

Together in Hope: Re-thinking worship?

Re-thinking Worship?

Jan Berry

St Marks CRC Press Sheffield

Together in Hope – Resources for Christian Faith Today

This series of resource books is produced by a number of organisations working together to give encouragement and hope to those who seek a credible Christian faith for the twenty-first century.

We hope that these books will be helpful to those individuals and groups, inside and outside of the Church, who are exploring matters of faith and belief.

We are grateful to our authors and encourage others to offer their services.

For further information about the sponsoring organisations please see the back cover. If you wish to contact the editorial group, please email togetherinhope.editor@gmail.com

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ISBN 978-0-9559593-6-3

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Jan Berry's publications include:

'From Privacy to Prophecy' in *The Faith Lives of Women and Girls*, ed. Nicola Slee, Anne Phillips and Fran Porter, Ashgate 2013

Naming God, Granary Press URC/Magnet, 2011

Ritual Making Women: Shaping rites for changing lives, Equinox 2009

Prayers and worship material by Jan Berry in various anthologies, including:

Moments of our nights and days (Liturgies and resources for baptisms, weddings, partnerships, friendships and the journey of life) ed Ruth Burgess, Wild Goose Publications.

Bare Feet and Buttercups Wild Goose Publications 2008

Fire and Bread: Resources for Easter Day to Trinity Sunday Wild Goose Publications 2006

Candles and Conifers and Hay and Stardust, ed. Ruth Burgess Wild Goose Publications 2004

Wrestling and Resting: Exploring stories of spirituality from Britain and Ireland ed. Ruth Harvey CTBI 1999

Gateways of Grace ed. J Lees URC Prayer Handbook 1998-99

Human Rites: Worship Resources for an Age of Change ed. H Ward & J Wild Mowbray 1995

Celebrating Women ed. H Ward, J Wild, & J Morley SPCK 1995

Reflecting Praise ed. J Boyce-Tillman & J Wootton WIT/Stainer & Bell 1993

Bread of Tomorrow ed. J Morley Christian Aid/SPCK 1992

Foreword

For many who seek a credible Christian faith in this twenty-first century, participation in public worship raises challenging questions about the nature of God, the use of language and the very practice and purpose of acts of worship.

Much has been written about prayer and worship over the centuries and there are many helpful insights and resources about liturgy. Yet the difficult issues about language and meaning in worship remain an obstacle for many who would wish to be part of a worshipping community.

In this booklet Jan Berry addresses these issues in a gentle and yet comprehensive rethink about Christian worship. For many in the churches, this booklet will hopefully encourage discussion about the ways in which their offering of worship can speak, with integrity, to modern day believers. For others, the questions raised here might offer hope for ways in which church communities can include those who question, search and yearn for authentic spiritual experiences which speak to them of the love and compassion seen in Jesus.

We are grateful to Jan Berry who has brought her considerable knowledge and experience as a pastor, liturgist and teacher to add to the books in this Together In Hope series.

Adrian Alker

Re-thinking Worship

Contents

1. Introduction
2. Space and Symbol
3. The Language of Worship
4. Sharing at the Table
5. Conclusion : Transforming our worship

1. Introduction

Ask any group of Christians to describe an experience of worship, and you will get a variety of answers. For one person it is the sense of transcendence and mystery in Orthodox liturgy, for another the immediacy and spontaneity of a Pentecostal service. One person will encounter God in the messy playfulness of all-age worship, whilst another will be uplifted by the formality and structure of a sung Eucharist. For some, repeated words and a formal liturgy are 'vain repetition'; for others an informal sharing of bread and wine in groups on the grass in the open is casual and irreverent. And for some, worship is the private sense of prayerfulness of a walk in the mountains, or listening to music in the comfort of their home.

However we understand it, worship has been seen as an essential part of Christian life and discipleship, and corporate worship as the foundation of the church's life. Whatever other activities and programmes make up the life of a congregation, at some point there is usually a gathering which includes prayer and praise, the expounding of Scripture, and the celebration of Eucharist.

Yet for many progressive Christians, the regular worship and liturgy of the church can be problematic in a number of ways.

All too often, the familiar words and imagery raise intellectual questions that remain unanswered. Whilst in our thinking we have left behind the idea of a God 'up there', or miraculous answers to prayer, or manifestations of the supernatural, in worship we find ourselves using words and images that are rooted in a world where we no longer feel at home. Worship seems to invite

us to participate in a form of intellectual dishonesty, where we cannot engage with integrity.

For many people, such as women, people with disabilities, lesbians, gay men and trans people, or people of colour, the primary feeling of worship is exclusion. Women have drawn attention to the exclusive language of 'mankind', 'brotherhood', 'sonship', and the dominance of male imagery for God. Others have challenged the use of language of disability, or of blackness or darkness in negative senses; and often those who are single or in relationships other than heterosexual marriage feel that their experience is invisible and marginalised by the dominance of heterosexual or family images.

Finally, worship that stresses our weaknesses and helplessness before an almighty God can leave us with feelings of guilt and dependency – that somehow we have not done or said all that we should, and that we are worthless, miserable creatures. Rather than leaving us feeling uplifted and encouraged, all too often worship can leave us feeling unheard, our needs unmet, and our sense of self-worth damaged. Sometimes worship should carry a spiritual health warning!

Yet worship should not, and need not, be like this. Worship can inspire us with a sense of the mystery and wonder of the divine, taking us beyond ourselves into a place of beauty and awe. Worship can help to create a sense of belonging and community, strengthening the ties of relationship. Worship can build up our faith, stretching our understanding, and challenging and inspiring us to fresh commitment.

In this booklet let us reflect on what we mean by worship, particularly in relation to the corporate worship and liturgy of the church. We will look at some of the elements of worship, such as space and symbol, language and imagery, to see how they might become more effective in helping us to encounter a sense of the divine and build community. We will explore what it means to share bread and wine in the sacrament of Eucharist, or Communion. Finally we will look at the possibilities for change, and how we might go about exploring the potential for transforming worship in our own contexts.

Each chapter will end with some questions for discussion or reflection, and a suggestion for worship and prayer. These can be used by individuals, or shared within a group. At the end of the booklet you will find suggestions for further reading, and a list of resources that could be used in worship.

What do we mean by worship?

Just as there are many different experiences of worship, so there are many different definitions or ways of understanding what is going on. In this chapter we look at and critique different ways of understanding worship, seeing their strengths and their limitations, and trying to find a way of expressing the purpose and intention of worship that can be helpful to progressive Christians.

We begin by looking at some of the traditional definitions of worship and liturgy, and how they might help or hinder us in understanding what people are doing when they gather for worship.

One of the traditional understandings of the word 'worship' is derived from 'worth-ship'; it is about acknowledging the worth of God. In this

understanding, worship is about recognising the glory and the majesty of a divine being, transcendent and far above us. For many people, this in itself is problematic, and not consistent with the idea of a God who is immanent, alongside and within us, a presence or energy in the world. We need a way of finding meaning in worship which is intellectually congruent with our beliefs.

Another commonly used word is 'liturgy', often used to refer to a set and prescribed form of worship. It is actually derived from two Greek words, 'laos' and 'ergos', and literally means 'the work of the people'. In Paul's use of the word in Romans 12:1 it refers to the whole of our Christian living, which should be our 'work' offered to God. Often however, it seems that worship is removed from the needs, emotions and daily lives of the people in the pews. If our corporate worship is truly to be 'the work of the people' then there needs to be a coherence and connection between what we do and say in church, and the whole of our faithful living and believing.

Worship: honouring God's worth?

One common way of looking at worship is that it is the duty and obligation of humanity; it is what we owe to the God who has created and redeemed us. In this understanding, worship does not have to be relevant or inspiring. It does not matter what we feel, because our worship is what is due to God.

However, there are difficulties with this understanding of worship. It implies a hierarchical and anthropomorphic view of God: a divine being, far removed from us, who demands homage and adoration. In the women's spirituality group I attend, some are reluctant to use the word 'worship' at all,

as it carries so much of this kind of resonance. If we are questioning the existence of a God 'out there', and instead focusing, as the Quakers do, on the sense of a divine spirit or light within humanity, then this definition of worship as homage to an external, superior, transcendent being will have little meaning for us. If it is difficult for us to think of, or image, God in anthropomorphic terms then to think of worship in this way will feel dishonest, and lacking in integrity.

For some people there is a strength in this understanding of worship. For those who belong to a tradition which uses a fixed and constantly-repeated liturgy, there can be a sense of being carried by the familiar words and phrases at times when faith seems low or absent, and prayer difficult or impossible. I remember, as a Baptist student, occasionally attending an Orthodox church. On one occasion a member of the congregation said to us: 'In your tradition, the service can be a success or a failure, depending on the preacher; with us, the liturgy just happens, it just is'. Whilst it may seem to some to be a dishonest restriction, the sense of a liturgy that 'just is' and that does not depend on our feelings and state of mind may offer a secure framework to others.

Worship: nurturing the believer?

Another way of looking at worship is more subjective, placing an emphasis on its value for the worshipper. Worship is about strengthening and nurturing faith, about building relationships and community with other believers, so that we go out feeling inspired and challenged for our daily living. This, I suspect, is what people mean when they talk about worship 'charging the batteries'! In this model, worship is primarily about what happens

internally for the believer: it is an attitude of mind and heart. If worship is not inspirational, then either this is a failing on the part of the Christian worshipper, or it means the worship is somehow not spiritual, but empty and mechanical. In this understanding of worship, it is important that the worship is relevant for those who are there, meaningful and accessible to them.

I suspect that many would have sympathy with this perspective, in that we hope to find worship helpful or meaningful in some way. However, to view worship solely in this way makes it dependent on the person leading or planning the worship, or on the elements within it which appeal to particular individuals. It is very subjective, and can lead almost to a consumer attitude to worship, with people shopping around to find church communities and congregations where the worship is congenial to them.

Each of these understandings of worship has something in its favour. There are times when the corporate liturgy of the church can carry us through times of doubt and difficulty, when 'going through the motions' is all that is possible for us; and we are held by the worship and prayer of the community of faith. Equally there are times when we find inspiration, comfort or challenge in the words of a prayer, or in the familiarity of a well-loved hymn. But both have their weaknesses too, and raise questions for us about whether we can actually participate in worship with integrity.

Worship as connection

I would like to propose another way of looking at worship, which is about connection. In this way of looking at it, worship becomes about helping us to feel a sense of connection - at a number of different levels. First of all,

worship should help us connect with whatever we understand of the divine. Whether we believe in a transcendent deity, who is beyond our understanding and comprehension, or whether we affirm that sense of the divine within everyone, worship and prayer at its best will help us discover that sense of mystery and presence. Secondly, worship should help us connect with what is going on within ourselves: it needs to speak to our hopes and fears, our dreams and anxieties, our longings for a better life and a more just world. And thirdly, such worship should not remain inward looking, but should also help to strengthen and nurture our sense of connection with the world around us, both in terms of our immediate relationships, and the social and global issues which confront us.

This sense of connection is constantly there; it is like breathing, part of our living and existing in the world. But like breathing, there are times when it is particularly helpful to be aware of it. Worship and prayer at its best is about cultivating and focusing on that sense of connection which undergirds our lived faith.

The relationship of worship and belief

Underlying this discussion of worship is another fundamental issue about the relationship between worship and belief.

The phrase 'lex orandi, lex credendi' - as we pray, so we believe (literally, 'the law of praying, the law of believing') dates back to the patristic period and has been used in liturgical scholarship to denote the way in which theology influences and affects our faith. In other words, what people say, sing and do in worship will affect and shape their theology; and I would argue that when

words are wedded to ritual action or to music, their effect is even more profound, working at a level that is deeper than the conscious cerebral understanding.

The use of this phrase for the relation of theology to worship can be interpreted in two ways.

Traditionally, it has been understood to mean that liturgical texts must be closely scrutinized for their adherence to correct or sound doctrine. Often texts are produced by liturgical commissions and approved by ecclesial authority before they are issued for regular use by congregations. In traditions which do not use set texts there are often unwritten rules and norms about what is acceptable theologically in worship; for example, attempts to change the dominance of male language and imagery for God meet resistance on the grounds that this is theologically wrong or even heresy. In this understanding of 'lex orandi, lex credendi', it is restrictive; it is a way of ensuring that correct, or approved or authorized theological concepts are enshrined in the liturgy in such a way that they become embedded in the minds and hearts of worshippers.

But there is another more dynamic way of interpreting 'lex orandi, lex credendi'. In this understanding, liturgy is an active process of shaping theology. Rather than a vehicle for conveying received texts or norms, liturgy is seen as engaging with scripture and human story, with sacrament and experience, in an interactive and dynamic process of negotiation. Alternative forms of worship and liturgy emerging in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries are constructing and shaping theology for a post-modern generation. In some instances this may be a conscious and intentional process,

in others it may be a half-realised search for words and images that make sense of Gospel story and divine activity for a particular context or congregation. Either way, the theology is not pre-formed and handed down, but is emerging from the experience of searching for God in new ways of worship and prayer. Our worship therefore becomes a way of 'doing theology'. New concepts and images of God, new ways of speaking about the life and work of Jesus, new understandings of the Spirit's working amongst us, emerge in the process of transforming and constructing liturgy. In this way liturgy really can become 'the work of the people', as we engage in the dynamic creative process of constructing theology.

Conclusion

No one way of thinking about worship will speak to each individual's need. Some will want to stress the objective nature of worship, but seek to find ways in which they can express honour to God without compromising our questions and beliefs. Others will want to emphasize worship as the source of inspiration and challenge, affirming the individual and creating community. For some, seeking a sense of connection with the depths of themselves and the world around them will foster a sense of connection with the divine.

But for all of us, worship has the potential to shape our theology; if we can engage in it with a playful and creative spirit, it can be transformative.

Questions for discussion/reflection

1. Think of a recent experience of worship, whatever that term means to you! What was positive and helpful about it, or what was negative?

2. Which of the understandings of worship described above do you find helpful, and why?
3. How does your usual practice of worship (if you have one) relate to the beliefs you hold? Can you think of any ways in which worship has helped to shape your belief?

A suggestion for worship or prayer

Take some time to think about what gives you a sense of the divine: relationships, music, art, nature. Find moments when you can pause to focus on that, developing your awareness and strengthening the sense of connectedness.

2. Space and symbol

I was brought up in a tradition that always stressed, 'The church is the people, not the building'. The words 'For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there amongst them' (Matt 18:20) were often used to remind us that location and numbers were not important, and that God's people could gather together to worship anywhere, at any time.

And yet I have become increasingly aware of the importance of space. If we take seriously the idea of incarnation, of the Word made flesh, then we must see our bodies and our senses as holy; they are part of the flesh that God in Christ takes on. Incarnation is not a once-and-for-all, unique event, but a story and an image of the way God dwells with us in our embodied world.

Sacred space

The concept of 'sacred space' is an ancient and enduring one. In the Old Testament we find sacred stones put up to mark encounters with God, the sense of God's presence in the Ark, and then in the Temple. Other religions have their sacred places and temples, and stone circles and monuments such as Stonehenge speak of the sense of the sacred in cultic ritual. In the early days of Christianity we find a separation from temple and synagogue as people gathered for worship in homes. But by the third century Christians were beginning to construct buildings specifically for the purpose of worship (White 1997:75). When Christianity became recognised by the Roman Empire, these buildings began to take the form of the Roman basilica, with its nave and aisles, with its raised dais for the priest, assuming the position of power as the

Roman magistrate had done. Such architecture still determines the form and shape of many of our church buildings today.

However, the concept of 'sacred space' goes beyond buildings. For some, buildings are important; the architecture and art of a great Cathedral can speak of the majesty and greatness of God. Others will find more of a sense of divine presence in nature: on the mountain tops, or by a still lake, or experiencing the constant movement of waves crashing on a shore.

When I visited Israel/Palestine, we were taken to many of the sacred sites in Jerusalem and Bethlehem. I found myself unmoved by the crowds in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, or by the silver star marking the (supposed) place of Jesus' birth. But walking down the Mount of Olives, and looking out of the window of the tiny 'Dominus Flevit' (The Lord wept) chapel over Jerusalem, I could imagine Jesus weeping over this divided city. Walking down the Mount of Beatitudes and by the shore of Lake Galilee helped me recall the familiar stories, and brought them to life in my imagination.

So what makes space 'sacred' for us? Sometimes it is the beauty - of a landscape, or a building - that inspires a sense of awe and wonder, of transcendence, helping us to catch a glimpse of something beyond ourselves that we may choose to name as divine. Sometimes it is the memories or associations that the place holds for us: the memory of a significant occasion or moment in our own personal journey. Sometimes it is because a place has been a place of prayer and pilgrimage for generations, so that the very air seems to resonate with the faith of people who have gone before. Sometimes it is the quiet and peacefulness that allows us to retreat, to draw away from the noise and bustle and the constant demands of everyday life.

The word 'sacred' carries with it the notion of something set apart, holy in a way that is different from the mundane experience of our everyday living. However, there is a difficulty with this; surely God or the divine is in every place, and part of our day-to-day living? There seems to be a tension between a belief in an omnipresent God or divine spirit, and the notion of special places, set apart and in some way special or different. But as human beings, perhaps we need that focusing of God's presence in particular times or places. Just as a piece of glass can focus and concentrate the sun's light, so the divine light within becomes focused in places that move or inspire us, or have been intentionally designated as places of worship and prayer. They do not guarantee God's presence in a way that other places do not, but they offer that opportunity for encounter, of stripping away the barriers and the distractions, so that we can make that connection with what is at the root and ground of our very being. Of course we can encounter God in the midst of a crowded city or a derelict street; but there are places that are, in the words of George Macleod in describing Iona, 'thin' places, where the separation between earth and heaven seems less, and we experience a sense of the transcendent.

Symbol and symbolic action

Just as some places take on something of the sacred, so the way they are laid out, and the symbols and the images that are used, can help to convey a sense of the sacred. The structure and architecture of our buildings can speak of our concept of God; the magnificence or height or grandeur of a building may reflect a concept of a powerful, hierarchical God. Traditionally, many church buildings have been designed in such a way that they seem to point upwards: a spire or a steeple pointing to the heavens, an aisle leading up to the

altar. But writers such as Lesley Northup, (Northup, 1997) in writing of women's ritual, talks of the distinction between vertical and horizontal space; the vertical is linked with understandings of a superior, hierarchical Being, whereas horizontal space stresses relationships with others in worship. So the way the building is laid out and the way we use the space have their effect on the way we understand God and the divine/human relationship.

The symbols that we use in worship are important too. We have the traditional symbols of water, bread and wine, the altar or the Communion table, the pulpit or the lectern, liturgical colours representing the Christian year used for altar cloths or vestments. But increasingly other symbols are being used in contemporary worship. The traditional practice of lighting candles is an ancient one in many traditions, but now increasingly common in those churches formerly suspicious of symbols; there is a common use of stones or shells or a variety of other objects to symbolise our prayers; and projected images onto a screen, and the use of banners or coloured cloths to symbolise the seasons of the year have become features of worship in many places.

Symbols are important to us because they work at many levels. They appeal to our senses - of sight or sound or smell - and take us beyond forms of worship that are purely cerebral or verbal. A symbol can convey powerfully an idea which would take many words to explain. It can mean different things to different people. However, there is a risk to this too; people may not understand the symbol in the way that is intended. Symbols that have been used for many years can be powerful because of their memories or associations; but they can also become obsolete, so unfamiliar that their

meaning is lost unless it is explained, or so familiar that they lose their power to communicate.

A symbol can also be used as a focus for silence or contemplation. We may hold a stone in our hands, marvelling at the way it has been formed over centuries, or watch the flickering flame of a candle. Our senses of touch and sight come into play, to help us focus our mental and spiritual energy, concentrating it and just 'being' in the moment.

The symbol 'participates in that to which it points' (Tillich, 1957). Whilst the candle is not literally the light of Christ, it participates in that light and conveys it to us. When we talk lightly of something being 'just symbolic', we are disregarding the power of the symbol to help us make that connection with our sense of the divine. This means that our symbols need to be congruent; there needs to be a connection, that we can recognise and affirm, between the symbolic object and the meaning it is hoped to convey.

Symbolic action is also a powerful vehicle for our worship. Many of us can remember being told to 'close your eyes and put your hands together' for prayer. This may have come to seem an empty formality, but nevertheless taking up a bodily posture is a ritual action that can bring about the emotion or state of mind we are wishing to enter. So kneeling may suggest devotion, respect, and obedience; or it may have uncomfortable connotations of submission and subjection. Opening our hands for prayer, or standing with upraised arms for praise, will be helpful to some. Ritual, and symbolic action, is performative: in doing an action, we are participating in bringing about a desired result.

In our worship the creative arts can work in similar ways to enhance our experience of connectedness with another realm. Art (whether painting, banners, sculpture or installation) appeals to the visual, and can take us beyond ourselves. Movement, dance and drama can be used to portray meaning in embodied form. Music can lift us beyond the immediate moment and comfort, inspire or challenge us, evoking powerful feelings and memories. In the past the use of the creative arts required skills and resources not available in many congregations, but modern technology has opened up a range of different possibilities and resources to enrich our worship.

Conclusion

Sacred space, symbols and symbolic action - all point to the reality that our worship is embodied. We may seek to worship 'in spirit and in truth' (John 4:24) but we are physical, embodied human beings, and the worship or prayer of our spirits is expressed and to a certain extent shaped by what we do with our bodies. Finding a place that helps us feel a sense of connection, using symbols and symbolic action to help us sense the divine, is an embodiment of our worship.

Ideas for discussion/reflection

1. Focus on a place that is special, or sacred, for you. What makes it so? Is that sense of sacredness, or specialness, something that can help you in your worship?
2. If you are meeting regularly as a group, suggest the week before that everyone brings an object which has symbolic value for them. Share

these objects and their stories in the group; then discuss what symbols or symbolic action you find helpful in worship.

Suggestion for worship or prayer

If you are on your own, spend some time in silence, focusing on a candle or a cross, or a natural object. In a group, invite people to light candles, or place stones or shells in a bowl, as a sign of their own prayers.

3. The Language of Worship

Whilst our surroundings in worship, and the visual images and symbols we use are important, most forms of worship (with the possible exception of Quaker meetings) depend in part on words. The language we use to convey our prayers and praise, or to seek to understand the Scriptures, is a vital element in our liturgy. In this chapter we explore the ways in which we use words in worship, in our prayers, hymns, readings and expounding of Scripture.

Language as metaphor

I begin by arguing that no language can do justice to God. There is a sense in which God is unknowable, uncontainable in human words and language. Whether we think of God as transcendent Spirit, or the mystery at the depths of our being, we are talking of something that is beyond our grasp. The apophatic tradition in prayer and spirituality stresses the impossibility of finding adequate language for God; all our language is limited, and we can only describe what God is not, or refrain from language altogether and fall into silence. Whilst in the mystic tradition this has been a helpful way into prayer for many, in most of our worship we tend to use words. It is important therefore that we remember the limits of language; the language of worship is metaphorical and poetic. Metaphor indicates something of the reality we are pointing to, without describing it wholly. When we talk of life as a journey, we are not talking about literal movement through space; we are using a metaphor. When we speak of the church as a family, we do not literally mean that people in the church are biologically related; we are using a metaphor to convey the idea that a church has some of the characteristics of a family. When we talk of God as rock, or light, or living water, we are not talking

literally; we are using metaphor. God is not a rock, or light or water, but these words help us to understand something of what God is like. Some metaphors have become so familiar that we no longer recognise them as such, and this has happened with the well-used term of 'Father' for God. This is a metaphor; God is not literally a father in the biological sense, but has some of the characteristics that we associate with fatherhood. To take our metaphorical language literally is a form of idolatry.

Because our metaphors are partial and incomplete, using as many different metaphors as possible can enrich our worship. This is what the Psalmists do. Read through the psalms and you will find a huge range of similes and metaphors for addressing God. There are the familiar ones, such as 'King' and 'Shepherd'; there are also 'Rock', 'Fortress', 'Shield', 'Shadow of wings', 'Light', 'Refuge', 'Mother's Breast', and many more! By piling up metaphors, being creative and playful, we can enrich our worship and expand our consciousness and awareness of who or what the Divine is.

Inclusive language

But we need to look carefully at the metaphors we use, to ensure that they are fully inclusive and relevant.

The importance of inclusive language was first raised by Christian feminists, who drew attention to the dominance of male language and imagery in our worship (reflecting a much wider male dominance in the leadership and hierarchy of the churches). Feminist theology draws attention to the fact that using male language of worshippers is exclusive of women; we are not sons or brothers, and do not feel part of 'mankind'. For some this is simply dismissed

as 'political correctness', but for many it is an issue of social justice, and stems from a genuine desire to create a sense of welcome and inclusion in worship.

If we accept that all of us are made in God's image, then our language for the divine needs to reflect that too. For centuries, our language of the divine has been dominated by male terminology - Father, King, Lord - which does not enable women to see themselves reflected in the divine. Some would argue therefore for gender-neutral terms: God as Friend, or Creator, or Shepherd, for example. The problem with this is that such is the dominance of male imagery for God, it is likely to be heard as male. As one person remarked to me in a seminar, 'Surely God doesn't have a gender. He's neither male nor female, is he?' So we need to balance the male imagery with female imagery, of God as mother, giving birth, as old woman, as Wisdom/Sophia. Sometimes we may want to use words that are linked to activities often done by women – God as weaver, bread maker and so on, although there is a danger that this could lead to a reinforcing of female stereotypes. Some would prefer to avoid personal imagery for the divine altogether, arguing that it leads to an anthropomorphic concept of God which is inappropriate or unhelpful. But so long as we remember all our imagery - personal or impersonal - is metaphorical, using a whole range of metaphors and images may open up new ways of seeing and describing the invisible, indescribable mystery.

Whilst an awareness of inclusive language may begin with gender, there are other ways in which language can be exclusive. Much of our traditional language and imagery associates white and light with goodness and purity, whilst blackness and darkness are used to suggest evil and sin. For many people, this is offensive and perpetuates a kind of implicit racism. Others have

drawn attention to the way in which we use the language of disability so that we are 'blind' to God's love, 'deaf' to God's word, 'paralysed' by sin. Words which are used to describe disability thus become associated with sin and weakness, perpetuating negative connotations of disability and leaving people feeling excluded and alienated.

Other metaphors can cause difficulty because they are militaristic or hierarchical. The language and imagery of kingship, of the Lord of Hosts, of battle and war, have their roots in a picture of God which is contrary to what we see in the Gospel stories of Jesus. Here Jesus comes as one who is alongside the marginalised and oppressed, meeting and eating with the poor and the excluded. Triumphalist language reinforces our social power relations and dynamics; language of victory and overcoming may be appropriate when it expresses the longings of the oppressed, but not when it perpetuates the power and might of those who are dominant or privileged.

Our language is metaphorical, but metaphors can lose their power when they are overused or become obsolete over time. We need to explore ways of creating new metaphors and imagery which are relevant and accessible for the context of our contemporary worship. Imagery of God as shepherd would have meant a lot to people in biblical times, for whom shepherding was a part of daily life; it may have less resonance for contemporary urban Christians. If our worship is to come alive, and be truly accessible and contextual, it needs to reflect the realities of life in a post-modern, technologically developed society.

The form and shape of prayer

A large part of any service of corporate worship is likely to take the form of prayer, which will vary according to the tradition and practice of the church and/or its denomination. Some will be determined by a fixed liturgy; some will use prayers written or chosen from published collections for that particular service, and some will use extemporary prayer. Most prayers will be verbal, but we may also use pictures, images or icons to help us to pray. Whatever our practice, there are a number of elements of prayer which are likely to be present in most services.

There will be prayers of praise, adoration and thanksgiving. These may focus on God's acts in creation, God's saving activity in Christ and in the world, and the blessings of God experienced in everyday living and relationship. For many of us, the idea of adoration of a superior being is difficult; but a sense of wonder and mystery at the universe around us, or of appreciation and thankfulness for moments of joy or gift that we have experienced may help us to capture something of that sense of praise.

Prayers of confession can easily concentrate on our worthlessness and humility before God, leaving us feeling defeated and inadequate. Perhaps it is more helpful to focus on injustice and inequality in the world, recognising our privilege, and the demands of God upon our lives.

Prayers of intercession can be particularly difficult. They suggest an interventionist God who needs to be persuaded to act. Many prayers of intercession avoid this by simply asking for an increase in our own awareness and willingness to act; but there is also a power in simply holding situations

and people in the sense of God's love, seeking to make a connection with the God who suffers with and in the world.

The power of hymns

St. Augustine is reputed to have said, 'He who sings prays twice', and there is certainly a power in singing hymns that goes beyond the power of words alone.

At a workshop for a project on hymnody, I tried to demonstrate how hymns stick in our minds by asking the group to sing (without any copies of the words) the first verse of 'There is a green hill far away'; they went on to sing the whole of the hymn! Now I am sure there were many of us in that group who would be ill at ease with the theory of substitutionary atonement implicit in that hymn, yet, like it or not, those words were embedded in our consciousness from our childhood Sunday school days.

I think there are a number of reasons why hymns remain in our minds in that way.

Firstly, hymns have memories and associations for us. For many people, a particular hymn is significant because it was sung at their wedding or at a family funeral. Some hymns take us back to particular occasions in our lives, and regardless of the actual words or theology, they recall the emotions and significance of that time.

Secondly, hymns use rhyme and rhythm to make them memorable. Some, such as modern worship songs or choruses, or Taizé chants, also use repetition. The metric structure and the rhyme scheme, although we may not

be consciously aware of them as we are singing, help the words to become embedded in our minds.

These two factors can of course apply to any repeated piece of liturgy (the 23rd Psalm, or the Lord's Prayer, for example) but thirdly, hymns carry an added power in the music. Music works at a less cerebral level to affect our emotions and mood. Words become wedded to familiar and well-loved tunes; just think of the outcry if an organist or leader of worship tries to introduce a new tune to a well-loved hymn!

And finally, singing is an embodied and usually (apart from singing in the bath!) a corporate act. We stand as a body of people, as a group, using our bodies and our breath, in order to sing.

For all these reasons, hymns have a power to move and inspire us. But like symbolic action, they are performative ; they do not only express our emotions, our faith and our theology, they are constructive. Years ago the principal of my theological college told us, 'Congregations get most of their theology from the hymn book' and over the years I have come to realise how right he was! This means that the choice of hymns is important; we can absorb theological ideas and images without consciously questioning them, or hymns can stretch and challenge our understanding. Many contemporary hymns seek to do just that, and technology makes it easy for us to access and use new material.

Sharing the Word

What about the place of the Bible in worship? We talk of services of Word and Sacrament, and we will look at the sacrament of the Eucharist, or

Holy Communion, in the next chapter, but the reading and exposition of the Bible plays a large part in most services of worship.

Many churches follow a lectionary, in order to ensure that major books and themes of Scripture are covered throughout the church year, rather than depending on the inspiration (or whim or hobby-horse!) of the preacher. For some, however, this is seen as placing constraints on the freedom of the Spirit, or the ability of the preacher to discern what is most relevant for a specific congregation on a particular occasion. The selection of lectionary passages in itself can have some serious omissions; difficult or challenging passages can be ignored. Sometimes the links between passages can be obscure and difficult to see.

In addition to the reading of Scripture, many questions are raised for progressive Christians. Preaching can seem a didactic, authoritarian mode of engaging with Biblical passages. However, it need not be so. A skilled preacher can retell the story, incorporating the insights of critical scholarship, in a way that invites a congregation on a journey of discovery. Preaching can be inductive, rather than deductive, helping people to find meaning in passages or text that they can apply and work with in their own lives. Alternative forms of worship, such as cafe-style worship, may well be experimenting with different ways of engaging with the biblical texts.

Preaching need not be the only way of engaging with Scripture. Bible studies, discussions, all-age activities that work with particular images or stories, can enable people to engage with biblical passages in new ways. Other readings, stories, and resources such as film or music may be used too, to engage people's imagination and bring the message to life. What is

important is that however it happens, a dialogue opens up between the experience of the people and the biblical text, allowing questions to be raised and meaning to emerge.

Conclusion

The language of worship takes many forms in prayers and hymns, music and preaching, stories and images. What is needed for our worship to be contextual, relevant and inclusive is a creative and playful approach, and a willingness to try out new ways, words and images to bring worship to life.

Questions for discussion

1. Are there occasions when you have felt excluded, alienated or untouched in worship?
2. What helps to give you a sense of engagement or being included?
3. What is your favourite hymn, and why have you chosen it? Now look carefully at the words; how closely do they express your faith and theology?

Suggestion for worship or prayer

Write your own prayer. It may be one of thanks, or confession, or a prayer of concern for the needs of others. You may like to include a simple response that others can join in.

4. Sharing at the Table

Most of our traditions of worship (with the exception of the Quakers and the Salvation Army) include, in some form or another, the sacrament of sharing bread and wine. Whether it is referred to as Holy Communion or Eucharist, the Lord's Supper or the Breaking of Bread, sharing bread and wine in obedience to the words of Jesus at the Last Supper is seen as a central act of worship. It is in most Christian traditions regarded as a sacrament and a command from Jesus, and so should be a sign of unity. Yet it has probably caused more division, in terms of its significance, who can preside and who can partake, than any other Christian practice.

I do not want in this chapter to rehearse the arguments about transubstantiation, consubstantiation, real presence or memorial meal, nor the arguments about the authority to preside. Rather I want to explore how, whatever our tradition, we can find meaning which is consistent with an open, questioning approach to faith, and which will allow us to share at the table with integrity. This is something that not all of us find easy.

The language of sacrifice so often associated with communion, the imagery of the blood of Christ, implies for many a substitutionary understanding of atonement in which an angry deity (the Father) needs to be placated and reconciled with humanity through the sacrificial death of an innocent victim (His Son). Such imagery is difficult if not offensive to many within progressive Christianity. However, it is not the only way of understanding what we are doing when we share bread and wine.

The power of memory

We can begin with the idea of memory – which is embedded in the familiar words of the narrative of the institution (I Corinthians 11:23-26) and the Gospel stories. For some traditions this is the central meaning of this meal; it is a memorial, carried out in obedience to Christ. For others this is to reduce it to a ‘mere memorial’. We need, however, to do full justice to the weight given to the word ‘remember’ in the biblical languages. To remember is not simply to look back and to recall, but to live something again, to re-present it in such a way that we are reliving the original experience. This is the sense in which the Jewish people remember the Passover, as if they too are living through that experience of liberation and freedom. When God remembers his people in the OT texts, such remembrance involves action; it is the prelude to God’s saving activity. So when we remember the life and death of Jesus in communion we are not simply recalling the story - we are placing ourselves within it. So the death and resurrection becomes not a once-for-all sacrifice, but an ongoing picture of God’s mission in the world, a mission which we become part of when we share bread and wine.

Cross and resurrection

What does it mean to talk of the death and resurrection of Jesus in the world today? If we are to reject the idea of a once-for-all sacrifice, how do we interpret the cross?

On the cross many Christians see God suffering in Christ. For them this is not a once-for-all event, but can be a picture of how God shares in the suffering of the world: the brokenness of the bread represents the brokenness of humanity, the shed blood reminds us of the violence of wars and abuse.

When we speak of the body and blood of Christ, we are speaking of a God who is Emmanuel, God-with-us in the suffering of the world. When we share in the bread and wine, we are affirming our solidarity with those who suffer and are oppressed.

The sacrament of Communion also includes a celebration of resurrection: it is Eucharist, a thanksgiving. So whilst we remember the suffering of the world, we also proclaim the hope of resurrection, that somehow, now in our present living and witness but not yet fully realised, love is stronger than hate, life stronger than death.

A shared meal

The meal that Jesus shares with his friends in the Gospel stories has its roots in the Passover - a celebration of liberation. So the bread and wine we share has a political dimension to it; it is a proclamation of liberation and justice. It recalls too other meals Jesus shared - with the sinners and the tax-gatherers, those who were marginalised and excluded. So the Eucharist should be a meal of inclusion – when we gather around the table the invitation is, or should be (!) open to all. It is a table of welcome and hospitality.

It is also a table at which we share; Communion is a corporate act. Although in some traditions it has been common in the past to talk of ‘making my communion’, increasingly partaking of the bread and wine is seen not as an individualistic act of devotion, but as relational, bringing people together around a table. Sometimes this will be expressed in the layout of the building, with an altar placed in the centre of the congregation, or with the community gathered around a table. The sharing of the peace expresses this too; we

cannot come to the table unless we have first made peace with one another. As one body, we share in the body of Christ. Just as the death of Jesus is embodied in the suffering of the world, so the life and mission of Jesus is embodied in the community of faith. The bread that we break is for us the body of Christ, but as we partake of that bread, so we renew ourselves as the body of Christ. Christ is incarnated (embodied, made flesh) in our living as we share the bread which is his body, and go out into the world to share the welcome, the grace and the justice of Christ.

A sacramental act

Communion, or Eucharist, is often referred to as a sacrament, an act in which God is uniquely present, and in which God's grace is conveyed. One of the reasons Quakers do not observe Communion is that for them every meal is a sacrament. There is a strength in this assertion; just as God is in every place, so God is present in every relationship, in every meal, at every table. But just as some places become special and sacred, so the everyday act of sharing food and drink, when carried out consciously and intentionally, becomes sacred for us.

Symbolic acts can be performative: they bring about the state that they signify. Because sharing bread and wine is a powerful, embodied symbolic act, it has the power to recreate us as the body of Christ. However we understand the activity of the Spirit in the sharing of bread and wine, as Christians we affirm that God is present in a particular way. The bread and wine become for us the body and blood of Christ.

There is a sense in which we can see the whole universe as sacramental. Every part of creation, every human relationship, every human activity has the potential to convey something of the presence and grace of God. By taking an everyday activity - eating and drinking together - we focus that presence of God in a particular embodied act.

Conclusion

Much of the language and imagery associated with Communion, or Eucharist, draws on a sacrificial world view. But if we focus on the roots in Passover and the simple act of friends sharing food together, we are drawn into a communal meal of hospitality, solidarity, justice and hope. Finding language and imagery that can express this is a major challenge for contemporary progressive liturgy.

Questions/further reflection

1. What do the various terms for sharing bread and wine (Eucharist, Communion, Lord's Supper, Memorial) mean to you? Which do you find most helpful, and why?

2. In your own tradition, how inclusive is the practice of sharing bread and wine?

Suggestion for worship or prayer

Take a piece of bread and break it, sharing it with others if you are in a group. As you do so, remember situations where you see God sharing in the suffering of the world. Turn these thoughts into prayer in whatever way is helpful for you; this may be silence, spoken words or a simple spoken or sung response.

Construct a form of communion that would work in your own context.

5. Conclusion: Transforming our worship

In this booklet I have tried to set out ways of understanding the corporate worship of the church which will help progressive Christians find meaning and significance in this central activity of the community of faith. There are ways of sharing in worship and prayer which can be honest and enable us to retain our integrity; we can be inclusive and welcoming, developing a sense of community and belonging; we can leave worship feeling encouraged and uplifted for our daily living.

Our worship can be inclusive, liberating, playful and imaginative. But all too often we are stuck with a tradition of worship which is resistant to change, and which feels stifling and oppressive. How do we begin to transform our worship so that it becomes transformative of our life and faith?

Liturgy as the people's work.

If you are in a situation where you have some responsibility and freedom for the pattern of worship, for example if you are ordained, or a lay preacher or leader of worship, then this is a relatively simple process. There are any number of resources for worship (see the resources page for some suggestions) and with the modern technology of the internet, photocopier and data projector they can easily be made available to the congregation (although do beware of copyright restrictions and the need for appropriate acknowledgement).

Of course there will be resistance. Sometimes it is more effective to move slowly, introducing one new element at a time, but keeping something that is familiar (new words of a hymn to an existing tune for example, or a discussion instead of a sermon, but within the usual structure and framework). Special services celebrating the major Christian festivals, or all-age worship, can also offer opportunities for experimenting with more creative forms of worship.

The movement to create 'fresh expressions' of church, as part of our mission, can also offer opportunities. Sadly, some forms of this are simply doing the same old thing in a different setting, but alternative worship, cafe church, messy church and Godly play are all seeking to engage people in worship that will be creative, relevant and inclusive. Not all 'fresh expressions' will have a theology that is congruent with progressive Christianity, but many, in seeking to reach people outside the church, are rethinking language and imagery in a way that is also helpful to many dissatisfied with traditional forms.

Community or exodus?

What if you are in a situation where the liturgy is fixed, and there is resistance to any change? Sometimes people remain in such a situation for the sake of community; relationships have been formed over the years, and memories are strong. That sense of belonging can sustain us in spite of words and images that seem irrelevant or outdated. Sometimes the liturgy can carry us in that awareness of other people's faith: the communion of saints extended in time and space, regardless of our individual questions and doubts.

Sometimes it is possible to find opportunities to influence the pattern of worship – by introducing new hymns or different practices for intercessory prayers for example – or to find opportunities for prayer outside the main corporate worship of your church, in prayer groups or ‘fresh expressions’. It may be possible to find ways of exploration and creativity that can go alongside the more traditional patterns.

For some, however, remaining in a pattern of worship that feels irrelevant, exclusive, or even oppressive, ceases to be an option. Many women have left the church because they can no longer tolerate exclusive language and the dominance of male imagery. The imagery of exodus, of leaving something that is restrictive and oppressive, is powerful; but for many, as in the biblical narrative, exodus leads to a wilderness, wandering without a fixed point of reference. That can be freeing, but also disorientating, often leading to a sense of isolation.

So people may turn to those traditions that allow more freedom in worship and less insistence on formal adherence to dogma, such as the Quakers, with their silence in meeting, and their commitment to justice and peace, or to the Unitarians, with their emphasis on individual understanding and conscience. Sometimes people will keep their allegiance to their own community of faith, but take opportunities to worship elsewhere as and when they can.

Others will find that sense of connection in nature, or in the creative arts – poetry or music, painting or sculpture. Finding moments of awareness and presence outside of church can sometimes help us to sustain regular or

occasional church attendance for the sake of community, whilst our own spirituality is nourished elsewhere.

Worship in spirit and in truth

However we seek to worship, and however we understand that word, it remains important for us to keep our integrity. Those who lead worship have a particular responsibility to be true to their own convictions, but also to ensure that worship will not alienate or exclude others. Worship that is not true to our deepest convictions, that does not fire our passion for justice, that is not honouring of the glimpses of the divine we see in the world, will not sustain us. We need to worship in spirit and in truth.

Questions for discussion or reflection

1. Can you think of one thing in the regular worship of your own tradition that you would like to change? Can you see any possibilities for doing this?

2. Are there any ways in which you could influence the pattern of worship in your own context?

3. If you feel there are no possibilities for change, what is it that keeps you within that particular congregation or community of faith?

Suggestions for worship or prayer

Find an opportunity to participate in a form of worship that is unfamiliar to you. If you are part of a group, reflect together on the experience

afterwards. Is there anything from this tradition of worship that you could learn from or incorporate into your own practice?

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Eggs and ashes: Practical and liturgical resources for Lent and Holy Week

Fire and Bread: Resources for Easter Day to Trinity Sunday

Bare Feet and Buttercups: Resources for Ordinary Time

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Collections of hymns by Fred Kaan, John Bell, Andrew Pratt, June Boyce-Tillman and other contemporary hymn and song writers can be purchased via various online booksellers

Collections of hymns and songs from Wild Goose publications – see www.ionabooks.com

Liturgies and prayers by Rex Hunt, a leading Australian progressive minister and writer can be found at: <http://www.rexaehuntprogressive.com>

Mainstream downloadable worship resources (which incur charges) from: www.theworshipcloud.com

The websites of the Together in Hope sponsoring organisations Modern Church and PCN Britain also have liturgy resources which you may find helpful.