

'Developing Progressive Liturgies': Whose words are they anyway?

As presented at the PCN Britain weekend, Glenfalls, June 2013

Opening words:

Sitting in the back row
of a couple of thousand years
makes it very hard
to see what's happening.
Some say God's come to save us.
Some say our long wait is over.
But, from here I can't even see what God looks like.
There's too much time between us
and too much noise,
like crackle on a long distance line.
So I'll need to find some other way –
God will need to find some other way –
for me to sit today in the presence of Holiness,
some other way...

(Gretta Vosper, *'Holy Breath, Prayers for Worship and Reflection'*, p.13 (author of *'With or Without God: Why the way we live is more important than what we believe.'* She is the minister at West Hill United Church and founder of the Canadian Centre for Progressive Christianity.)

Language is a huge issue within progressive communities of faith. Not so long ago, gender exclusivity was the biggest language problem the church faced so many hymns, prayers, and sermons were rewritten to become more gender inclusive.

But, what do we do when almost everything we say, pray and sing about points us to ancient images and beliefs that many no longer hold as literally/ultimately true?

Burning Question:

Where can churches find liturgical resources with creative, engaging and meaningful alternatives to the current patriarchal, supernatural language and symbolism?

But first some definitions and a serious health warning!

Definition of liturgy:

A liturgy is a form or formulary (ritual) according to which the customary public worship is done by a specific religious group, according to its particular traditions, or a more precise term that distinguishes between those religious groups that believe their ritual requires the "people" to do the "work" of responding to the priest, and those that do not [hence leitourgia = work of the people].

Origin, mid 16th century: via French or late Latin from the Greek *'leitourgia'* meaning **'public service, worship of the gods'**...

As a religious phenomenon, liturgy is generally a communal response to the sacred through activity reflecting praise, thanksgiving, supplication, or repentance.

Thus, even the *open* or *waiting* worship of Quakers is liturgical, since the waiting itself until the Holy Spirit moves individuals to speak is a prescribed form of Quaker worship, sometimes referred to as "the liturgy of silence." Typically in Christianity, however, the term "the liturgy" normally refers to a standardized order of events observed during a religious service, be it a sacramental service or a service of public prayer.

Stephen Mitchell suggests that the 'rituals of faith' (responses to the sacred) are worth bothering with, 'in so far as they fire our imaginations and empower us to work through the issues that face all of us as human beings'.

[<http://www.sofn.org.uk/pages/agendaforfaith.html>]

A fundamental of human existence [because we are self-aware/self-consciousness], is the urge to determine what is (already) sacred, and/or in the future, what should be made 'sacred', and this takes place in a broad and rich context that embraces the 'when', 'why' and 'how' of human 'being'.

Rituals, whether as liturgical activity or as everyday routines, define and call into question 'who' we are and 'what' we are about.

Health warning!

All rituals/liturgical activity are powerful, be they responses to the sacred or actions that make up the mundane humdrum of everyday existence. **The rituals of faith (liturgies) can empower and liberate people just as easily as they can prohibit, enslave, and destroy others.**

Some rituals are uplifting and life giving whilst others are toxic with deadly consequences. This is as true of the rituals, the symbols and liturgies of traditional mainstream Christianity as we know it today in Britain, as it is of any other kind of ritualistic or symbolic activity.

Can we step aside from the traditional words?

After much scholarly research, Paul Bradshaw (Professor of Liturgy in the States) in his book, 'Search for the Origins of Christian Worship' [SPCK, 2002] concludes that:

'Too often in the past, over-confident assertions have been made about the nature of Christian worship in the first century on the basis of false assumptions and methods, or of dogmatic rather than historical criteria. There is relatively little about which we can be sure with regard to this subject, and so the New Testament generally cannot provide the firm foundation from which to project later liturgical developments that it has frequently been thought to give. We must therefore be content to remain agnostic about many of the roots of Christian worship practices, which we observe clearly for the first time in the following centuries.'

For example: 'there is a question that asks if the Eucharist ever conformed to the pattern presented in the New Testament narratives of the Last Supper, in which the bread and cup ritual are separated by the meal. It must be remembered that we possess no evidence at all for such a practice: it is simply inferred from the narratives. But that is to assume that the narratives once functioned as the detailed 'script' or *ordo* for the community's celebration and not simply as aetiological stories, and that maybe a mistake.'

And in case you're wondering: an etiological narrative is an imaginative story triggered by a question about how (or why) something came to be in the world. An etiological narrative offers a mythic explanation for the origin of something (as opposed to a historical or scientific explanation) and thus frees an individual or culture from defining something in strictly historical or scientific terms. In other words, an etiological narrative gives reign to poetry, dream states, imagination, and associative creativity. It is the language of origins liberated from the constraints of history and science.

So, whose words are they anyway?

I suggest that these words are the ageless chants of humanity, phrased and rephrased in the vernacular of living communities to express the angst, the longings and hopes, alongside the fears and shortcomings of humanity. This is an ongoing process and yesterdays words may be meaningless to present and future generations. But what are these words? They are the words of faith (often set into liturgical settings) that human beings need to speak afresh in each and every generation.

There seems to be a perpetual human need to celebrate 'a faith' in 'an benevolent other', to reinforce a belief in the idea that 'all is never lost' or 'without hope' and perhaps to express a conviction that, as Julian of Norwich so famously pronounced, in the end 'all shall be well'. That the universe does tend towards goodness and flourishing, despite decay and darkness. However you look at it, there is a human need to 'trust' and 'celebrate' rebirth, new life and resurrection and for this we need to create suitable liturgies.

So maybe we should ask, not 'what' is liturgy, but 'how' is liturgy?

At its best, liturgy is a poetic and eclectic mix of words, actions, music and song that is both Aspirational and Inspirational. That is to say that good liturgy is about expressing the aspirational and the inspirational as we live our everyday lives. Liturgy is a way of doing just that! And, from progressive Christian perspectives, they need to reflect Christ and the gospel for our own time, however this may be understood.

This requires that liturgy should be: Provocative; Challenging; Using words, music and actions in ways that should make us sit up and take notice...

Two forms of liturgy (for the purposes of this discussion)

For the purposes of this session I'm taking global sweep and dividing liturgy into broadly two kinds:

a) Liturgy, which enables Rites of Passage, Marks the Seasons and Compliments the Rhythm of Life:

These give an expression to what is! They articulate feelings of the moment. They allow for a naming of the present realisation, and allow us an appropriate and sacred space for celebration or mourning, etc.

These liturgies mark boundaries and they mark changed realities...

And

b) Liturgy, which performs as Prayer:

Prayer, is here defined as a solemn request for help or expression of thanks, which may be directed at God, or at some other object or subject to which we wish to give worth (the universe, our planet, our communities etc.) It's a way of expressing earnest hope or wish...

Liturgy in this sense becomes a means of regular expressions of the aspirations and inspirations we intuitively feel, and as such they are also a means of getting in touch with our 'spirituality'.

Liturgy here enables us to honour that, which is not us, that which is outside of us. Such liturgies offer a way of touching the world beyond ourselves: the transcendent, the numinous, the immanent etc...

And such liturgies, carefully crafted, can also invoke a sense of the liminal in that they can help us to inhabit a point at, or on both sides of a boundary or threshold which may be understood as the boundary between the sacred and the secular, or the temporal and the spiritual.

Intention:

To invite you to share your ideas about what you think Progressive Christian liturgies, litanies, hymn lyrics, and chants might sound like – that is, **what** they might say and more importantly, **how** they might speak.

Some representative examples of attempts at 'progressive' approaches to words and ideas were circulated

We ask, what makes a response to the sacred 'progressive' (rather than 'traditional')...

- How important is the genre of theology in play (i.e. radical theology as against classical theology for example)?
- Does it matter what 'model of God' is invoked or envisaged?
- How continuous or discontinuous with what has gone before (the Tradition) should progressive liturgies be?
- Do they always need to be Christocentric, or maybe they should never be Christocentric?
- Should we return to the earliest known understandings/worship formats and work from there?
- Should we start afresh with new liturgies shaped purely by current radical theological reflections?
- Where does orthodoxy end and heresy begin (today's heresy is tomorrow's orthodoxy)?
- Are we expressing orthopraxis (a way of living) rather than orthodoxy (a way of believing)?

1. With these kinds of questions in mind, we considered the Lord's Prayer:

✚ *Aramaic translations* [<http://www.focus-on-prayer.com/The-Lords-Prayer.html>]

✚ *Gretta Vosper's offering* [<http://progressivechristianity.org/resources/a-new-lords-prayer/>]

The samples offered were not definitive versions by any means, but hopefully gave a flavour of the way in which traditional ideas and language are already being reformulated and translated with nuances that intend to remain faithful to what we think of as 'the original' (i.e. as found in the English translations of Matthew 6:9 – 13 or Luke 11: 1 – 4).

Consider:

- The Lord's Prayer, in the times of Jesus, would have been spoken in Aramaic, which is a pictorial language, rather than a factually based 'logical' language such as we use today.
- Some scholars claim there is evidence that the core of the prayer pre-dates Jesus into antiquity.
- When the disciples asked 'how we are to pray', their question was more likely to be about body language, breathing, state of mind – rather than the literal *form of words* (the 'what') that were to be used! To this day the obsession with right forms of 'words' often appears to get in the way of the intent of prayer!

2. Eucharist and Creeds:

Again, the samples offered were not definitive versions by any means, but hopefully gave a flavour of the way in which traditional ideas and language are already being reformulated.

Versions of the Eucharist and Creeds

- ✚ **Jane Keener-Quiat**, 'The invitation to Holy Communion' (Methodist, USA)
[<http://www396.sslldomain.com/tcpc/doc/Sampler%20final.pdf>]
- ✚ **Polly Moore's 'Didache'**, (adapted by Polly Moore, College Heights UCC, San Mateo CA).
[<http://progressivechristianity.org/resources/didache-communion/>]
- ✚ **Kathryn Hawkerself**, 'Table Prayer for a progressive Christian Community'
[<http://progressivechristianity.org/resources/table-prayer-for-a-progressive-christian-community/>]
- ✚ **Curran Jeffery**, 'Feast of the Common Table' (TCPC)
[<http://progressivechristianity.org/resources/feast-of-the-common-table/>]
- ✚ **Don Welch**, The Nicene Creed [new] (TCPC)
[<http://progressivechristianity.org/resources/new-creed/>]
- ✚ **Charles W Allen**, 'The Apostle's Creed, as I hear it'
[<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/exploringourmatrix/2012/09/the-apostles-creed-the-lords-prayer-as-one-progressive-christian-hears-them.html>]

Things to consider...

- Look for inclusivity/gender bias/modern words for the old concepts only...but is there anything that expresses 'progressive' understandings?
- Are they simply sanitising the unacceptable, etc... and nothing more?
- Is it truly progressive to add other material yet retain the traditional material pretty much unaltered...does that 'do the trick' or is embellishment only?
- Do any (or all) of them *feel* 'progressive' to you?
- Perhaps try placing the samples on a continuum that includes the form of Eucharist you are accustomed to taking part in... are they more 'progressive' than you are used to, less so, about the same?
- What do you think a progressive Eucharistic service should celebrate/encourage?
- Do you think/feel that the services you encounter now, in your current worship pattern, already do this?

Deeper questions might ask:

- Are we celebrating a trans-cultural significance that stresses a continuing relevance of the life and teachings of 'Jesus'?
- Or are we celebrating the life of 'Jesus' as a link with deity, or as a man 'united with the ground of his being'?
- Are we about principle or person? God not as an objective reality, but rather as our religious objective, as a symbol of the spiritual ideal humans must strive to attain?
- Or should we be expressing our own hopes and fears and owning that God (however conceived) is unknowable?

There are many other questions too, all without definitive answers, but the above represent some that come to mind at the time of writing!