

WHAT'S GOOD ABOUT WORSHIP?

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'Yearning', said Augustine, 'makes the heart deep.' And he goes on to say that 'Christians are a people who live in the happiness of hope.' I hope that we do, and that what I have to say this evening about what's good about worship will help to keep us in step with fellow pilgrims in past centuries and in other lands and will save us from turning our worship of God into self-indulgent fantasy!

'All my hope on God is founded;

he doth still my trust renew.

Me through change and chance he guideth,

only good and only true.

God unknown,

he alone

calls my heart to be his own.'

Herbert Howells, the organist of Gloucester Cathedral, set these words of Robert Bridges to music soon after the death of one of his children from leukaemia. Out of the depth of his despair and bereavement came a tune that speaks deeply of the mystery of God and offers us a glimpse of what it means to be a people of God who live in the happiness of hope.

I might easily have given this evening's talk the simple title 'Unmasked'.

Like the yearning that Augustine says makes the heart deep, so the word 'unmasked' goes deep. Worship at its best will certainly unmask you!

Worship is often seen as a kind of entertainment for those who have a taste for music and ceremony; whereas, I would maintain that worship is an inescapable part of being human. Men, women and children are natural

worshippers. For it is a characteristic of all human beings that we constantly look beyond ourselves to relate what we are doing and what we are becoming to something or to someone we regard as fearsome or attractive.

Of course, the gods people worship vary very much. Today the most popular gods are abstract. They are dreams like success, security, power and wealth. They are abstract but they are not impotent. They exert a powerful influence on how we behave, how we choose our friends, who we invite to dinner, how we spend our money. Sometimes the gods are other human beings - the cult heroes or heroines of the sporting world or the pop idols of the music world. Our church buildings proclaim that the God and Father of us all is made known in Jesus Christ. He is to be our point of reference as Christians for all that we do and for all that we are becoming. So worship is inescapable.

My second point is that what we worship puts its mark on us. You can't help giving away, often unconsciously to others, the name of the god you worship. It is true not only of our behaviour but sometimes of our very faces. A contemplative nun - a person scarred but not defeated by suffering. It has been said rather ominously that after the age of 40 we are largely responsible for our faces!

What we worship also leaves its mark on the face of society. Who could fail to see in the Nazi rallies at Nuremburg or in the slow shuffling columns of people at Lenin's tomb, the faculty of worship tragically misdirected? Who could fail to see in our world today that the worship of money beyond all reasonable need or sense has the power to distort social relations? If we are all engaged in worship, and if the god we worship marks us profoundly, then the search for a worthy vision to inspire it

should be urgent and strenuous - not least by those of us who aspire to excellence in worship.

We do not search alone however, and it would be dangerous to do so. Human nature being what it is, there is always a danger of reducing God to our own convenient proportions. We may use the right words 'Lord, Lord' or 'Our Father', but they are drained of their potency when we try to possess them.

Cosy religion domesticates the mystery and ignores the harder demands of God's word, which insists on our being just and truthful and moral whatever our likes and dislikes. Some acts of worship are now so casual that this aspect of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is obscured by shallow bonhomie! Cosy domesticated religion leaves us with a figure who fails our imagination as soon as we look into the vastness of space, confront the mystery of creation, or encounter the intractable tragedies of our day - a malformed child or the bleeding bodies of children in Baghdad.

W.H.Auden in one of his plays devises a prayer for the worshippers of a diminished, comfortable god. 'O God, put away justice and truth for we cannot understand them and do not want them. Eternity would bore us dreadfully. Leave thy heavens and come down to our earth of garden gnomes and hedges. Become our uncle. Look after baby. Amuse grandfather. Help Willie with his homework. Introduce Muriel to a handsome naval officer. Be interesting and weak like us and we will love you as we love ourselves. Amen.'

The temptation to worship a god made in the image of our own fantasies and desires is always fatal. It deals in short-term certainties.

Which brings me to ordered forms of worship. We seek in word, music and ceremony a world for which the ages wait and yearn.

'Thy kingdom come! on bended knee
The passing ages pray;
And faithful souls have yearned to see
On earth that kingdom's day.

The day in whose clear-shining light
All wrong shall stand revealed,
When justice shall be throned in might
And every hurt be healed;

When knowledge hand in hand with peace,
Shall walk the earth abroad:
The day of perfect righteousness,
The promised day of God.'

'Yearning,' said Augustine, 'makes the heart deep.' But, as the words of Frederick Hosmer's hymn tell us, we also live by promise, a promise declared completely unambiguously and powerfully in the Incarnation. So to quote Augustine again, 'Christians are a people who live in the happiness of hope.' The happiness of hope keeps us in step with fellow pilgrims in past centuries and in other lands, and saves us from turning our worship into self-indulgent fantasies.

We have something firmer than do-it-yourself forms of contemporary religion, and something that is capable of resisting strident, fanatical, know-all faiths which divide people from each other and add fuel to the dangerously combustible state of the world.

Here is a specific example. It will bring what I am saying down to earth. It is a poem. It was written in prison. It was written by Dietrich Bonhoeffer as he awaited execution at the hands of the Nazis. It is called 'Who am I?'

'Who am I?

Am I really the person people say I am - strong and confident?

They say I come out of my cell like a squire out of his country house.

Is that the real me?

Or is it the one I meet when I cannot sleep at night,

Sweating with anxiety, only just hanging on?

Is that the real me?

Or is the real me just a bundle of fleeting moods?

Then comes the dramatic final lines.

'Who am I?

They haunt me those lonely questions of mine.

Whoever I am

Thou knowest, O Lord, I am thine.'

Acts of worship are not meaningless charades. They nourish that conviction and when the test comes our character is (prayer God) unmasked and made in its worship. That's what the prophet Isaiah means when he writes, 'They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall

mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint' [Isaiah 40:31].

Liturgy that inspires holiness reminds us that we are all on a pilgrimage and that none of us travels alone, unless we choose to. In relation to that journey

God is both the starting point and the ending point, the Alpha and the Omega. Not only that, but as the Psalmist says, in all our rushing around between the beginning and the end, he is there too.

Where can I go then from your spirit?

Or where can I flee from your presence?

If I climb up to heaven, you are there;

If I make the grave my bed, you are there also. [Psalm 139: 6,7]

So the journey we take is an accompanied one. God is with us every step of the way. Sometimes the awareness of the greatness of God is conveyed to us through the presence of God's people on the journey. As on a medieval pilgrimage, different people on the road have different backgrounds and a variety of family relationships. They engage in different occupations and have varied functions in relation to others on the journey. Not all are travelling at the same speed. Some spend their time specifically helping others along and ministering to them. Some imagine their own burdens are too great for them to be able to help others.

The Church is a pilgrim church, a body of people on the move. What the liturgy does is to put that journey in the context of the Church - the Church that prays, that celebrates, that cares. For the sake of those for whom it cares, the Church and its liturgy needs to embody a shape that will inspire holiness and help the people of God to find Him - or more importantly

for God to find us - in different seasons and in different situations. This is what it means to be a church on the move.

But, equally, the ever-changing landscape of our lives - what Michael Mayne calls 'the dance of life' in his book *Learning to Dance* - also needs to reflect that dependability, consistency and stability which is implied by the long history of the Church's worship, traditions and buildings. We serve God, who is the same yesterday, today and for ever, and who is continually doing new things, drawing his new creation to himself.

To return to the words of the hymn set to music by Herbert Howells:

'God's great goodness aye endureth,
 deep his wisdom, passing thought:
 splendour, light, and life attend him,
 beauty springeth out of nought.
Evermore
 from his store
 new-born worlds rise and adore.'

Good worship inspires holiness and relates the greatness of God to his people today whenever and wherever it provides companionship and spiritual food for the journey each human being is making - towards baptism, marriage, welcoming children, and at death itself. This is the kind of companionship which, in revealing the love of Christ, unmask individuals and draws them 'to live in the happiness of hope' and to serve Christ in the fellowship of his Church until they come to their eternal home in the company of all the saints.

Let me give you an example of what I mean by this. Five years ago I made a journey to Burma to attend the enthronement of their new Archbishop in his cathedral church in Yangon. Burma's borders, as you know, have been closed to foreign travellers for the past 40 years and a country that was once one of the richest countries in S.E.Asia (economically, culturally and artistically) has had its doors to the West closed by order of the military government. In 1966 the military authorities expelled all foreign western missionaries and stripped the Church of any privileges it might have enjoyed in colonial times, not least in the areas of housing, education and health care. All that the military government permits Christians in Burma to do is to assemble for worship in their church buildings.

'Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I say rejoice.' These were the words of St Paul chosen by Archbishop Samuel San Si Htay on the day of his enthronement in Yangon Cathedral as the fifth Archbishop of Myanmar (Burma). 'The apostle St Paul,' he said, 'has encouraged us in all situations of life to live with Christ. We should be joyful all the time. '

During the service he said that 'happiness and joyfulness do not depend upon success, upon being popular with the authorities, or upon the possession of wealth and status.' Here was a simple and clear message coming from a

Burmese Archbishop's lips to a Church in a far away Province of the Anglican Communion that does not enjoy the comforts and the resources we do here in the Church of England.

The Church of the Province of Myanmar bears witness to Christ in his death and in his resurrection within an oppressive regime and a predominantly Buddhist culture. The Archbishop said that afternoon in Yangon, as a gift of God and knows that such a gift is given particularly to those who suffer and live with difficulties.

Some two and a half thousand people were packed into Holy Trinity Cathedral in Yangon and into its surrounding compound. They had travelled from every part of Burma - in many cases over many days - on foot, by boat, by train, by bullock cart, by bus - and the few of us from the West who were allowed to be with them and with their new Archbishop, joined them in song as we sang in English and in Burmese the great Victorian hymns: 'Hark, the sound of holy voices' 'The Church of God a kingdom is' and 'Thy hand, O God, has guided thy flock from age to age'.

We each sang the Te Deum in our native tongues and then listened to the massed choir as more than 300 young voices from the Anglican Young People's Association from every part of Myanmar sang the Halleluyah Chorus from Handel's Messiah in Burmese.

The Archbishop was skilful and brave in the way he led the liturgy that afternoon. It inspired holiness because it was rooted in the long history of the Church's worship, traditions and buildings and related..God to the realities of what it means to be called to be a follower of Jesus Christ in Myanmar today. By associating himself and his Church so publicly with the apostle Paul when he was in chains in prison, he indicated that the joy and happiness of the day of his enthronement needed to be rooted within

the experience and context of what it means to be a member of the Church in Myanmar today.

'Rejoice in the Lord always; and again, I say, rejoice.'

But Paul goes on to say: 'Let your gentleness be known to everyone.'

I am a better and a gentler Christian as a result of the friendships and contacts God has given me over the years through my contacts with the Church in Myanmar. Christians in Myanmar know what it means, and know what it costs, to bear witness to Christ in death as in life. They are recognized for their generous magnanimity and for their hope and zeal, even though the authorities may hate them for it, and at times brutally rage against the holiness of living that creates and sustains this spirit among them.

Jesus' magnanimity cost him the Cross. The Cross is not a moderate remedy. It is the symbol of God's magnanimity. It is also the symbol by which God most often unmask us. It is his way of saying: 'I am pure, simple Goodness, and therefore I cannot will or desire or rejoice in, or do or give anything, but goodness..... for I am and have nothing else.'

Ultimately, Christian holiness has nothing else to give. Our solidarity one with another in the Gospel, and especially with the Church on the margins in the developing world, draws us into a deeper companionship with God and with our neighbour, whoever and wherever he or she may be. The way we worship puts its mark on us and leaves its mark on the face of society.

A story is told of a Christian monk who dreamed of going on pilgrimage to Jerusalem. He prayed about it and studied maps and ancient texts for

many years until, at last, the abbot gave his permission for the monk to leave the monastery for a year. He was free to walk to the Holy Land and there to pray at the sacred sites and walk around the hallowed walls. The day of his release arrived and he set off down the hill from the monastery with staff in hand and his bag on his back.

He had not travelled far before he met a man sitting by the road who told the monk that he and his family were starving and that he was almost too weak now to continue begging for those he loved most. The monk knelt down with the man and prayed and then startled him by walking around him three times before emptying his purse and giving him his cloak. The monk then turned round and headed back for his monastery where his brothers were astonished to see him. Why had he come back? Had he forgotten something? 'Yes,' replied the monk, 'but now I have been to the Holy Land. Jerusalem was brought to me.'

And the tellers of this story concluded by informing their listeners that Christ later appeared to the monk in a vision and revealed it had been he, the Lord, next to the road that day and that he reminded the monk of the writings of the beloved disciple who taught that the one who says he loves God should love his brother and sister also. Even the monk's piety needed to be humbled in order for his love to be enlarged. Only then was Jerusalem visited.

In the film 'Babette's Feast', screened a year or so ago by the BBC, two elderly sisters live together in a remote village. Their late father had been a minister of a hard-line ascetic religious community and his memory is still revered by the villagers. The sisters spend their days in prayer and charitable work until, one stormy night, a distressed woman arrives at their

door with a letter from a friend in Paris. The letter explains that events back home are so bad that Babette has fled. Her husband and son have already been killed. The letter informs the women that he has told her to make her way to them as he feels sure that they will both find a place for her in their home - perhaps as a servant. The sisters tell Babette that, unfortunately, they do not have the money to pay her but Babette offers to work without any payment. 'If I cannot,' she says, 'I will die.'

So, Babette works for them for 14 years until, one day, she receives a letter from a friend in Paris who has been looking after her lottery ticket. She has won ten thousand francs, which is an enormous amount of money. On hearing of this, the sisters have mixed feelings because they realize that Babette is sure to leave them now she owns such a fortune.

At the same time the sisters have been planning a gathering in their home to commemorate their late father. Babette now asks them if she may be permitted to cook a Parisian meal for them and their friends and to pay for it herself out of her newly acquired money. The sisters object, but Babette reminds them that she has never asked anything of them before and so, eventually, they agree.

Puritanical Christians are suspicious of the human senses and luxuries and the villagers, although admitting that it is kind of Babette to cook for them, decide to be silent about the meal and to behave as if they have no taste. Babette knows nothing of this as she carefully makes out her shopping list and the large crates arrive from France safe and sound.

On the evening of the meal, a visiting general happens to be in the town and is invited along to the meal. As the guests take their seats around a

sumptuously laid table, with cut glass and fine linens, and as they then begin to eat the exquisite turtle soup and drink the fantastic amontillado sherry, the general becomes aware that this food and wine is of the highest quality and has obviously been prepared by someone highly skilled. In fact, he says to the otherwise quiet guests, this dinner reminds him of one he once had in the Cafe Anglais, one that had been created by the head chef. We later discover that this had been Babette when she worked in Paris.

Later in the meal, after a glass or two, the villagers begin to loosen up and begin talking to one another. Things start to happen. Two old women, for instance,

who have been slandering each other suddenly recall the days of their childhood when they had made their way together to confirmation class hand in hand. Their memories reconcile them. Two businessmen make up after a long standing disagreement and, perhaps, most touching, a man and a woman finally admit their love for one another and seal it with a small kiss. The table, which has been prepared so lovingly, becomes a place of reconciliation and celebration.

After the dinner, when the guests have gone home, the sisters go into the kitchen and find the exhausted Babette surrounded by pots and pans and they thank her for doing such a marvellous deed before leaving them. Babette tells them that she is not leaving. Besides, she has no money. The sisters are confused. Why doesn't she have any money? Where is all her lottery money? Babette tells them simply that she has spent it all on the dinner. She has nothing left. She was given an opportunity to do the best she could and that was enough for her. The two sisters weep for joy and

embrace her, which, again, was something that had never happened before.

I believe that this story can be read as a parable of holiness for in it we cannot fail to see what it means to live in the happiness of hope. It also alerts us to the concept of serving our neighbour and the creation of personhood.

'The glory of God is seen in a man fully alive and the life of man is the vision of God', writes St Irenaeus - a person concerned to befriend and to enter into

communion wherever possible. Those who want to laugh at us will find it very easy to discover our weaknesses in our trying to become what we celebrate in our acts of worship, and, likewise, we will know our own failures only too well. Holiness of living has its torments. Christ's invitation, though, is clear: everything is waiting to be hallowed by the fullness of our being. 'There is another world,' writes Paul Eluard, 'but it is in this one.'

For this reason, when the guests at Babette's feast have made their way home and the two sisters collect their thoughts as to the strange but loving things that have happened that evening, one looks at the dark sky and then into her sister's eyes. 'The stars have come nearer tonight,' she whispers.