

A Glimpse from the past – Intimacy with God

“All your anxiety, all your care,
Bring to the mercy seat, leave it there ...” *

The mercy seat is one of the defining features of any Salvation Army hall. Typically it is a long wooden bench located at the front of the sanctuary and is central to Salvation Army worship. The mercy seat itself has no inherent power, but its function is sacred and, in fact, sacramental. It is a place for prayer or a public declaration of faith – where one can commune with God, whether for the first or the thousandth time.

The mercy seat has its origins in the North American revival movement of the early 19th century. One of the main features of that movement was the call to “come forward” in response to the word of God. First known as the ‘mourners’ bench’, it referred to benches located in front of the speaker or pulpit, where people seeking salvation were invited to come and kneel. They ‘mourned’ for their sins until they were ‘transformed by the “joy of salvation”’. It also became known as the ‘penitent form.’

In his book *The Mercy Seat*, Nigel Bovey notes,

“Over the years the penitent form has become an integral part of Salvationist identity. Millions of people have found salvation at the mercy seat. Millions more have found divine help and nurture. The mercy seat has appeared in different guises – a bench, a chair, a drum, a mat, a pile of coats, a sand sculpture – but its purpose has remained the same.”

And from *The Salvation Army Handbook of Doctrine*:

“We affirm that the mercy seat in our meetings symbolises God’s unremitting call to his people to meet with him. It is not only a place for repentance and forgiveness, but also a place for communion and commitment. Here we may experience a deep awareness of God’s abundant grace and claim his boundless salvation. The mercy seat may be used by anyone, at any time, and particularly in Army meetings when, in response to the proclaimed work, all are invited to share loving and humble communion with him.”

*Salvation Army Songbook, #246 by Edward Henry Joy (1871-1949)



References

Bovey, Nigel

The Mercy Seat

London, The Salvation Army, 1996

Salvation Army

Handbook of Doctrine

London, Salvationist Books, 2010