

Last Sunday after Pentecost/Christ the King
Proper 29
Year C

Jeremiah 23:1-6
Psalm 46
Colossians 1:11-20
Luke 23:33-43

Why do you come to church? People have many different motivations for coming to church. Some might be considered frivolous, while others are deeply spiritual. Why do you come?

I have related in the past the story of a friend who attended a large Episcopal Church in Southern California. For her, church was a place to be seen and to see who else showed up. For her, there was very little difference between church and the country club. Church attendance was a fashion, or society, statement.

Other people, especially in larger congregations, might go to hear the music. With a well-trained choir and multiple instrumentalists, church can become a concert with a message. I will admit that I truly enjoy good church music, but I stop short of saying that is why I attend church. Music should enhance worship, not be the center of worship.

There are some Episcopal priests who might attract a following because of their excellent preaching, but they are few. The sermon is not the centerpiece of our worship, unlike in some other denominations. In one church I attended in the past, the rector's sermons seemed to come from some sermon writing service. They were as meaningful for that congregation as the *Times of London* would be for Ozark. The associate priest in that same congregation crafted wonderful, highly intellectual sermons, but one needed to be very close to the pulpit to hear his soft voice. On the other hand, in this diocese, we have some great preachers. Even they would agree that the sermon is not the focus of the service. The sermon has a role in worship, but rarely are Episcopalians attracted by the skill of the preacher.

If all of these features of our worship are not to be the motivating force for attracting people to our church, what should we be seeking on Sunday morning?

The central purpose of worship in the Episcopal Church is our encounter with God. This is best represented by the Eucharist. This is evident in our architecture. The pulpit is not the central feature in the building. The choir loft is frequently hidden in the balcony or behind a screen. It is the altar, the communion table, which is the focal point of our sanctuary. It is there that we experience God in Christ.

Within the celebration of the Eucharist, we experience the life and ministry of Jesus. We hear the words Jesus spoke to His disciples, we visualize the actions taken at the Last Supper, and we experience the grace God extends to us through the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The Eucharist is not just a sacrament of the church, but is the defining action of our faith. We are a

Eucharistic people. It is here that we become one with Jesus in our journey of faith. All of the rest of our time together is to prepare us for this moment.

I challenge each of us to examine how we might enhance our experience of church. While music can draw us deeper into our worship and good preaching can help teach us how to take our experience into the world, it is our encounter with God that should be the central motivating force in bringing us to church each week. As we end one liturgical year and turn toward a new one, let our focus be on God and our relationship with God through Jesus Christ. In a few short weeks, we will again celebrate the beginning of Jesus' life, let us also celebrate a closer walk with God in worship.