

The Television Set

What happens in worship

Prepared by John Kleinig and David Schubert
for the LCA's Department of Liturgics

Tuning in

Imagine a television set that's never used. It occupies a prominent place in the living room, and it has developed rather inflated notions about its own importance. It's met all the visitors that have come to the house. It's heard all the conversations in the room. It's watched everything that has happened in the house. But it's never been used. It's never let its owners push in its plug and switch on the power. No one has ever turned on its speaker, so that it could sing and speak properly. No one has ever adjusted its vision, so that it could display a clear image.

And so it has sat there undisturbed and has never functioned as a television set. It's lived all its life in that room and has never discovered what goes on elsewhere outside its immediate range. It's never caught a vision of the world outside and has never brought it back into its home. It's never become a receiver and so could never become a transmitter of words and visions. It's nothing but a useless piece of furniture.

Well, that's how people are who never worship God. They don't fulfil the purpose they were created for. They never become receivers and transmitters of God's heavenly transmission to us in this world. They lead lives that are spiritually frustrated and unfulfilled.

Receiving

In Christian worship we human beings tune into heaven here on earth. We become receivers and transmitters of heavenly life together with other Christians and our risen, ascended Lord Jesus.

We often think of worship as what we do, when we come to church, or hold our devotions. But that's not really what worship is all about. Worship is more a matter of receiving than doing. First and foremost it's what God does for us, not what we do for God. It's God's activity that lies at the heart of Christian worship. Human activity is secondary and dependent on God's initiative.

Take the common order of worship. Here we see the mysterious presence and activity of the triune God with us. The service begins with *'In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit'*, which announces the presence of the triune God. God comes and puts his name on us. We are marked with the sign of the cross because we have been made God's children in baptism.

And then right through the service, the main accent falls on what God does. He forgives our sin in the *absolution*, and receives us as beggars of favours from him in the '*Lord, have mercy*'. In the *greeting* before the prayer of the day and the readings we acknowledge our Lord Jesus as our chief worship leader.

After that our heavenly Father speaks powerfully to us in the *readings* from the Scriptures and in the *sermon*. He listens to our requests for his help in the *prayer of the church*. He gives us the body and blood of Jesus for the healing of our bodies and souls in *holy communion*, and he dismisses us with the *blessing* of his Son.

So worship is always first and foremost God's actions of loving kindness. It's true that he also judges us, but only in order to give us more of himself and his blessings. God encourages and invigorates us, he heals and helps us, he revitalises and enriches us. God is the doer and we are the objects of his activity. God is the giver. God is the transmitter and the power supply, and we are the receivers of his spiritual gifts to us. In worship he gives us as much of himself as we can receive this side of heaven so as to prepare us for eternal intimacy with him in heaven.

Transmitting

A television set doesn't remain inert as it receives its transmission. The same power that transmitted the vision helps it receive and reflect the transmitted vision. And we can't remain passive and inert in worship. We're affected by God's impact on us. We don't take the initiative in worship, but merely go along with Jesus. He's our leader in worship. What's more, we can't do this by ourselves without the help of the Holy Spirit, any more than the television set creates its vision by itself without the power that enables it to receive and transmit its vision.

Our order of worship makes this clear. We respond to God's invitation by *gathering* in his presence. We respond to the offer of forgiveness by *confessing our sins*. We respond to God's acceptance of us by singing '*Glory to God in the highest*' and other hymns of praise. We respond to God's speaking by *listening* faithfully to him and *confessing our faith*. We respond to God's generosity by *offering* ourselves and some of our money to him. We respond to God's offer of help by asking him for help in *prayer*. We respond to our entry into the presence of our heavenly Father by joining together with the heavenly hosts in singing '*Holy, holy, holy*'. We respond to the gift of Christ's healing body and cleansing blood by gratefully *receiving* these gifts and surrendering our lives to him in the *Song of Simeon*. We respond to God's blessing by going out into the world and *serving* him in our daily lives.

We aren't left to our own devices in all this. Our fellow Christians are with us and the Holy Spirit prompts us and empowers us in our worship of the Father

through the Son (Ephesians 2:18). The Holy Spirit directs our worship. What's more, he turns our whole life into a single act of worship, a continual song of praise about our gracious heavenly Father for the whole world to hear. By helping us receive God's heavenly transmission, the Holy Spirit makes us into living transmitters.

Our worship of God as human beings on earth is always rather clumsy and inadequate. Our reception is poor and our transmission is poorer. We don't always get it right. But what matters is that Christ gets it right for us. Throughout our whole life we learn, bit by bit, how to appreciate, enjoy and worship God. None of us is an expert in worship. We're all beginners. At best we can support and encourage each other as we learn to worship by worshipping together.