

WEDNESDAY SUPPLEMENT

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Welcome to this week's Wednesday Supplement.

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RETURNING TO CHURCH

By now I am sure that you will be aware of the various changes to the Covid-19 restrictions which were announced by the government yesterday. It appears that the legal suspension of public worship will be lifted from 4th July and that it will be lawful for services to resume from Sunday 5th July, subject to the continuing requirements of social distancing and shielding.

When the rules change, consequential directions are given by the Church of England nationally, and then by individual Dioceses. The process is not instant, but it has resulted in guidance which has always been clear and complete, even if not always what we would like.

Given the short timetable, I suspect that we may receive information about what we can and cannot do, and how we must do it, rather late in the day.

It is also important to caution that, in the words of a message from Archdeacon Vernon which I received this morning: “**we will not be returning to the old normal**”. Like you, I hope that it will be possible to return to our prior pattern of services, with appropriate modifications, from Sunday 5th July, but please do not count on anything until we have firm guidance. I will pass it on as soon as I have it.

If we are permitted to hold services on Sunday 5th July, I suspect that precautions along the following lines will be the minimum we can expect:

- We will remain 2m apart. This will be safer and easier to achieve than the new ‘1m plus mitigations’. We will probably need to close off alternate pews and only households or bubbles will share a pew.
- Hand sanitizer to be used on entry and exit.
- The use of physical objects, such as service books and hymn books, is likely to be discouraged.
- The peace to be shared at a distance.
- The chalice of wine not to be distributed. Communion to be received in bread only and socially-distanced, one-way queuing to be used. We will receive standing, rather than kneeling at the rail.

- Singing may not be permitted because it appears to increase the level of potentially infected aerosols significantly – although this is currently being reviewed by Public Health England.
- It is possible that we will have to keep a record of everyone who attends services, so that they can be contacted afterwards if necessary.

The suspension of public worship has been very disappointing and continuing restrictions will be extremely frustrating. I remind myself however that churches are open to all and it is our mission to care for all. We count among our congregations many who for one reason or another are especially vulnerable to this infection and so we must do all we reasonably can to protect ourselves individually and collectively in obedience to instructions from above.

THE FUTURE OF OUR OTHER ‘SERVICES’

As we return to church, there will be a certain shifting of resource back to our buildings and the services that take place there. Ministries that have been suspended while personal contact was impossible will restart, while some of the new burdens that arose in the lockdown may ease somewhat.

On several occasions, I have noted how circumstances have brought us into contact with new people far and near: via YouTube; via email; via printed copies of the *Supplements*. I am very keen not to abandon all this work and all these new contacts, whose participation in our virtual corporate life has been so welcome.

It will not be possible to produce a twice-weekly newsletter, but there are other possibilities which it may be feasible to continue, such as the Sunday Supplement, by email and by hardcopy for those who cannot make it to church.

Technical and time constraints make it unlikely that we will be able to film ordinary services, but it may be possible to film part of the weekday communion service and make it available online, if there is demand.

Please get in touch as soon as possible if you have thoughts on what you would like to receive. I extend

this invitation to *all* those who receive this *Supplement*, not just those living in our parishes or able habitually to worship with us.

PRIVATE PRAYER

Most of our churches have reopened for private prayer. Please take responsibility for yourself and for others: observe social distancing, follow directions on notices and use hand sanitiser. St Cuthbert's is open from 10am to 4pm each day. St Mary's is open during all reasonable hours, as before.

Prayer stations are available. In St Mary's, for example, you might wish to add an angel to the display in the South aisle, to remember someone who has been affected by Covid-19.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A CHRISTIAN?

We asked this question of our youth group, *Meeting Point*, in Broughton last week. Answers included: to be ruled by God; to worship God; to be like Jesus; to believe in something; to have someone there always to talk to, believe in, and celebrate; to be honest, kind and true; to believe in God and his teachings.

What is your answer?

LITURGY CORNER

As we look forward to a return to worshipping together in church I thought it might be a good time to ask 'what is worship'.

What is worship?

Our word 'worship' comes from the Old English *weorthscipe* or 'worth-ship' – at its root, worship means to ascribe worth to God. How we go about doing this is a complex question, that we explore below.

First, we need to note another familiar word which is almost, but not quite, identical with worship, namely 'liturgy'. We tend to use this word to refer to printed materials, but liturgy properly means the whole of the worship, all that we say and do. That is why we sometimes refer to services as the 'Liturgy of Holy Communion' or 'The Liturgy of Ascension Day' etc..



Our word 'liturgy' comes from the Greek words *laos* (people or public) and *ergon* (work). It therefore describes either the work of the people or a public work. These are important, if not the only, aspects of worship. We also remember the work of God in worship, which in the Catholic tradition is referred to as *opus dei*.

You might say that 'worship' is what we are trying to achieve, while 'liturgy' is what we do in public to achieve it.

Why should we worship?

Perhaps the fullest answer to this question is contained in the five aspects of worship discussed below. However, it is worth picking up the way in which the Bible talks about worship.

Worship is central in the Bible. I often give the example of how the desire to worship the Christ-child is the hallmark of the magi in Matthew 2. In order to convince them of his good faith, Herod then says that *he* intends to worship the baby. The story points out the proper response to God. Even Herod knows what that is, although he does not intend to abide by it.

Elsewhere in the New Testament the point is made more explicitly: "*God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.*" (John 4:24); "*let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe*" (Hebrews 12:28); "*I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.*" (Romans 12:1).

The Psalms are particularly full of invitations to praise or worship God, as one might expect from what is thought to be an ancient hymn book: "*Oh come, let us sing to the Lord ... let us worship and bow down*" (Psalm 95:1, 6); "*Worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness*" (Psalm 96:9); "*Serve the Lord with gladness! Come into his presence with a song!*" (Psalm 100:2).

Worship and belief

In an entirely logical world, we would form beliefs in a rational manner and then act upon them. In practice, the world is not like that. Early Christians did not sit down and decide what they believed and then afterwards design their worship in order to give expression to those beliefs.

From the first, Christians engaged in worship according to the social (and religious) customs of their time, exploring their beliefs through the medium of gathering together. The beliefs which were thus refined then in turn influenced the shaping and reshaping of worship.

Nevertheless, worship generally came first. For an example, remember that what we now call the Nicene Creed did not reach its final form until the First Council of Constantinople, AD 381. Yet the evidence of Paul's letters suggests that distinctively Christian worship was taking place in the second half of the First Century (see for example the possible hymn in Philippians 2:6-11). Firm documentary evidence of the nature of Christian worship comes from Pliny the Younger's Tenth Letter to the Emperor Trajan, dated about AD 112:

"they were accustomed to meet on a fixed day before dawn and sing responsively a hymn to Christ as to a god, and to bind themselves by oath, not to some crime, but not to commit fraud, theft, or adultery, not falsify their trust, nor to refuse to return a trust when called upon to do so. When this was over, it was their custom to depart and to assemble again to partake of food—but ordinary and innocent food."

We can see in this account (which may or may not be comprehensive) something that resembles present-day worship, but also much that is very different.

Five aspects of worship

The liturgical scholar Professor Ruth Duck understands worship as having five interlocking emphases, which I find helpful. You'll notice that they all begin with 'R', but this is not as contrived as you might fear!

Ritual

Ritual involves the repetition of symbolic words and actions. There is neurological evidence to suggest that humans are hard-wired for ritual. It is hard to find any society which does not have rituals around death, for example. Atheist writers often recognise how religion harnesses the tremendous power of ritual. The Cambridge zoologist and developmental psychologist Professor Robert Hinde wrote that, what matters is not so much what people believe, but how they behave. He did not believe that there was much difference between secular and sacred ritual: both delivered similar benefits in similar ways.

The advantage of ritual is that it is comforting; it offers a means by which life experiences can be integrated into our overall understanding of the world; and most importantly, ritual expresses communal belonging. We should not be afraid of repetition: there is so much depth and breadth in the liturgy that it is only through

constant access to it that we can hope both to explore particular details or see everything as a whole.

Christians occasionally fall into the trap of supposing that other people's rituals are just meaningless repetition. In fact, the nature of ritual simply varies, as does our individual predisposition to different types of ritual. A Quaker meeting, for example, is very simple and eschews 'rituals' – but it still has a ritual structure. In this age of ecumenism, we can confidently advise our brothers and sister that if they do not find *our* ritual helpful, there will almost certainly be a church or denomination whose ritual they *do* find fulfilling.

Recognising the importance of ritual helps us to value differences in churches and churchgoers: almost everyone is seeking ritual to one degree or another, but the most congenial ritual varies from person to person. We have to learn to accommodate the unique ways in which we are made.

Appreciating the value of ritual may also help us to maintain and enhance existing forms of service, rather than feeling we have to introduce change (or reduce 'ritualism') for its own sake. It may also help us in devising new services, ensuring that we include appropriate and helpful ritual.

Although ritual helps us to know God effectively, it tends to be 'horizontal' – forming connections between ourselves and other human beings in the congregation. We need to add a 'vertical' aspect to worship; one which forms connections between us and God.

Revelation

One 'vertical' aspect of worship is revelation: the way in which we receive a knowledge of God and his purposes for humankind. This might be through hearing the Word of God read aloud; through testimony; through interpretation or reflection; in sermons, song and silence; or through the mysteries of the sacraments. Ritual plays a role here: by working through a familiar structure or words, we provide a framework in which the subject matter of the service, and our own response, can interact. This may be familiar in that sense that a particular word or phrase in the service 'stood out' one week, in a way it did not the week before. Through the Spirit, God reveals himself to us in worship, and we sense both his presence and his particular message for us.

We should not over-emphasise revelation: worship is not just about what we are going to 'get' from God. We also risk creating a false expectation that everyone must 'hear' from God personally, which is damaging to those whose experience of faith is different. Everyone

experiences God in worship which is effective for them, but we do this in many different ways – for some it will be more mystical, or more intellectual, than for others.

Response

Revelation has a sense of one-way traffic from God to us, but worship is also about responding to God. Christians of more sacramental inclination find God to be even more present in worship than in everyday life. Sacramental Christianity, as in the Church of England, holds that Christ is really present in the Eucharist and that the sacrament operates as a means of grace, rather than a mere human promise of improvement, or a memorial of Jesus. The idea of human response and divine presence are mysteriously intermingled.

Other indispensable aspects of our liturgy are clearly responsive in a less mysterious sense: prayer and song are the obvious examples, as well as other forms of praise, such as the *gloria in excelsis*. We may also respond in various ways by rededicating ourselves to follow God. The Methodist Covenant Service is a good example of this.

Relationship

The idea that God is present in our worship is not limited to the sacraments. If we believe in a Trinitarian God of three persons in relationship, whose very essence is perfect love, who chose to become incarnate among us and who left his Holy Spirit with us – then it follows that the very essence of God, and of our knowledge of God, is relationship.

It might be said that relationship sums up the two-way street of revelation and response described above. The relationship we are seeking in worship is first and foremost a vertical one with God, but we are also building up a horizontal common life, in God, with one another. Ritual helps us to do this. If we all just stood in a room and talked about our personal plans to make the world a better place, we might well dissolve quickly into factionalism and argument. In worship, we concentrate our attention on God's plan to make the world a better place, in which we are invited to participate alongside all-comers.

Rehearsal

In all the foregoing, we are of course practising the sort of self-giving love to which God invites us to witness: we are self-evidently loving God and our neighbour. Sharing in the Eucharist models the fair sharing of resources to which God calls us, as well as anticipating the table of his abundant and everlasting feast in Heaven. In worship we are also rehearsing (by hearing,

contemplating and affirming) our call to witness to God's love here on earth.

This is why worship is not simply other-worldly, or focussed on the hereafter. As Ruth Duck writes, "*worship as the practice of new life in Christ ... would be honest about life within the congregation's context – naming its joy and suffering, its challenges and resources ... emphasising the ethical dimension of worship would mean that before leaving, the congregation would be commissioned and sent out to be signs of God's love, justice, and peace in the world.*"

In a small way, our own Eucharistic liturgy reminds us of this in the closing dismissal: *go in peace to love and serve the Lord*. There is actual an enormous amount encapsulated in that small phrase. The Bible teaches clearly that worship that is pleasing to God is worship that is not free-standing, but inextricably bound up with just and holy action. The prophet Amos spoke the Word of the Lord in these terms:

*I hate, I despise your festivals,
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.
Even though you offer me your burnt-offerings and grain-offerings,
I will not accept them;
and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals
I will not look upon.
Take away from me the noise of your songs;
I will not listen to the melody of your harps.
But let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.*

(Amos 5:21-24)

Conclusion

Different denominations, different churches, different services – all emphasise these five characteristics of worship to varying degrees. All should be present in our words, our thoughts or actions to some degree, if our worship is to be true. As we return to church, do take the opportunity to look for these five emphases in and around our services. Do we have the balance right?

PRAYER

*Keep us, good Lord,
under the shadow of your mercy
in this time of uncertainty and distress.
Sustain and support the anxious and fearful,
and lift up all who are brought low;
that we may rejoice in your comfort
knowing that nothing can separate us from your love
in Christ Jesus our Lord.
Amen.*