



Learn to worship: worship to learn

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Worship is the principal locus for Christian education. The faith and vocation of the Church and of disciples is explored and developed in every authentic act of worship. Worship is a unique communal activity; but it is analogous to participation in a drama. The article expounds a vision of the worship-drama as shaped by the passage of dark and light over a 24-hour period, whose key phases are interpreted by classic liturgical words and biblical metaphors. The renewal of worship as a high-quality creative experience hinges on the Church addressing some systemic failures in its organisation of worship and preparation for worship.

WORSHIP • EDUCATION • DISCIPLESHIP • DRAMA • MISSION • GRACE • HABIT
• TRANSFORMATION • CONSECRATION • COMMUNION • PRESBYTER • LOCAL
PREACHER

The Christian calling is to share in the mission of God. Worship, discipleship and mission are the principal aspects of Christian participation in the mission of God. Worship, discipleship and mission are not separate dimensions of the Christian life; they are interconnected. Christian worship is the hub that holds them together. Worship is also the principal educator of the whole of Christian life. When a congregation is a school for learning to worship, its members discover in and with their feel for worship a more acute sense of discipleship and mission. In the worship of God, the faith and calling of every Christian – and of the Church as a whole – are focused, clarified and developed.

How does the educational character of worship function? By enabling a community of people to be immersed in a drama – a movement from night to day, from sorrow to joy and from death to life. This is a special sort of learning, which I will sketch below. But some rudimentary initial reflections are in order.

There is something to be learned about worship from listening to music. It is not necessary for a listener to know the techniques by which a piece of music is constructed. What stops a listener in their track is the discovery that, for inexplicable reasons, a particular composition moves them deeply, compels them to find one way or another to hear that music again and again, to the point that they find welling up inside them an authentic love for that song or symphony or whatever. Of course, there have to be in the background technicians and learned scholars of both composition and instrumental skills, and hours of practice to the point that making music seems to the untrained listener to have become second nature to the performers, and truly to be a marvel. But it is the music that ‘speaks’, enthral, thrills and lifts an enrapt listener out of themselves into a new dimension of existence. Emotions, imagination, feeling and aesthetic appreciation of beauty surpass intellectual analysis in the learning process.

Worship is not about the refined exposition of doctrinal themes or even biblical scholarship. It is about the skilful management of specialised resources so as to develop a drama, into which worshippers are drawn spiritually, imaginatively and emotionally. Worship is a self-involving process; more like a theatre than a classroom. It is more than anything like coming to know a person in depth. It is an adventure in love. Worship therefore entails something like the following: respect, tentativeness and adoration of a mysterious ‘other’; ever deeper self-awareness; ever more trusting openness and more careful speaking and listening in mutual conversation; the struggle to integrate hurts inflicted, miscommunications and annoying habits which are perceived with increasing

clarity both ways in the developing relationship into a shared sense of being at peace with each other; and an acknowledgement of mutual affect, even mutual transformation, as shared responsibilities are undertaken jointly.

Reference to the analogy of learning to love another person reminds us of how fragile such an enterprise is. High aspirations for quality in worship preparation and worship leading are essential for the growth and nurture of Christian people. But nothing can disguise the fact that each leader of worship, however experienced and dedicated, is a clay vessel with at least some cracks in it. And each service of worship, whether formal or informal, fails in some degree to be a worthy carrier of divine Love. Mysteriously, by the mercy of God, both the product of intense striving for perfection in worship provision and a slap-dash, incoherent concoction may be vehicles of grace. The latter, however, is never justifiable as an offering of the Church. The Church must prioritise training which produces quality worship resources and leadership skills.

What shape and form does Christian worship take, to act as a powerful educator?

Before that question can be answered, attention must be given to the preparation for worship that is the responsibility of all regular participants and not just of the accredited leader of worship.

Long before it gets near service time there is an obligation laid on all potential worshippers: they must do all in their power to put right stressed or broken relationships. They must practise forgiveness of those who have wronged or hurt them; and they must seek peace with people they themselves have upset or abused. Failure to attend to this basic focus on relationships on the part of everyone frustrates the possibility of worship, however erudite and well managed the drama of worship may be in the hands of an experienced leader. (See Matthew 5:23–24; 6:12, 14–15.)

Worship cannot begin until energy has been given to forming those who assemble into some sort of community or fellowship, inspired by Christian ideals. People come to a worship service from all sorts of backgrounds and experiences and with a multitude of worries and excitements. Everyone is to be welcomed with respect. We all need time to share our recent stories with one another. Some will need to unburden themselves of terrible news and traumas, of anxieties and hurts that threaten to overwhelm them. We are

learning to be 'church', building a sense of belonging to one another as brothers and sisters, with mutual support at its heart. Perhaps the famed 'tea or coffee and a biscuit' should precede a worship service, not follow it.

Consider now who in fact assembles when an act of public worship is about to begin. A particular number of identifiable individuals, obviously: their names may or may not be known; their past experience of worship and their motivations for being present on this particular occasion will remain largely unknown. Methodists like to count the numbers assembling for worship. They overrate the significance of numbers increasing or declining. Counting disguises a basic truth: there are always more present than meet the eye.

Each and every person present has brought with them – consciously or unconsciously – an extraordinary collection of 'invisible' people: those they care deeply about, for example, and people who have profoundly affected them in the past, for good or ill. All stand together before God. Furthermore, a worship service has the potential to *influence* all those who are present, both literally present and present imaginatively and emotionally. Worship and mission are intertwined. That is what we believe – though it cuts across the rabid individualism of our society.

The drama of worship now begins. It can be formal or informal, brief or lengthy, traditional or experimental. I simply provide some brief notes that remind us of the flow of a worship service, organised as a three-act drama.

Act One: God is present and active in God's creation

We watch and wait, in reflective mode; we journey from night to the first light of day

Worship has to begin with common human experience, to engage all who are present (literally and imaginatively), from whatever cultural, social or political background. But it is common human experience viewed from a fresh and distinctive perspective. An analogy is in order. Look at the night sky in a typical urban street and it is impossible to see the stars, so great is the light pollution from street lights and cars. To see the sky differently it is essential to get right away from towns and cities, deep into isolated rural environments. All around is deep darkness. But what is seen in the sky? Sometimes an all-pervading blackness, when the night sky is filled with thick clouds. On a clear night, however, a wondrous sight – the starlit heavens! There is one sky, but what is perceived is dramatically different in city and countryside

At the moment the service begins there needs to be a sharp break from everyday personal conversations (the sort of chatter we indulge over tea and coffee); and from the everyday secular values and interpretations that we use. Ideally the congregation moves from the place of informal gathering into a specially prepared worship area which is totally silent. Stillness and silence place us in a context open to Holy Mystery. We stand in awe before that which is infinite, ineffable and incomprehensible, utterly beyond us. But Holy Mystery is also closer to us than we are to ourselves, as Holy Spirit. In the silence we inhale Spirit like the air we breathe.

(If later we are to use words in worship, they have to be chosen with immense care; and selected from reliable sources. Indeed church authorities, like the Methodist Conference, invest heavily in hymn books and worship books that both authorise well-trying words for worship and provide models for using contemporary language. And only trained and accountable persons – presbyters and local preachers – may use their own words in public worship or take responsibility for the outcomes when others are encouraged to speak.)

Adjusting to silence is like adjusting to pitch darkness in the countryside at night. It enables people to perceive things in our human experience that are otherwise blotted out from view. Sometimes there is no view: the world is so awful, full of rape and abuse, of vicious cruelty, warfare and violence, or natural disaster. But even in the bleakest place the task is to search for specs of light – that is, for signs of moral actions, integrity and human values.

On other occasions, the night sky is ablaze with glorious lights! We discern any number of examples of goodness, truth and beauty: they are owned and celebrated by all. Examples and stories are beyond number of what nourishes the genuinely human – from a young child in school discovering gifts and aptitudes not hitherto suspected, to simple acts of neighbourliness, to international negotiations for peace and justice; from a photograph of a striking landscape taken by a member of the congregation on their holiday and projected on a screen to a masterpiece by Rembrandt or Monet; from the local organist playing a piece of Bach to the best of their ability to a professional recording of Debussy's *Syrinx*.

Faith declares that all examples of goodness, truth and beauty are signs of the Spirit's invisible presence and activity in every part of God's creation, quietly nourishing spiritual and moral values in every human heart and community (Galatians 5:22–23), in spite of human wickedness and selfishness. These gifts

are in truth fragments of Christlikeness, for the crown of the Spirit's work is to form in human beings the mind of Jesus Christ.

Now the Church is ready to pray: Come, Lord Jesus! Suddenly we discern the first light of day gradually dispelling the darkness just before the sun rises above the horizon (Luke 1:78–79). The Light of the World, the living Word of God, Jesus Christ, is about to appear! God's steadfast love and mercy, God's peace and forgiveness, are to be revealed. This is gift beyond all measure and expectation. The Church responds in praise and adoration. Psalms, hymns and songs fill the air, like the voices of the heavenly host in the Bethlehem fields (Luke 2:14).

Act Two: Jesus and ourselves in dialogue

Time for work; we journey from daybreak to three in the afternoon

Morning breaks: 'Christ, whose glory fills the skies', dispels gloom and fear.

Sometimes the very nearness of the living Jesus takes us aback with a stunning disclosure of majestic generosity and promise. Out of the blue sky a treasure of incalculable worth is suddenly in front of us. It startles us with infinite possibilities for our lives, for their radical renewal and for moral and spiritual transformation. This is pure grace! And we have little option but to make our overriding priority to absorb this gift and be changed by it (Matthew 13:44–46).

More typically, in the burning light of the rising sun, it is we ourselves who are exposed to view. Jesus Christ knows every secret of our hearts. But he looks at us and into us with unqualified kindness, with no shred of contempt. We are therefore emboldened to see ourselves a bit more truthfully, to acknowledge in our hearts muddled intentions, terrible memories of words and deeds which now shame us, and buried guilts. 'Lord, have mercy on us!'

The daytime, however, is for work. Like Bartimaeus of old (Mark 10:46–52), we have waited for this moment when the Lord comes vaguely into our orbit. Now is the time for action. We sense, however inchoately, that Jesus could help us, could change our circumstances for the better. We must engage with him personally and directly. We will not be frustrated or put off. Jesus asks us: 'What do you want me to do for you?' Jesus requires of us that we go as deeply as possible into our hearts to find out what drives us, our inner yearnings, what it is we crave for above all else. We may well have little awareness of this. The

inner desires we are alert to will be dominated by self-importance. We may even be ashamed of what is energising our determination to get close to Jesus, for his help. But unless we ask, unless we beg for attention, we cannot expect to receive anything. Conversely, 'Ask and you will receive' (Luke 11:9). Only now are we in a position to listen for the voice of Jesus addressing our deepest desires and needs on this occasion. Our hearts burn within us, in expectation.

The word of God is to be heard through readings from Scripture and the words of a sermon. Reading and preaching are both essential. Scripture comprises the authoritative collection of writings from the ancient world which, in the Church's experience, have provided a series of lenses through which the creative, saving and sanctifying grace of the one God (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) may be truthfully discerned. But they are strange writings to us – a complex mix of stories, prayers, practical wisdom and moral exhortation, all enveloped by complicated metaphors and disabling mythologies, and written in unknown languages. They must be translated and interpreted in order that their transforming possibilities may become accessible to twenty-first-century people. A broad-brush interpretation is provided by the use of an accredited version of the Bible from which passages can be read in the vernacular. But the preacher must take the interpretation much further, to demonstrate how Scripture may engage with the challenging spiritual, moral, political and economic issues of the day: an awesome responsibility.

The great French writer Marcel Proust was brilliantly served by a fine translation into English of his masterpiece, *À la Recherche du temps perdu*, by C. K. Scott Moncrieff. Proust himself was an admirer of things English and tried his hand at translating John Ruskin into French. Critics found in his translation many technical flaws, to which Proust replied, 'I do not claim to know English, but to know Ruskin.' Authentic preaching comes from a preacher who may have limited oratorical skills and will certainly not produce a masterpiece of translation, but who knows and loves Jesus Christ. For Jesus Christ is the one who proclaims God's good news; moreover, in his life and pivotally in his death on a Roman cross (at three o'clock), he *became* the good news. Through the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ, and him crucified, God graciously offers to all the possibility of freedom and repentance, forgiveness and radical transformation. Our blind eyes may be opened.

The word of Jesus to us always far exceeds our own perception of our needs and wants. Our needs and wants may indeed be met – but are always then surpassed. Sometimes it is an immense puzzle how the promise and gifts of

God, wonderful as they obviously are, connect to what we imagined were our deepest desires. The challenge Jesus presents to us is to have faith in him and his extravagant generosity. For everyone who puts their trust in Jesus, a new world begins: this is pure and unconditional gift – God’s converting grace.

We must never underestimate the potential for change in God’s ministry to us in a single encounter, in a particular time and place. However, the characteristic way of God is to nurture change in us through good habits – most especially the habit of regular worship. A habit of worship is the core of Christian education.

Regular worship facilitates the education of our desires.

- Our determination to get close to Jesus, to draw from him the power of the Holy Spirit, is strengthened both from the disciplining of our own wills and with the help of fellow seekers. It demands singlemindedness to refuse all sorts of distractions (notably a fascination with wealth and power) and to overcome blockages. Mary established her place at the Lord’s feet in spite of Martha’s fretting and fussing (Luke 10:38–42).
- Frequent worship encourages the refocusing or redirecting of our inner yearnings, of our prayers of petition. Emerging in the midst of our unreconstructed self-interests, and hopefully in due course overcoming them, will be a desire for a heart cleansed of everything but love, and for that love to be shaped by the infinitely costly, self-giving love of the crucified Jesus.

It also takes time profoundly to trust in Jesus; perhaps a lifetime. We listen for God’s word to us regularly (weekly?) because there is no quick way to believe we are loved enough to forgo all defensiveness and self-concern and to worship God alone.

Act Three: Following Jesus and sharing in God’s mission to all

Devotion expressed in practice: the late afternoon and evening

Spiritual transformation (a new heart) is meaningful only when it becomes physical and practical, making an identifiable impact on the lives of worshippers and their relationships. Discipleship entails imitating the poor, humble and gentle Jesus, practising compassion for the poor and struggling

for justice and peace in the world. Standing at the foot of the Cross demands a commitment to kneel at the feet of hurting, frail and persecuted people anywhere in the world (Matthew 5:3–5; 25:31–46). Discipleship also involves participation in the life of the Church, the corporate Body of Christ in the world.

The third phase of worship shapes discipleship and mission through prayers. They help us to give practical expression to the love the Spirit releases in our hearts – love for particular people and circumstances in our contemporary world, and love for God.

We need the Spirit's guidance if we are to learn to pray. So we must begin with the prayer of the Spirit-filled Jesus himself – the Lord's Prayer. Entering deeply into this prayer helps us to believe that if we cannot think what to pray for (a frequent puzzle), the living Jesus or the Holy Spirit will pray for us. It never hurts to ask Jesus or the Spirit to do that for us anyway.

The pattern of prayers unfolds like this:

- our prayers of love and concern: intercessions for the Church and the world in its need
- a sacrifice of thanksgiving: for creation itself and the whole of our life within it (in its fragility, as well as its fullness); and above all for God giving us a share in God's own life, through Jesus and the Spirit
- prayers of consecration to obedient discipleship. They include commitments to particular vocations and ministries, or specific acts of rededication. Such devotion is focused in two powerful actions:
 1. the *offering of money and gifts*, with a vow to rethink how we use all the resources and time entrusted to us ('Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also', Matthew 6:21)
 2. the *sharing in Holy Communion*: like the two pilgrims at Emmaus, when evening was approaching and the day was almost over (Luke 24:29), we celebrate the self-disclosing presence of the living Christ who died for all. We are filled with a joy that transcends the nitty-gritty of time and place. Day or night no longer count for anything: this is a foretaste of heaven! Our doubts are dispelled, our muddled and partial understandings form a meaningful picture and we are energised to share in God's mission to the whole of creation.

We are now ready to leave the drama of worship and to re-enter everyday life, as disciples. We receive an assurance that God's Spirit will protect and guide

us; God's ever-present blessing and peace will be with us. We leave the worship event with a joyful song of praise on our lips.

Conclusion

Worship is never a rigid performance (like playing a CD endlessly). It is a living drama, and capable of infinite variations. But, like a child's squiddy toy, it must never lose its basic shape. Congregations, or at least a core of regular worshippers in a congregation, need to be confident about that shape as much as every accredited leader. In any particular act of worship, mishaps are likely to occur. Normally they are not significant and leader and congregation can learn from them if they are encouraged to do so. Critical reflection and regular participation provide the environment in which informal small-group learning in the Church and formal educational courses for Christian initiation and authorised ministries need to be grounded, to articulate systematically what is learned experientially in worship.

More worrying are systemic failures that vitiate effective worship. In British Methodism it is the tyranny of the circuit plan (a quarterly published rota providing for the leading of worship by different people in each church, week by week). Routinely the appointed presbyter or local preacher may be trusted to have done intense homework in preparation for a particular service. But the congregation is in the dark about the details; and there is no expectation of the 'director' and 'troupe' rehearsing together before the drama of worship is performed; or of the director releasing and coordinating the contributions of the troupe. The Church cannot any longer hope against hope that each Sunday the worship service will flow as a major creative experience while the congregants are alienated and non-participating.

A revolution is demanded, to win a new compact between congregations, worship leaders, preachers and presbyters. The outline of the worship drama will be held in common. Making its 'performance' matter will be the emotional, spiritual and learning ambition of all.