive grace upon grace from God's fullness (John 1:16), for through Christ we have unrestricted access to God the Father and his grace by the Holy Spirit. The mystery of worship is Christ with us, our access to grace and our hope of glory.

Dare to explore that mystery as you take your journey through life! Dare to confess the real presence of Christ and to live each moment as in his presence! Dare to believe that he lives in you and that you take him with you wherever you go.

Yes, "blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear" (Matt 13:16).