

INVITE GOD INTO YOUR WORSHIP!

Today's Text: 2 Chronicles Chapter 5; Matthew 18:20

Extracts:

1. "It came even to pass, as *the trumpeters and singers were as one, to make one sound to be heard in praising and thanking the Lord, and when they lifted up their voice with the trumpets and cymbals and instruments of music, and praised the Lord, saying, For He is good; for His mercy endureth for ever: that then the house was filled with a cloud, even the house of the Lord; so that the priests could not stand to minister by reason of the cloud: for the glory of the Lord had filled the house of God*" [2 Chron. 5: 13-14]
2. "For where two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst of them" [Matt. 18: 20]

On Monday, 2 February 2004, the Indiana Pacers hosted the Los Angeles Lakers in an NBA game. The LA Lakers have won the National Basketball Association Championship three times in the last four years, and the Pacers have the best record so far in the Eastern Conference of the league. Therefore, it was expected to be the battle of the titans. Tickets were sold out weeks before the game and attendance was a franchise record for the Pacers. In the game, the hosts won decisively, beating the Lakers 85-72. That should have been cause for great celebration for the fans of the local club. However, most of them were unhappy! The basketball stars that they had paid to come and see were not there. On the Lakers' side, Shaquille O'Neal, Kobe Bryant and Karl Malone had been sidelined by injury or suspension (Shaq). The star of the local team, Jermaine O'Neal, did not also play on account of injury. Summarising the mood of disappointment, a Pacers' reserve player, Austin Croshere, said, "It requires you to account for someone whose physical presence alone changes the game."¹

Let us apply that story to a worship setting in our churches. Who is that "someone whose physical presence alone changes the game"? It is hardly the pastor or choirmaster/mistress or head of the denomination at national or international level. That someone is God Himself, without whose presence, the worship session is a mere concert or retreat! How often have you gone to church heavy-hearted only to return home feeling much worse? How often have you felt recently that worship in your church has become boring and routine, and no longer spiritually fulfilling. Well, the likelihood is that God has not been invited! And what is a worship service if God is not there?

*In today's lesson, we shall use Solomon's dedication service to understand how to invite God into our worship. Without His glorious presence [**Shekinah**], we can misbehave or promote man-made rituals, which will lead us nowhere! Let us read on.*

¹ http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/basketball/nba/recaps/2004/02/02/16741_recap.html

1. Let us begin with what we know: Receiving a human dignitary

I still recall with nostalgia how we used to receive dignitaries when I was growing up in rural Nigeria. Maybe it was the Premier of the then Western Nigeria, Chief Obafemi Awolowo. He was actually coming on a campaign tour. We only saw the politicians once in four years, when either Federal or Regional Elections were around the corner. The mere announcement that he was coming would set off great frenzy!

The headmaster of our primary school would assemble the whole school and inform us that regular schoolwork was going to be suspended in the next few weeks. He would inspect our uniforms and command that new ones be sewn for almost half of the school, which our parents could hardly afford. The school premises as well as the public places in the town (e.g., the market, the town hall, etc.) would have to be cleaned up. The local council would have to repair and repaint public buildings, and fix the roads that had been neglected for years!

Local politicians would swallow their differences and serve on a committee to draft a welcome speech. In it, they would begin with excessive praise of the Premier, even though his party had done nothing for us at the time. They would go on to make an endless list of demands, such as better roads and other infrastructures, industrial establishments, etc. The young men and women would practise dances that were reserved for dignitaries to be displayed during the Premier's visit.

On the day of his visit, the whole town would be agog with music and dancing. Pupils and students would line the route from early morning, wearing the cleanest and newest uniforms that they could afford, waving the flags of the dignitary's party and our nation. The local politicians and community leaders would congregate in the town hall, with music and dancing raising enormous dust in the tropical heat! Ultimately, the guest would come. He would not spend more than fifteen minutes and he would be gone! Nobody would complain. That he was able to come was an honour!

That story is the same everywhere. Whether it is the President of the United States or the Pope, we are thorough with preparations to receive them *well*. We would not dare to come late to receive them nor appear before them in slippers and torn jeans! For example, recently, the United Nations Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, visited Trinidad & Tobago on vacation. Most of the senior and international staff of the UN agencies in the country were abroad on vacation because it was during the Christmas period. A reception was hurriedly organized for him, and you need to see the pictures that some of those who went from our office have been showing those of us who were absent. They shook hands with him individually and posed for photographs. Even those of them who would normally come to the office in casual dress turned out there in the latest outfits with Hollywood touch!

Some of them have decorated their tables with those pictures. All of a sudden, they feel very important about themselves!

2. But God is bigger than any human dignity!

If we are prepared to do so much to receive mere mortals like us, how do we receive God who owns the whole earth and everything in it [Ps. 24: 1]? After all, going to church is like an invitation to come and welcome God who is coming to visit us. The word of God says, “I was glad when they said unto me, let us go into the house of the Lord” [Ps. 122: 1]. But how many of us are glad to go there?

The same people who would rush out on weekdays to go to work, rain or shine or snow, are the first to wake late on Sunday or sleep all day. Those who care to go to church get there late, when the service is almost over. Those who care to arrive early are distracted by their earthly worries, whether their eyes are closed or opened during prayers! All in the name of trashing ritualistic worship, many go to church in very casual clothes and behave in ways that do not suggest respect for God or the church. Some others who care to dress properly are doing so for ulterior (and hardly holy) motives. Yet, the word of God has warned us, “The Lord is in His holy temple: *let all the earth keep silence before Him*” [Habakkuk 2: 20].

Is it any wonder that we return from church feeling unfulfilled? Don't you want to experience *Shekinah*, the glory and presence of God? Do you know the difference that that can make to your worship and life? Let us see how Solomon and his people invited God into their worship and how God responded.

3. Solomon invites God into his worship

There is something remarkable about the spot where Solomon built the temple. It was on Mount Moriah where Abraham offered Isaac as sacrifice [Gen. 22:2], and where the Lord appeared to David during the pestilence, the threshing floor of Araunah (or Ornan) that David bought [2 Chron. 3: 1]. A house is not a home. To make the temple God's dwelling place, Solomon still had to invite Him. In the words of Jesus Christ, “Behold, I stand at the door and knock: if any man hear My voice and open the door, I will come in to him and sup with him, and he with Me” [Rev. 3: 20]. No matter how palatial or magnificent is the church that you have built, it remains a mere house until God accepts your invitation to come in. Here is how Solomon went about doing that:

a) *The people prepared themselves physically and spiritually*

After Solomon had completed building the temple of God, he “brought in *all the things that David his father had dedicated; and the silver and the gold and all the instruments*, put he among the treasures of the house of God” [2 Chron. 5: 1]. See how much work had been done to prepare for

the day of dedication. The temple took seven years to complete [1 Kgs 6: 38]. The floor, the altar, in fact, the whole house was laid with gold [1 Kgs 6: 22, 30]. *Everything* that Solomon built or did was *in accordance with God's command to Moses* in the Sinai over 400 years earlier [see Exodus, Chaps. 25-32]. He did not add or subtract. The Levites transported the Ark of the Covenant from Zion into the temple, in the assembly of the elders, heads and chiefs of Israel, again as God wanted it [2 Chron. 5:2]. However, they would not have dared to carry it if they had not been sanctified, that is, set apart from unclean ways, just like the priests [v. 11]. And how about the congregation? Of course, everyone had to have been sanctified.

Go to **Exodus Chapter 19**, when God prepared the people to receive the Ten Commandments. God said to Moses, "Go unto the people, and sanctify them today and tomorrow, and let them wash their clothes, and be ready against the third day; *for the third day the Lord will come down in the sight of all the people upon mount Sinai*" [vv. 10-11]. Moses came to the people and told them, "Be ready against the third day: *come not at your wives*" [v. 15].

Under the New Covenant, we are sanctified "through the offering of the blood of Jesus Christ once for all." However, we are required to "draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water" [Heb. 10: 10, 22]. In other words, repentance and water baptism are necessary conditions but *we must remain sanctified vessels* (through holy living, which is the practice of true faith in God by Christ Jesus) *for God to accept our invitation to our worship*.

b) *The people offered thanks with cheerful hearts*

The worship began with thanks offering. As Solomon and the entire congregation assembled before the Ark, they "sacrificed sheep and oxen, which could not be told nor numbered for multitude" [2 Chron. 5: 6]. You can imagine how much those items cost! Listen to what God Himself has said about such giving: "If I were hungry, I would not tell thee; for the world is Mine, and the fullness thereof. Will I eat the flesh of bulls, or drink the blood of goats? *Offer unto God thanksgiving; and pay thy vows unto the most High; and call upon Me in the day of trouble. I will deliver thee, and thou shalt glorify Me*" [Ps. 50: 12-15].

The forgoing suggests that the offerings we make when we go to church are for our own good, not God's. Yet, if they were to pass a collection plate or bag around at the beginning of the service, most of us would walk out in disgust! We would allege that that church was running a business. Of course, some churches do abuse it but Solomon is showing us that it is

one important way to invite God into your worship. You are telling Him that He is more important than any material blessings that you enjoy.

c) *There was love and mutual respect among the congregation*

Each person played his/her role without stepping on other people's toes. The Levites carried the Ark into the temple and the priests took over. The Levites whose job was the choir arrayed themselves in white robes with their instruments, and at the side of the altar commanded by God [vv. 9-12]. When the time came to start the service, trumpeters and singers "were as *one*, to make *one sound* to be heard in praising and thanking the Lord" [v. 13].

In many churches, the choir is the biggest problem. Some members want their voices to be heard over and above everybody else's. Some drummers and instrumentalists want to drown out the singers' voices. In the end, there is no melody, no harmony, and no music. If the people do not like what they hear, how can God?

We see in Solomon's temple respect for the house of God. The people were orderly and took their places. There was unity of purpose that could only have come from shared values and hearts of true love. If we want God in our midst, we have to do the same thing.

d) *God arrives unexpectedly!*

As the people sang, danced and praised the Lord *in unison*, praising His goodness and mercy which last for ever, the temple was *suddenly* filled with a cloud "so that the priests could not stand to minister by reason of the cloud: *for the glory of the Lord had filled the house of God*" [vv. 13-14]. The phenomenon of the revelation of the glory and presence of God is commonly referred to as *Shekinah*.

There are also *Shekinah* experiences in the Bible involving Jesus and the Holy Spirit. When Jesus took Peter, James and John into a high mountain, He was transfigured before them, and "His face did shine as the sun and His raiment was white as the light." Soon after, "a bright cloud overshadowed them," followed by a voice which said, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; hear ye Him." The disciples heard the voice, "fell on their faces and were sore afraid" [Matt. 17: 1-6].

On Pentecost Sunday, the disciples were in one room "all with one accord in one place, and suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a mighty rushing wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting." What was the effect on them? "They were all filled with the Holy Ghost and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance" [Acts 2: 1-4].

In the best seller, *The God Chasers*,² Tommy Tenney gives an account of believers (both in biblical and contemporary times) whose passion for God's presence presses them to chase the impossible in the hope that the uncatchable might catch them. He demonstrates that once you have had the experience of God's presence, you will hardly want to let go! Solomon's long sermon and prayer that we shall examine next week confirm Tommy's assertion.

4. Lessons

When Elijah fled from Jezebel, he ran into the wilderness where he desired to die. As he wallowed in self-pity in a cave, the Lord passed by. Elijah was anxious to pour out his mind to Him but God did not manifest Himself in loud ways, such as through the wind or earthquake or fire. Instead, He spoke in a still small voice. He told Elijah what to do and his self-pity disappeared [1 Kgs 19: 1-14].

Shekinah need not be by a cloud or mighty rushing wind or a flashing light. What is important is for you to know the *conditions* under which God manifests Himself in your worship. First, confess your sins and become *sanctified*. Next, worship God as deserving of it [through thanksgiving and praise]. Don't behave as if you only went to church as a beggar or an *Oliver Twist* who is always asking for more! Get to church before the service begins because no dignitary will be happy to arrive before the hosts. You are the one inviting God. Therefore, get there early to confess your sins, offer your thanks and praise, and worship with the other people in love and unity. Then, when God comes in, you will be like one of the 5 wise virgins, who went in with the groom while the 5 foolish ones were still searching for oil for their lamps [Matt. 25: 1-13].

The temple of God need not be only your church. It can be your small family for, as Jesus has said, "where two or three are gathered *together in My name*, there am I in the midst of them" [Matt. 18: 20]. The two parents plus one child make "two or three!" Therefore, the size of your congregation does not matter. What matters is that you are all in spirit to make God's presence immediate.

Finally, your body is the temple of the living God and "as God hath said, I will dwell in them and walk in them, and I will be their God and they shall be My people." Interestingly, God's conditions are "be ye separate" and "touch not the unclean thing" [2 Cor. 6: 16-17]. When God lives in your body, what can be better than that?

Learn to invite God into your worship. It is for your own good!

² Tommy Tenney, *The God Chasers*, Destiny Image 1998