

# The Shape of Christian Worship

## What is Christian Worship?

‘Worship’ comes from the old English ‘woerthship’ which literally means worth-ship, to give something it’s worth. Christian worship is primarily about recognizing the worth of God, or honouring and praising God. In doing this we also remind ourselves who we are – the creation of a gracious, loving and all powerful being. One definition of worship is, “all that we are responding to all that God is.”

Christianity is a *corporate* religion - that means that we are not just individual Christians, but together we are the body of Christ. Part of our religious observance is to join with other Christians for prayer, worship, and to share and support one another in the life of discipleship. The most common way we do that is when we gather together for acts of public worship.

## What is it for?

There are several aspects to Christian worship:

- Gathering together as the people of God
- Gathering in the presence of God to offer praise and thanksgiving.
- To bring before God the joys and sorrows of the community, the wider church and the world
- For instruction and nurturing in the Christian Faith
- To offer our responses to God and reaffirm our commitment to Christ

## Why does it include certain things?

The shape of a service of worship is often called the Liturgy, this comes, via Latin, from a Greek word which means the work of the people, hence the English word ‘service’. Today ‘liturgy’ is often associated with churches which follow a formal, prescribed pattern of worship. However every worship gathering is liturgical in the sense that a service takes place.

Liturgical traditions vary between, and within, denominations. The Anglican Church includes a wide range of liturgical practices. Whatever form worship takes, there will be certain elements within a service. Not all of these will be included in every service, but at least some of them will:

- Praise
- Confession
- Assurance of God’s forgiveness
- Thanksgiving
- Proclamation of the Word of God
- Responding to God’s Word
- Affirming the faith we share
- Celebrating the Lord’s Supper.

The diagram on page 3 shows in more detail how these ingredients give a particular shape to worship.

### **Who is it for?**

Worship as worth-ship, recognizing the worth of God, may give the impression that we offer worship for God's sake – that God needs us to offer praise and glory. God does not *need* worship! We cannot add to God by recognizing God's greatness, God cannot become more worthy because we say that God is worthy. But worship is not irrelevant to God, it is one of the ways we have been given to communicate with God, to grow closer to God and to understand more and more of our Heavenly Father.

Worship is for the gathered people, and those leading worship aim to enable every person to become aware of God's presence, to have a new experience of, insight into or understanding of God through the worship that is offered. Every person who has gathered for worship, as well as some who haven't, participate in the act of worship. Each person contributes to the service that is taking place, through their presence, their responses, their prayers, their membership of the community etc. Some people will also make a particular contribution by leading all or part of the service. This might include reading the Scriptures, preaching, addressing the children, offering the prayers etc.

Worship is also for the whole Church. When we meet as a local congregation, we are just one part of the Church universal – the Church on earth and in heaven. When we worship, we join with all of our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Worship is also for the world. In and through our worship, we share with God concerns and joys about God's world. We recognize that no part of creation is irrelevant to God and that part of the duty of the Church is the care of the whole of God's creation.

### **Why is it done differently in different Churches?**

The Christian Church has a history of fall-outs and schisms. In every generation, people have felt so passionate about the truth of the faith and the way in which we should respond to that, that they have challenged the current practices of the Church and demanded that they change. The outcome of this has usually been that they end up forming another branch of Christianity rather than reforming the existing Church.

That is why there are so many Christian denominations, and so much variety in the way different churches are organized and the way they worship. Each denomination has a slightly different focus and structure, and that is often reflected in the style of worship. For example, the founders of Methodism, John and Charles Wesley, were great hymn writers and believed that people would learn about the faith by singing it. This emphasis on congregational singing is evident in most Methodist worship. Churches in the Reformed tradition often have a great emphasis on preaching, so Baptist, URC and Presbyterian Churches are likely to dedicate a significant amount of worship to the proclamation of the Word – reading Scripture and preaching.

Churches also differ in the extent to which their liturgy is prescribed. Roman Catholic Churches generally stick very closely to a given liturgy, so that you could attend RC worship anywhere in

the world and the shape and style would be broadly the same. Many Anglican churches also adhere to the prescribed forms of worship, although there is considerable variance on this within Anglicanism. Many Free Churches don't stick to a formal liturgy but pattern services according to theme, the focus of the day etc.

## Why does the shape of worship matter?

The liturgy – the shape or pattern of our worship tells a story. It tells the marvelous story of the saving work of God. Much of our liturgical tradition is inherited from a time when the majority of people were illiterate, and all church services were conducted in Latin. The average person didn't have much chance of knowing what was going on! In that context, the symbols used and the shape of the worship itself were hugely important, for many people that was how worship became meaningful for them.

The shape of God's story can be summarized as:

**Chapter 1 - Creation** God brings into being all that is, seen and unseen. God creates human beings in God's own image and likeness.

**Chapter 2 – The Fall** Adam and Eve represent all people as they turn away from God and all that God gives them and prefer to follow their own rules, be their own masters.

**Chapter 3 - The people of Israel** God remains faithful to the people of Israel, throughout all of their faithlessness to God. Prophets are raised up as God's messengers, to tell the people of Israel how they have lost their way.

**Chapter 4- The coming of Jesus** The Messiah that the Jews have long been waiting for is born – but he is not as they expected! Jesus overturns many of the practices of Judaism and challenges the social and political order of Israel. Jesus is publically crucified and on the third day, rises again.

**Chapter 5 - The Church** Followers of the living Christ are drawn into the body of the Church by the Holy Spirit. Christians live out the values of the Kingdom which Jesus proclaimed and spread the Good News of Jesus.

**Chapter 6 -The Final Fulfillment** The promises of God will ultimately be completely fulfilled and the Kingdom of God established fully.

The shape of worship echoes something of the shape of this story.

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## Gathering as God's People

Invocation of God's Presence.

Confession and Assurance of Forgiveness

Gloria, Hymn of Praise

God is the creator of all and calls us into relationship with Him. We fall away from God, but are always welcome back. We repent of that which has taken us away from God and recommit to our journey with the Lord.

## Ministry of the Word

Scripture readings

Sermon

Affirmation of Faith

The Christian community is formed around the Word of the Lord; the Scriptures which tell the story of God's work throughout history for the salvation of the world. The congregation make this their own story and work through what it means for today in this particular place. We identify ourselves with all who are part of this story across time and place and assert that we hold eternal truths in common.

## Response of the People

Offering

Prayers of Intercession

The Christian community responds to the initiative God has taken in drawing us to Him. We respond as a people, bound together in our shared life. All that we have is from God and he invites us to ask for what we need.

## Ministry of the Table

Affirmation of Unity and peace

Words of Institution

Prayer of Thanksgiving

Lord's Prayer

Breaking Bread

The Church exists because the death and resurrection of Jesus has opened a new way of knowing God. We remember and appropriate the sacrifice of Jesus and the triumph of God's love.

We sample in part the abundance of life that we will experience when Christ and the church are perfectly united.

## So what?

How is this relevant to your own parish, or how does it affect the way you might lead worship? The answer will be different for everyone, according to their own context, traditions and gifts. The following questions may help you to work out what it means for your parish, and your contributions to gathered worship.

- A.** Do you think it is important to understand the shape of worship in your own church? What difference might it make to be aware of the meaning and traditions behind it?
- B.** What are the possibilities and risks when we radically change the shape of worship? What would you want / need to be aware of in making changes in your own parish?
- C.** What part of your regular service do you find most helpful / inspiring / challenging / nurturing? Why do you think it is so important for you?
- D.** What part of your regular service do you find boring/ alienating / irrelevant? Why do you think it is included in the service? Do you think it could be done more effectively?

## Follow up ...

If you would like to learn more about the shape of Christian Worship, the following books may be of interest:

**James F White *A Brief History of Christian Worship* (1993) Abingdon Press**

This book traces Christian worship through the New Testament period, the first centuries of Christianity, the middle ages, the reformation period, modern times, and then worship of the future. White is not pushing one particular style of worship but shows how different trends have dominated during different periods. If you like this, you may also like:

**James F White *Introduction to Christian Worship* (2001) Abingdon Press**

Now in its 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, this book traces the development of forms of worship from the first Christians. It is quite a detailed account, and offers some thorough discussions of the main Christian traditions.

**Stephen Burns *Liturgy (SCM StudyGuide)* (2006) SCM**

This is an accessible book which starts by exploring participation in worship. It then goes on to look at the shape of Christian worship and the final section explores some of the debates and challenges about worship today.

**Paul F. Bradshaw (ed) *New SCM Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship* (2002) SCM**

A very comprehensive dictionary offering definitions and discussions about all aspects of Christian worship.