

'LITURGY - GIVING THE CUSTOMERS WHAT THEY WANT?'

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Let me begin as enticingly as I can, by making a confession ... and there, I'm afraid, any enticement ends: because, disappointingly, it's not a confession of the juicy or scandalous sort, nor is my soul likely to derive much benefit from my making it.

I simply wish to start off by admitting that, for nearly all of my ministry (and I reached the 30th anniversary of my ordination last month), I have spent almost as long each week choosing the praise lists for services as I have writing the sermons.

Modesty prevents me from indicating how often my sermons have elicited expressions of appreciation; but, I can truthfully say – more often than my choice of praise. Or, perhaps more truthfully, I can say that my praise lists have elicited complaints far more often than have my sermons.

Why should this be? And am I alone in having this experience? Somehow, I suspect not. It's a phenomenon, together with related issues, that bears a degree of exploration – sufficient, I hope, to provide an adequate theme for my address this evening and for any discussion which may follow.

The title of my address was prompted by a remark made by one of my elders at a Session meeting a good number of years ago. We were discussing a proposal to introduce (as many congregations have done) an additional 'early-morning' service during the summer months, with the particular aim of accommodating those who might want to 'get away for the day' and who would be less likely to skip church altogether if there were an opportunity to attend worship at an hour that left enough of the day still intact to make it worth 'getting away for'.

The question of the most desirable length of these early-morning services (about 45 minutes, if I recall correctly) led on to a discussion about the type of praise

best suited to such occasions, and that in turn led on to a complaint from the aforementioned elder that we were having far too many hymns that the congregation didn't know. Adopting the policy that it is wiser (within limits, at least) to allow such grumbles to be aired than to try to stifle them, we spent a few minutes debating the issue, with a brief and, I fear, futile attempt on my part to justify my practice. It was then that the elder retorted: 'Minister, you have to give the customers what they want.' (His actual wording was: 'Minister, you have to give the *punters* what they want' – but I judged such a colloquialism inappropriate for the title of an address to a gathering as august as here assembled.)

His remark, offered as well-intentioned advice to a relatively young and inexperienced minister, has remained at the back of my mind ever since, popping from time to time to the front of my mind. It seems to me to express, albeit in its own distinctive style, a certain fundamental tension which those who are charged with the conduct of public worship must continually wrestle with and seek to resolve.

Let me add a further confession at this point. It is a tension I have never satisfactorily resolved; indeed, I believe that by its very nature it is incapable of satisfactory – or, at least, satisfying – resolution.

However, before considering in any detail the vast question of what we should be doing in services of worship, in the liturgy, there is an interesting preliminary observation that arises from my elder's remark: namely, the assumption that worshipping congregations are, at least in their own self-awareness, in a significant sense 'customers' – akin to audiences who have bought tickets entitling them to a performance that comes up to their expectations and meets with their approval – or not. I'm not convinced that that is the prevalent assumption among the majority of church-goers; but I am cynical enough to believe that, in our consumer-driven society, even within the hallowed walls of places of worship there is perhaps a greater degree of expectation of customer satisfaction than we would care to acknowledge, along with a disturbing number who conduct acts of worship on the principle that the most effective way to engage with a congregation is to entertain them.

But I'm already letting slip too many of my own prejudices. Suffice it to say that those who today occupy pews (or, increasingly, chairs) are more likely than

their forebears to vacate those pews (or chairs) if they do not find what happens in services to their liking – and ‘what happens in services’ can serve, at least for the moment, as a broad definition of ‘liturgy’.

You may be familiar with the limerick:

There was a young priest from Dun Laoghaire
who stood on his head for the Kaoghaire.
When his people asked ‘Why?’
he explained it all by
the latest liturgical thaoghaire.

Were my standing on my head not the physical impossibility that it manifestly is, you will be relieved to hear that there would still be no chance of my propounding some new-fangled liturgical theory to justify a radical departure from what is often referred to (I sometimes think rather patronisingly) as ‘traditional worship’.

Sixty years ago this year saw the publication of W D Maxwell’s *Concerning Worship* [OUP], comprising a series of papers based on talks he had given to the chaplains of the 3rd Canadian Division in Brussels in October 1944. As he explains in the Preface: ‘In order that we might for a little time put from our minds the grim pattern of war, the subject chosen was Christian worship, with the emphasis upon its practical aspects’.¹

On today’s battlefield of a very different kind, I still defend (as I am confident this Society would unanimously still defend – although we would need to express it in more inclusive language) the maxim with which he concludes his chapter on ‘Worship as an Offering’: ‘Worship as an offering demands that man should bring and give of his best to God; to offer anything less is to debase God before men, and to cast dishonour on His most holy Name’.²

That, I believe, remains the starting point for any consideration of liturgy, or the formulation of any act of worship by or on behalf of the people of God. It has its roots in Baron von Hügel’s famous dictum: ‘The first and central act of religion is adoration’.

While I am in this ‘quotation mode’, and on the basis that awe is an essential element of adoration and therefore of worship, forgive me for indulging myself in the lengthiest series of quotations to which I shall subject you in this address. It comes from the seventh chapter of Kenneth Grahame’s superb *The Wind in the Willows*. (Grahame, as you know, was born here in Edinburgh, and I’m glad to mark in this way the centenary of the publication of his masterpiece – you can tell that I like to keep abreast of contemporary writing!)

As most of you, I imagine, will recall (probably from childhood, or from reading the book to your children or grandchildren), Portly, a baby otter, has been missing for several days, leaving his distraught father keeping a nightly vigil at the ford where the youngster was fond of playing. Just before moon-rise, Rat and Mole decide to go off in a rowing boat in search of the little chap; and then, as night is about to give way to dawn, Rat catches the intermittent sound of distant piping, ‘beautiful and strange and new’.³

At first, Mole is oblivious to the music, and gets on with the rowing, until, at last: ‘breathless and transfixed the Mole stopped rowing as the liquid run of that glad piping broke on him like a wave, caught him up, and possessed him utterly’.⁴

Then, spurred on by the music, he resumed rowing with fresh vigour, until they reached what is perhaps not a bad metaphor for the Church in the sense of sanctuary. ‘In midmost of the stream, embraced in the weir’s shimmering arm-spread, a small island lay anchored, fringed close with willow and silver birch and alder. Reserved, shy, but full of significance, it hid whatever it might hold behind a veil, keeping it till the hour should come, and, with the hour, those who were called and chosen’.⁵

And so they arrived at what Rat calls ‘this holy place’.⁶ And then, if we can set to one side the theological problems posed by a description of an encounter with the demi-god Pan, there follows what I would reckon to be among the most sublime expressions of religious experience in all literature:

Then suddenly the Mole felt a great Awe fall upon him, an awe that turned his muscles to water, bowed his head, and rooted his feet to the ground. It

was no panic terror – indeed he felt wonderfully at peace and happy – but it was an awe that smote and held him and, without seeing, he knew it could only mean that some august Presence was very, very near. With difficulty he turned to look for his friend, and saw him at his side cowed, stricken, and trembling violently. And still there was utter silence in the populous bird-haunted branches around them; and still the light grew and grew.

Perhaps he would never have dared to raise his eyes, but that, though the piping was now hushed, the call and the summons seemed still dominant and imperious. He might not refuse, were Death himself waiting to strike him instantly, once he had looked with mortal eye on things kept rightly hidden. Trembling he obeyed, and raised his humble head; and then, in that utter clearness of the imminent dawn, while Nature, flushed with fullness of incredible colour, seemed to hold her breath for the event, he looked in the very eyes of the Friend and Helper; saw the backward sweep of the curved horns, gleaming in the growing daylight; saw the stern, hooked nose between the kindly eyes that were looking down on them humorously, while the bearded mouth broke into a half-smile at the corners; saw the rippling muscles on the arm that lay across the broad chest, the long supple hand still holding the pan-pipes only just fallen away from the parted lips; saw the splendid curves of the shaggy limbs disposed in majestic ease on the sward; saw, last of all, nestling between his very hooves, sleeping soundly in entire peace and contentment, the little, round, podgy, childish form of the baby otter. All this he saw, for one moment breathless and intense, vivid on the morning sky; and still, as he looked, he lived; and still, as he lived, he wondered.

'Rat!' he found breath to whisper, shaking. 'Are you afraid?'

'Afraid?' murmured the Rat, his eyes shining with unutterable love. 'Afraid! Of *Him*? O never, never! And yet – and yet – O, Mole, I am afraid!'

Then the two animals, crouching to the earth, bowed their heads and did worship.

Sudden and magnificent, the sun's broad golden disc showed itself over the horizon facing them; and the first rays, shooting across the level water-meadows, took the animals full in the eyes and dazzled them. When they were able to look once more, the Vision had vanished, and the air was full of the carol of birds that hailed the dawn.⁷

I debated with myself, and even with my wife, as to whether I should include that final paragraph or end with ‘...bowed their heads and did worship’. We both agreed I should include it. It is of the essence of religious experience of that intense and vivid kind – from Moses before the burning bush, to Elijah in the mouth of the cave, to the vision of Isaiah, to Peter and James and John on the Mount of Transfiguration, to Mary in the garden, to Thomas in the room locked for fear of the Jews, to the disciples in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost, to Saul soon to become Paul on the road to Damascus, to countless men and women down through the centuries since – it is of the essence of the most profound religious experience that it is transient, of the moment, fleeting, too powerful to be sustained indefinitely – but none the less real for that. And that is the reality that impels us to bow our heads and to worship.

Just to show that I have in fact read a book about worship published later than Maxwell’s in 1948, I refer to a work from a prolific writer, pastor and former university teacher, the American Dr John Killinger. Now in his mid-70s, Killinger is perhaps best-known recently for books such as *Ten Things I Learned Wrong from a Conservative Church*, and *God, the Devil and Harry Potter*. However, it must be over 35 years ago that Killinger published a book entitled *Leave it to the Spirit* which I read while a student at New College. Writing further removed from the mindset and thought forms of W D Maxwell and his generation is hard to imagine. I no longer have the book (I passed it on to a colleague more at home in the conservative evangelical wing of the Church than I, hoping he might find it of interest – I never heard from him again). But I did come across notes that I made at the time, and I apologise for any inaccuracies in my recollections.

Before I recount some of them, I should perhaps explain (and here comes another confession) that, though on occasion I use religious and theological labels, I am never entirely happy with them. I blame my early upbringing. Being a Dundonian by birth, although I was baptised by his predecessor, my earliest memory of a minister is of the Very Reverend Dr Hugh Osborne Douglas, ably aided and abetted by a series of distinguished assistants, the most influential among whom (in my case) was the Reverend David Beckett, who bears the major burden of responsibility for my having entered the ministry. However, during those impressionable teenage years when I very regularly attended morning and evening worship in St Mary’s, even singing in the choir at both services,

I also went along to services at the local Tent Mission (principally because the girl I fancied at the time was keen on going there – sad to relate, since her early 20s, when she married A N Other, she has been a devout atheist). It is to this early ‘diverse’ worship pattern that I attribute my winning the only prize I ever attained in Ecclesiastical History, awarded on the recommendation of the late and great Revd Prof Alec Cheyne, for an essay on Moody and Sankey.

Anyhow, back to Dr Killinger, in sharp contrast to Dr Maxwell.

Whereas Maxwell advocates reverence and reserve, Killinger argues for daring experiment and adventurous abandon. ‘The posture of openness, of readiness, of sensitivity, is extremely important’,⁸ he says; and few of us would disagree with that. He goes on: ‘Religion must either be continually rearranging, recharging, and repudiating the patterns it has assumed or else obscure the very truths about life they were intended to reveal’.⁹ Again, not too much difficulty there for those of us who subscribe to the principle of *ecclesia reformata semper reformanda* (a church reformed, yet always in need of reform).

He asserts that our ideas of God are too neat and precise, and that we need to break free from religion that is safe and (a flavour of the ’70s here) to ‘bring the everyday world of syncopated rock ‘n’ roll into the sanctuary’.¹⁰ We need to exercise the same freedom in devising liturgies that true artists exercise in experimenting boldly with new forms.

Some of Killinger’s illustrations and examples are too outrageous for me to quote; but his basic premise is that God is not affected by what we do in worship – we are. And we need to loosen up. He bemoans the fact that our religious worship is too sedentary and cerebral, betrayed in D H Lawrence’s phrase into ‘the cul-de-sac of mind consciousness’. The Church must lose its fear of (and I quote) ‘spilling the Communion wine on its Sunday bib and tucker’.¹¹ There must be, he argues, a healthy balance between Apollinarianism (decency and order) and Dionysianism (heat and frenzy) and points to the élan of Eskimo dance as an example. (I have to say that I have always tended to attribute any élan of Eskimo dance to a simple and commendable attempt to keep warm – and perhaps it has something to offer our congregations as we are confronted with ever-escalating heating bills!)

Killinger still allows a place for preaching, but leaves us in no doubt that what the people want is (and I quote): ‘somebody who is clearly struggling with life and its issues and bothers to phrase his discoveries (or even his questions) in such a way as to speak to their own conscious and unconscious concerns about the same things … a sensitive, creative, poetic figure, grappling with the problems of being human and secular and whole in our time, and sharing both the quest and the results with other individuals around him. This is finally the only justification for his being paid a salary to be a minister … to be their freed man … their freed mind, their freed heart, their freed conscience, their freed dreamer, their freed critic, their freed believer’.¹²

Continuing the exploration of this concept of ‘freedom’ later in the book, Killinger states: ‘The true liberal, the free man in Christ, ranges easily through time … and space … for whatever materials he requires for his celebration. … Religion is sung, whistled, stamped, danced, clapped, more than it is thought’.¹³

I think I have quoted enough for us to get a clear sense of where Killinger is coming from. Much of what he writes and the illustration he uses are typical of the early ’70s, and the world and the Church have moved on since then. I have resisted the temptation to quote from his chapters on ‘Body’ and ‘Drama’ and ‘Story’ and ‘Blasphemy’ and ‘Metaworship’.

I have referred to Killinger so extensively because, it seems to me, he and Maxwell represent diverse if not opposite extremes of the spectrum from which we can approach worship and liturgy; yet, interestingly, Killinger, for all his emphasis on the Church’s mission as being – allowing myself one further quotation – ‘to bring redemption within the cultural situation’,¹⁴ still doesn’t quite advocate ‘giving the customers what they want’. If I may be forgiven for over-simplifying their positions, Maxwell sees the starting point as God while Killinger sees the starting point as the human situation, however it may define itself at any given time and place. But both share the ultimate aim of enabling meaningful encounter between God and his people that issues in sincere and whole-hearted worship of the one in whom ‘we live and move and have our being’.

Both approaches in the end are ‘God-centred’, whereas ‘giving the customers what they want’ rings alarm bells of self-centredness and self-absorption. And perhaps there we begin to provide an answer (I suspect only one answer) to the question my title poses.

The sixty years since Maxwell published his book have seen an unprecedented rate of change in society both nationally and world-wide. That rate of change shows little sign of slowing down. And those responsible for leading public worship have had to face challenges which earlier generations were spared. No longer can we assume knowledge of and familiarity with the conventional language and concepts of the faith.

Blest be the compilers of *CH4*¹⁵ for providing us with Hymn 696: ‘We come, dear Lord, to celebrate / the love our friends have found’ to the tune Repton, thus delivering those of us to whom the task belongs from explaining to soon-to-be brides why ‘Dear Lord and Father of mankind’, though a rightly loved hymn, is not perhaps the most suitable for a marriage service, with such lines as ‘forgive our foolish ways’ or ‘reclothe us in our rightful mind’ or ‘Breathe through the heats of our desire / thy coolness and thy balm; / let sense be dumb, let flesh retire’. Mind you, when I recently referred a couple to the ‘Family, Friendship, and Marriage’ section of *CH4* and asked them to go away and think about which hymns they might like, I hardly anticipated their choice of Hymn 691: ‘Be still, my soul: the Lord is on your side; / bear patiently the cross of grief or pain’.

Having said that, I think that section of *CH4*, together with the sections on ‘Wholeness and Healing’ and ‘Death and Grieving’, provide us with a marvellously rich and sensitive treasury of items that enable people to worship God ‘where they are at’ in terms of human experience – again, not so much ‘giving the customers what they want’ as giving the worshippers what they need. *CH4* deserves the widespread commendation it has received for the range of praise resources that it offers the Church, recognizing the different styles and preferences and tastes that are evident in a healthily broad Church while expanding our horizons by introducing us to new or unfamiliar material, much of it drawn from our own heritage of folk melody or from congregational song from around the world, that is almost invariably worth the effort of getting to know.

It almost persuades me to forgive the compilers for omitting such jewels as ‘My God, I love thee; not because I hope for heaven thereby’ or ‘How great the harvest is’ (to mention but two).

To refer briefly to last year’s address to the Society given by Professor John Hume, I was, I confess, surprised by his openness to the use of modern technology in the form of screens and PowerPoint and multimedia presentations in worship. I hope that in my case it is more than ‘unfamiliarity breeding contempt’ that leads me to want at least to reserve a continuing place for a more ‘traditional’ approach. I have still to be convinced that the modern worshipper is unable to concentrate on the spoken word for longer than a few minutes and that visual images are essential to effective communication. (If that is the case, this address has been doomed to failure from the outset!)

While there is without question a place for multimedia worship, and while it is hard to deny that such means of communication are more likely to connect with the younger generation, there is still a case for allowing the power of the spoken word to interact with the listener’s imagination, leaving the Holy Spirit room to prompt internal images and thoughts and feelings far more relevant to that listener’s situation and need than any chosen in advance by the worship leader or preacher to be superimposed on a screen. How often are those of us who conduct worship thanked profusely by departing worshippers at the church door for having said or done something in the service we had no conscious intention of saying or doing?

So I am likely to reach retirement still following the pattern I have always followed, taken as the norm by the compilers of *CH3*¹⁶ and set out with such clarity in the much-maligned 1979 *Book of Common Order*,¹⁷ with the eucharistic progression even when the sacrament was not being celebrated of Approach to God (with praise and prayers of adoration, confession, absolution and supplication), The Word of God (with readings from the Old Testament, Epistle and Gospel, praise and sermon) and Response to the Word of God (with praise, perhaps Creed, offering, prayers of thanksgiving, dedication, intercession, commemoration of the faithful departed, and the Lord’s Prayer, followed by praise and benediction).

While I am very much at home with such a traditional approach to worship, I realise that there is a need for more contemporary styles, particularly for younger

people. Different styles have their own integrity and, rather than seeking to find a form that is all things to all people, employing a variety of styles at different services provides opportunity for people to find what is most congenial and helpful to them, while at the same time broadening their horizons and deepening their appreciation of unfamiliar forms.

There is no betrayal of any sacred principle in recognizing the value of offering choice to worshippers – both in terms of times of services and in terms of their content and style. One of the opportunities afforded by the Parish Grouping model being increasingly adopted within presbyteries within the Church of Scotland, calling too on the resources provided by local worship committees and members of congregations who have undertaken training in leading worship, is to be able to offer just such a range of worship opportunities, whilst never compromising Maxwell's exhortation only to bring and give of our best to God. Then, as Killinger urged, we can be open to the freedom that the Spirit brings, to the glory of God.

'Liturgy – giving the customers what they want?' I hope that I have said enough to indicate that my answer is a resounding and unequivocal 'Yes and No'.

I can do no better than refer you to the 'About the Society' page of our embryonic website: 'The search is no longer for what is liturgically correct, as if there were some way of worshipping that applied to all places and times. The current quest is for worship that is catholic and continually reforming, that is scriptural and topical – big enough to let our congregations glimpse eternal truths and mysteries, yet earthed in their experience and their resources.'

That, in the proverbial nutshell, is what I've been attempting to say.

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- 1 William D Maxwell, *Concerning Worship*, vii. (Oxford University Press, 1948).
 - 2 William D Maxwell, *Concerning Worship*, 81.
 - 3 Kenneth Grahame, *The Wind in the Willows*, 26th Edition, 150f (Methuen & Co Ltd, London, 1927).
 - 4 Kenneth Grahame, *The Wind in the Willows*, 152.
 - 5 Kenneth Grahame, *The Wind in the Willows*, 153.

- 6 Kenneth Grahame, *The Wind in the Willows*, 154.
- 7 Kenneth Grahame, *The Wind in the Willows*, 154ff.
- 8 John Killinger, *Leave It To The Spirit*, 130 (Harper & Row, New York, 1971).
- 9 John Killinger, *Leave It To The Spirit*, 143.
- 10 John Killinger, *Leave It To The Spirit*, chapter 1 'Forms'.
- 11 John Killinger, *Leave It To The Spirit*, 152.
- 12 John Killinger, *Leave It To The Spirit*, 155ff.
- 13 John Killinger, *Leave It To The Spirit*, 185.
- 14 John Killinger, *Leave It To The Spirit*, 182.
- 15 *Church Hymnary - Fourth Edition* (Canterbury Press, Norwich, 2005).
- 16 *The Church Hymnary: Third Edition* (Oxford University Press, 1973).
- 17 *The Book of Common Order* (1979) (The Saint Andrew Press, Edinburgh, 1979).