

Inspiring Worship

*“I have formed this people for myself. They will show forth my praise”
(Isaiah 43:21).*

I am an ordained minister in my own denomination, but I don't come from a strongly liturgical background. It was therefore with mixed feelings that I stood behind the pulpit in *All Saints* Anglican Church in Beirut and led the congregation through the Order of Service for the first time.

O Lord, open our lips

And our mouth shall proclaim your praise.

Blessed are you, sovereign God, ruler and judge of all, to you be praise and glory for ever! May we reflect the light of your glory this day and so be made ready to come into your presence,

Father, Son and Holy Spirit

Blessed be God for ever!

God ever reigns on high.

O come, let us worship.

Looking out over the assembled worshippers, mainly expatriates living and working in Lebanon, I asked myself what this invitation meant in practical terms. The Vicar was a man of God and he was determined to proclaim the love and power of Christ in this land, riven as it was by sectarian warfare for more than a quarter of a century. How did his definition of worship compare with the dozen or so major church groupings represented at *All Saints*? I thought about my own background.

Every church has its liturgy

The church in which I grew up and that which I now called home were not overtly liturgical. And yet they both were. Every church I knew (without exception) reflected histories, beliefs and patterns designed to make worship a relevant and dynamic experience, but followed predictable routes. Like the minister whose form of thanksgiving over a meal was both contemporary and anchored in his past:

“Bless the food upon these dishes

As you blessed the loaves and fishes

Like the sugar in our tea

May we all be stirred by thee.”

Man was created as a worshipper. Fulfilment as Christians is commensurate with our lives being expressions of worship. Having said that, worship is not about us. It is about God (John 4:23, 24). The Bible tells us hundreds of times that He is worthy of our praise. Worship is an expression of love to the Father and thanks to the Son. Whichever liturgy we use, formal or informal, ancient or modern, if the language is understandable and the heart and theology are right, the mind and body will follow and God will be pleased. We can worship God corporately and privately, as long as Jesus is the object. Everything else is false worship.

I've seen some relatively "weird" forms of worship over the years, but I acknowledge that many forms I found "alien" were perfectly acceptable to God. Before we become sententious about form (rather than substance) we personally do not find appealing, let's never forget the words of Jesus about the woman who poured out her fortune anointing him, "She did it for me" (Mark 14:6-9). We may not want to ape forms we observe, but our personal preference does not de-legitimize them in God's eyes.

Let's fast forward the tape and try to situate worship in a contemporary setting. The church that is relevant in the new century will have forms of worship that both exalt God and are fun and meaningful for those involved. True worship will reflect the culture in which it is expressed (subject to what is Biblically acceptable). Everything can and does change. Christian worship is amenable to multifarious modes of expression.

An anthropological view of Christian worship

When I was at university I decided to conduct a study of a neighbourhood church, from a cultural anthropological perspective. I tried to imagine how a newcomer might interpret what was going on when they first entered the sub-culture as a participant observer. What "meanings" would they attach to the forms, symbols, relationships and language used?

From the moment I set foot inside the "sanctuary" (isn't that where rare birds are housed?) I discovered a vocabulary that most people outside the "system" would consider esoteric. Expressions such as, "We claim the blood of Jesus over the meeting", "Welcome to the Body of Christ", "He touched me", "sanctification", "justification", "redemption" and "the glory of God" did not contain a sense of what they denoted for people outside of the clan.

The order of service, with people closing their eyes and lifting up their hands, saying "Thank you Jesus", "Hallelujah", "Glory to God" in loud voices suggested a degree of comfort with the proceedings, on the part of those involved; this was to the exclusion of the uninitiated, like myself. What on earth were they doing? Why did they all do it at the same time? The serving of "communion" (or the "Eucharist") was described by the leader as the "symbols of the body and blood of Christ". They looked like wafers and cordial to me (weren't they supposed to use wine? I wondered what was in the chalice the priest was using!), not flesh and blood.

People sat in rows facing a raised platform. Speakers raised their voices in a form that was redolent of political oratory. The separation between the majority of the people (the spectators) and those in charge suggested functional differences and levels. There was no indication for newcomers as to how long this convocation would last and what program was being followed. There were no clocks, as far as I could see. Great! There was little explanation as to exactly what was going on – the assumption seemed to be that participants knew what was expected of them. In between the songs (some of which were repeated five or six times) someone came around collecting donations. ("Can I have a receipt please?")

At the conclusion of the service the preacher invited strangers to “give their lives to Christ”. Had a visitor been so inclined, this would have meant walking out in front of all these strangers, falling on the ground when touched on the head by one of the church members and speaking a strange language, with everyone else looking on. There is nothing more disconcerting to some enquirers than a whole congregation gawking at their discomfort.

I left with unanswered questions. What, I wondered (as a nascent anthropologist), did people get out of the meeting? What did the different outfits denote? A news sheet handed to me when I first arrived provided details of activities, but some of the technical terms (“Home group”, “baptismal service”, “Power group”) were culture-specific.

Everyone Jesus called, he called publicly. I had no problem with public nature of the appeal *per se*. But I suspect they understood a bit more about what was actually going on than many visitors to institutional churches do today. Church can be alien to newcomers. How relevant was this group to my experiences? How much was I expected to know before participating meaningfully? No one seemed to want to explain the event. A casual visitor could be excused for not knowing what was going on.

To be fair, it was clear to me, as a researcher, that the people whose service I had observed had real faith in God; their worship was meaningful; their faces shone with unmistakable joy. They had what many other people needed. If they could break down what they had and impart it in simple terms, many outsiders would be attracted to share Christian life with them.

Creative worship

Creative, relevant, interesting, understandable and fulfilling worship services are a key element in presenting the Gospel in the modern world. Over recent years in the West, churches that have had high percentages of newcomers have invariably had contemporary styles of music and worship. Where people feel they can “connect” with styles used, identify with the words and be part of the atmosphere, they are more likely to remain (subject to other key indicators, such as making new friends).

Some readers will counter with claims that church life is about how people grow in faith, not just the content and form of the music that characterises their congregations, that Biblical faith is not based on feelings. To a certain extent, I agree. Faith comes from God’s word, from revelation, not a musical instrument or the charisma of a song-leader. However, however just as plants grow best where there is plenty of rain, sunshine and nutrients in good soil, so the environment and vitality of church are important contributors to personal spiritual development. If people feel they can get close to God when they meet with other Christians (ok, I know they are technically not distant from God when they are not at “church”), they are likely to keep coming.

I have encountered a myriad of styles of worship in churches around the world. What “works” in some places does not work in others. Usually, the drivers are cultural, not theological. If we can deal with the cultural nuances we find much progress is possible. Miss the point culturally and we might as

well be on a different planet. Few people are prepared to forsake what they are familiar with in favour of external forms that are extraneous, hard to understand and irrelevant to their lives – no matter how urgent and compelling the message may appear to the presenter.

People from non-church backgrounds have stereotypes that are either confirmed or changed when they walk into a church for the first time. The way they react to styles of worship is also influenced by generational issues. Older people are less likely to be attracted to contemporary Christian music, not because of doctrine but personal preference.

Why worship?

Let's step back and examine for a minute the "why" of worship. "Worship" is common to most of the world's faiths (although Christians tend to sing more than any others). Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, Sikhs, Jains, Satanists and all the rest have worship styles.

"Love the Lord your God and worship only him" (Matthew 4:10). That's what the Book says. We are not to worship worship. It is not to become an end in itself. Worship is not intended to make our church look more attractive (even if we author it), but to make Christ more appealing to a searching world. The Bible says He will not give his praise to graven images.

We worship God because of who He is, for his majesty, greatness, holiness and truth. We also worship for what he has done for us, revealing his mercy, forgiveness, grace, deliverance, protection and faithfulness. God has been good to us. There is no greater love than that expressed when Jesus died for us. He has forgiven our sins, answered our many prayers, provided for us in times of lack, been with us when we felt alone, given us wisdom in difficult situations, guided us when we were lost, healed us when we were sick (unless he had another purpose in allowing a sickness to remain), consoled us in times of grief and given us victory in times of personal struggle "Oh that men would praise the Lord for his goodness and for his wonderful works to the children of men" is the constant refrain of the Psalmist (Psalm 107:8).

There is often tension between being Biblical in our rationale for worship and correct as to content. Some religions are syncretistic, adopting content and styles they see in other faiths. The expression of Christianity in some parts of the world is syncretistic. I have witnessed people in Bolivia faithfully attending mass then going to the shaman to sacrifice a chicken to appease a local spirit. Sometimes the local spirit has a Christian name. Icons feature local deities with "Christian" associations, including the Virgin Mary. There is a temptation to copy what we see in the world and make it our own, to attract people or to get out of denominational ghettos. However, it is simplistic to assert that Christian worship should not sound like the world. Many of the church's most famous hymns adapted tunes that were contemporary in their day.

Church life is not just about people 'coming in', but about individuals growing in faith within the congregation, and living their faith through external activities. Informality in worship styles has a definite relationship to numerical growth and vitality. Satisfaction with musical styles relates to a sense of belonging

and to growth in faith, numbers of newcomers in a congregation, retention of young adults and growth in other areas.

Worship as a way of life

I recently attended a wedding in a denomination I normally consider ultra-conservative. The priest surprised me by praying that we would all go out to “radiate the joy of Christ”. I got to thinking about what he said. Christian witness *is* about radiating the joy the Holy Spirit places in our hearts (Romans 5:5). If it has a Biblical basis and is linked to relevant teaching, creative styles and empowered living it is bound to touch the lives of others.

Worship is liberating, because it changes our outlook. Instead of thinking about ourselves and our circumstances, worship concentrates on the greatness of God. It enables us to rise above negativity and develop thankful hearts. It expands our vision, from our narrow limits to the limitless creator and sustainer of our lives.

One of the things I noticed living in the Middle East was that Arabic is peppered with references to God. Routine daily conversations in the Arabic-speaking world are filled with words of praise. When people meet another, they do not start out by swapping stories, but use standard greetings which in English mean “Thank God”, “Praise be to God” and “God is the greatest”. If they do this in ignorance, how much more should we, who have experienced the life, joy and forgiveness of God make worship a way of life.

In my experience, people will not attend church if it is dull, boring, non-inclusive and unstimulating. Even the best songs, performed with technical expertise, can be “done to death”. Spurgeon once recalled sitting through a lengthy series of expositions about the Epistle to the Hebrews, lamenting that the Hebrews had not kept it to themselves because the series “sadly bored one Gentile lad”. People in a busy society think twice before committing their time to something they do not believe in. If church attendance is voluntary, it is important that the time people set aside to turn up regularly be well invested. It should never be our purpose to slavishly follow patterns that, frankly, bore the congregation. The life of Jesus and the experience of the early church contain no hints that those who left all to follow Jesus found the whole affair boring. Dangerous, yes. Controversial, yes. Boring, no.

Worship is one of the reasons people go, or stop going, to church. The style affects whether or not they are prepared to invite their friends to church. Worship that is appropriate to their culture, age group and socio-economic background will have a positive and satisfying affect on their lives.

If we are called to take the Gospel to the nations and disciple whole peoples, our efforts will be hamstrung to the extent they do not understand what church culture is all about. Given the number of people who have never heard the Gospel explained in terms they could understand, the challenge for the Christianity community is to hit the target the first time. Worship is a useful way of incarnating the message.

“Let everything that has breath praise the Lord (Psalm 150:6).