

Transforming Worship?

Introduction: 'You have not passed this way before' (Joshua 3:4)

In the Book of Joshua, as the people make their way through the desert the officers tell them to follow the ark of the covenant, 'so that you may know the way you should go, for you have not passed this way before.' This is a good place for us to start as we try to understand the church's current situation and the implications for our worshipping life. It may be obvious to us now, but it has taken a while for us to recognise it clearly enough – the simple fact that 'we have not passed this way before'. The world has changed. It is very different from the world in which most churches formed their identities and developed their current patterns of worship. It is time to face this reality.

However, even though many things have changed, there continue to be points of contact between things as they were and things as they are. The scriptures continue to have the ability to tell us truths about today's world and to help us reshape it. But we need to ask: what does it mean to 'follow' the scriptures today? Although worship is concerned with more than this question, it is a question at the heart of worship. The biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann suggests that, when we worship together and engage with the Bible, we ought to be prompted to see reality differently, in the light of God's presence and purposes, and we ought to be glimpsing God's alternative reality – here and now. If, on the other hand, our worship has lost this capacity to enable us to see the world as it may become, something is wrong. So how can we ensure our worship helps us to see and build God's new world?

This quest reflects a particular approach to worship – one in which we might think of God as the ultimate 'critical friend', or something like a heavenly mirror, which is both critic and encourager. In other words, we come to worship to see ourselves and God's world *more clearly*, that is, to see ourselves *in the light of God's love and wisdom* rather than according to our distorted impressions of ourselves and the world. Of course, we should not fool ourselves – we never see ourselves or the world *just as God does*; but the point is that, as we gather together for worship, being as honest as we dare before God and open to God's wisdom through our engagement and conversations with the Bible, *something happens!* We come to see things a little differently; we see ourselves with new insight; we see the world with

renewed vision; we see the world's pain more fully, its brokenness, its violence and inequalities; but, as Brueggemann suggests, *we also begin to see things as they may become*. The 'mirror' of worship does not simply show us things as they currently are; it offers us a reflection or glimpse of God's new world, God's new creation, which sustains our faith, gives us hope, and invigorates our love – for God, self, neighbour and enemy. We worship, because the loving nature of God makes us want to share all that we are with God, our fears as well as our hopes; but through worship we encounter the healing and transforming power of God's love, in the mirror: we see ourselves in our weakness but also with our God-given capacities to participate in God's mission.

Worship is therefore a dynamic event, because it works with our changing experiences of God's changing world and helps us to respond. It also involves some courage, because it confronts us with realities we might rather ignore – that is, it *shakes* us – but also encourages us with God's belief that we can participate in God's actions. As we seek to affirm this dynamism, we need to explore some features of contemporary culture before sketching some implications for our worshipping life.

Pause for reflection

Imagine that churches are like caterpillars! We live in an environment which is not easy for caterpillars, but we just don't seem to be able to change into butterflies. We keep eating, we keep nourishing ourselves in worship with food which satisfies us as caterpillars, but somehow it is not the kind of food which helps us change into butterflies. Or, perhaps we have already cocooned into a chrysalis, we feel safe in our world of worship, but there is no sign that we are developing any further. What kind of radical change is needed for us to fulfil our calling as butterflies? What should we be eating, or doing, in worship to become as attractive as God intends, and to fly?

Our World: with many threads

Sometimes, without realising it, churches can be tempted to assess the world around them as though they are totally separate from it. We seem to point the finger at it, to make assertions about it and its problems, and to judge it for its errors, as though it is a world entirely shaped and inhabited by *other* people and not by us. Instead, we need to appreciate that it is *our* world too and it has always influenced our religious and worshipping life, even in ways we have not noticed or

understood. So how exactly has our culture shaped us and our churches? We need to give this some attention.

But we need to recognise that this has always happened – not only now, in so-called ‘postmodern’ culture, but in the ‘modern’ and ‘pre-modern’ worlds too. We are always affected by our context and culture. For example, the ‘pre-modern’ world, especially before the 17th or 18th centuries, was a world in which religion was the dominant force shaping people’s sense of identity and community, but religion was expressed in particular cultural ways. People accepted the trustworthiness of their religion and it was essentially an influence throughout their lives – but it was largely ‘taken for granted’, so the nature of its influence and the role of the religious leaders were *generally* unquestioned. In other words, people did not tend to challenge the authority of religious leaders:¹ they were *the* interpreters of the tradition. But with the rise of the scientific discipline, the demand for evidence, and the belief that individuals should use their rationality to test ideas, we see the ‘modern’ era emerge. In this enlightened world, people debated the nature of religious texts, argued about the details of history, and aimed to promote human freedom – not least the right to be free from external control, including the obligation to accept the authority of religious tradition. Instead, distinctions were made between those views which can be publicly accepted as reasonable, because they can be proven, and those which are more a matter of personal, or private, opinion. As a result, religious faith was nudged into people’s private worlds, since so many of its ideas cannot be proven.

We should not underestimate the ways in which these wider cultures have shaped churches and their worshipping lives. The modern world has made it difficult to speak of faith in public, since we accept it is a matter of personal opinion. There are considerable debates about the nature of history, not least with regards to religion, which are sometimes explored in the media, but many of us feel unable to respond, because churches have not properly prepared us to be involved in such debates – we would rather hold on to our private beliefs without having to face public scrutiny. So our faith is reduced to something hidden inside our heads, which we have little confidence to articulate. Our worship encourages this reluctance to speak

¹ Of course, there are exceptions; there were people who did challenge the religious establishments; but by and large, people would accept the interpretations of the tradition by those who represented it officially.

because we are basically expected to sit and listen to 'the expert' and to leave without discussing our various views. Although our own life-experience is the basis of so much personal expertise, we have not been enabled to view it and value it as such.

In effect, it looks as though we worship in a pre-modern bubble, trusting the wisdom of the religious experts, fearful of the modern world's difficult questions about science, history, literature and culture – but in other respects, we have adopted the culture of the modern world, accepting that our faith is a private experience, something personal to each of us, instead of something with public meaning and public implications. Some churches react strongly to this by reasserting their faith publicly, but often in 'modern' terms, by packaging it as a set of ideas to believe or a product to sell.

Meanwhile, another world has been creeping up on us – a long time in the making. It is a world which is wary of 'the big stories' which have traditionally commanded people's respect and it is wary of the authority of 'experts'. It believes it is important to be sceptical: after all, every idea is shaped by its context – so we should be sceptical when anyone tells us that their experience is true for all people. In particular, when a person or a tradition says 'This is the truth for all people', it is often the case that the experience of specific people or groups is being ignored, forgotten or suppressed. So in this 'postmodern' world, there is the recognition that people see and experience the world in many different ways, and that people with various kinds of power use their power to tell us that 'the world has to be this way'. (In other words, some of our assumptions about the world are not so innocent, but are attempts to justify social injustices.) So as much as we see the differences between us, there is also a new longing to heal some of the divisions and rebuild community. To help with this, there is a rediscovery of the power of the old stories – if only they are freed from the 'modern' debates about historical reliability or rationality and we hear them speak as symbolic glimpses of alternative ways of being community. In fact, we are rediscovering how people are shaped by story, rather than being merely rational, and how we are shaped by one another, rather than being merely individuals.

It is even arguable that this emerging culture is better suited to the nature of the Gospel – its inclusion of diverse people and the stories of those who are

disadvantaged; its belief in community rather than individualism; and its criticism of those who use their power to keep others down or out.

In other words, 'postmodern' culture does not reject the use of human rationality, but adds to it, because it recognises that we are complex social creatures shaped by our environment and each other. We discover truth through our relationships with one another – and relationships are at the heart of the Gospel, not only relationship with God, but with one another and with God's whole world. Churches therefore need to blend the pre-modern, the modern and the postmodern, because our culture is itself a blend of many factors – ancient stories, multiple interpretations of them, disciplines of science, psychology and history, affirmations of diversity, and longings for community.

Our Worship: with many threads

Churches are shaped by culture. We live in a world which is a matrix of the pre-modern, the modern and the postmodern, so it is right for us to understand the mix and to offer worship which speaks to it more fully. Here are four implications for our worshipping life which I offer for discussion:

- *1. Different People: Being in Community*

It often looks as though our worship has an assumption hidden behind it – the assumption is that Christians are primarily all good listeners. We are *listeners* in the sense that most of our worship involves our listening to someone speaking; and we are *good* listeners in the sense that it is assumed that we are good at acting on what we hear. So if we want people to get something out of worship, we expect them to be good listeners. But people are much more diverse than that. Many people struggle to learn, grow and change simply by listening (or by singing!); and most people find it hard to act on what they hear. So worship needs to take into account the diversity of people who gather together – not only the *potential* diversity of those who *might* come, but the *actual* diversity of those who *already* come but who are required to conform to the assumption that they are good listeners.

Take the story in Luke 13: 10-17, where Jesus is teaching in the synagogue, but he stops when he notices a woman with a disability. He calls her over and heals her. What is striking about this is that Jesus allows this marginalized woman to disrupt

the congregation's expectations of worship, turning it from an event in which they listen passively to his wisdom into an experience of the transforming power of God's love. Worship has to be disrupted! If it is going to be meaningful to a wider range of people, all of whom are called to be in community with one another, *its conventional patterns must be disrupted*. This disruption must be led by people at the margins – and it must be allowed by us all!

Disrupting worship

Earlier on, I said that, in worship, we are 'shaken' (the term comes from Andrew Shanks). This is because, whenever God reveals Godself to us, we are 'shaken' – like Moses, or like Mary. That is to say, our pre-existing thoughts or views of the world are broken open; we are confronted with the unexpected; we have to make adjustments to our vision of the world. The idea of 'disruption' is no different: it is not so much that we should set about disrupting our worship, but that we should be open to the ways in which *God* shakes or disrupts our worship, not least as God works through other people. If we are not open to such disruption, our worship and mission risk being fossilised; whereas to be open to it is to demonstrate our belief in a God who has not stopped.

- *2. Different Experiences: Being in Solidarity*

Often our worship seems to accept inherited versions of things; we believe what earlier experts taught; we use the same language as those whom we have respected; we focus on the usual Bible passages and accept the conventional wisdom – for example, God is male; there are certain things which cannot be explained but which we must accept as divine mysteries; the miracles mean particular things which are beyond question; though Jesus blessed the poor, he does not urge us to believe the system can be different; and so on. Each church will have its own conventional wisdom, its own tradition of expecting people to assume certain beliefs and to reject others. This is shaped by a pre-modern confidence in the authority of those who preach to us; but it also reflects the modern desire to reduce our faith to a particular set of ideas which our group deems to be acceptable or crucial. The effect is to define our religious faith by certain experiences, certain feelings, certain assumptions, but to exclude many others – simply according to the traditions of our group.

Instead, in a postmodern culture, we need to rediscover bigger pictures, such as: the Bible uses female imagery for God, has many stories in which women play crucial roles, includes profound questioning, not only acceptance, of the way things are, and allows for different readings of reality, the miraculous and the possible. Overall, God will not be reduced to the prejudices of our own group. For example, take the story in Luke 4: 16-30, where Jesus reminds the congregation that God worked through the prophets to bring healing to foreigners – they don't like to hear it, because they want to be comforted in their own world-view, but worship confronts us with a God whose vision and love are bigger than ours. So our language and illustrations need to be inclusive, our hymns and worship resources need to be representative of and in solidarity with the fullness of human experience, drawing from the global Church and reflecting even the more hidden aspects of life and death. Worship needs to reflect honestly the pain, joy and connectedness of God's whole creation, to help people make effective connections between faith, their own lives and the wider world.

- *3. Different Methods: Being in Conversation*

Because we increasingly recognise that people and our experiences of the world are diverse, so it is right for us to find diverse ways of engaging with people – not using only the traditional format of 'the hymn sandwich with a sermon filling', but story-telling, creativity and art, drama, silence, food and so on. Whether this means a mixed diet of worship at the same time each week, or a range of options at different times, this is for each church to decide, according to its situation and resources. But essentially, in a world which is complex and contradictory, we need to be responsive in the way we worship. For example, science is a vital part of contemporary culture (as is history; as is technology; as is economics), so churches ought to help us to engage with the big debates – but worship is also an art-form in itself, something which must appeal not simply to the rational and intellectual aspects of human life, but to our longing for beauty, hope and compassion in the face of the world's cruelty, despair and suspicion. Worship should therefore be creative: a moment for people to get in touch with their creativity, rooted in God's creativity. After all, human beings are not brains on sticks; we are whole bodies, called to love God with our whole bodies, so artwork or eating together can be part of worship no less than listening to a sermon. We need to diversify!

At its heart, there is a renewed emphasis on worship as conversation: no longer a passive acceptance of the expert's knowledge, but a communal interaction with the Bible, everyday life and being community together. This approach should help, too, to build people's confidence, so people feel more able to articulate their faith, including their questions, publicly. In Nehemiah 8: 5-12, when the words of scripture are read, there is a whole-body response by the congregation: they weep and they share their food with others. So too, in Acts 2: 43-47 and Acts 4: 32-37, the worshipping community is a genuine community, where songs are sung, bread is broken, and people's needs are met – these elements are intertwined with each other. Worship needs to provide the space for a new quality of conversation – with God, the world around us, its needs, questions and hopes, and our whole lives. 'Postmodern' culture expects our worship to have an *impact*, something which touches us *personally* and *communally*, which is evidently *authentic*, something experienced and lived, in our togetherness.

- *4. Making a Difference: Becoming the Alternative we believe in*

The bottom line, therefore, is that worship needs to make a difference – to our sense of identity, our sense of community, and our own capacity to act in the world. The songs or hymns we sing, the ways in which we engage with scripture, the methods we use to nurture a sense of being community (rather than simply a collection of individuals with ideas hidden in our heads), and the concern we have to demonstrate the implications of faith publicly – all of these things need to be related to everyday experience and the challenge to live and act as Jesus' disciples in the world. If our worship does not help us to live differently, or to hold out to others the possibility of God's alternative reality, what is the point of worship? It must not be merely 'food for thought', but fuel for action.

When Jesus overturned the tables in the courtyard of the Temple, he was not trying to separate the sacred realm from the world of everyday economics. He was demonstrating how his commitment to the sacred nature of life impacts on everyday economics: after all, the Temple was not simply a religious institution but a social and political institution, if not the central economic institution of the nation. The entire system was based on exclusion and exploitation. To confront it and overturn its tables was not about keeping the House of Prayer uncorrupted by everyday things, but was about reasserting the public meaning of the House of Prayer – a house 'for all nations' (Mark 11: 17, Isaiah 56: 7), that is, an open

house – which exposes and overturns exploitation. So, also, in Amos 5: 21-24 (or Isaiah 58), God does not want worship simply for its own sake, to flatter the divine ego, or religious rituals for their own sake, but worship which flows into transforming action.

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