

## *The Simplicity of Christian Worship*

In one sense the seasons of the year and the Church's Calendar of festivals bear a striking resemblance to one another. In the Northern Hemisphere Easter coincides with Spring, the one declaring that life was brought out of death in Christ, the other bringing new, young growth from the soil and the flowers and blossom speaking of the beauty of new beginnings. But there the similarity ends. Life is given, as it were, to the soil by the weather patterns of Spring but the festival of Easter is a commemorative celebration of God's free gift of new life, love and reconciliation for all humankind given once for all in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The seasons of the year are cyclical, regeneration having to recur every year but the message of Easter is that Jesus is alive now and for ever, to whom we respond daily in faith and in worship confirm our commitment to him before God.

We shall be seeing how the rise of the Calendar in the Church eventually changed the early conviction that in worship Jesus, the risen Lord, was always present to and with the community. Jesus would then be seen as either a figure in the past or 'absent', in the heavenly places, with whom we must get in touch by the rites of worship. In particular the single, unique commemoration of his death and resurrection was split up into several distinct rites which became a re-living of those events and lapsed into a cyclical, regenerative form of ritual worship. Today we need to be clear that the commemorations of the Calendar can be used, as the reformers of the sixteenth century hoped, in the context of worship which is inclusive always of the Master who invites us to the feast.

### The New Testament

Christian worship as we see it in the New Testament is a new phenomenon. Using the old materials of worship - 'psalms, hymns and spiritual songs' - and above all celebrating in agape meals 'the breaking of the bread' in which Jesus is known, Christian worship no longer is waiting for things to happen, or alternatively performing rites to make things happen, but declares that God has come to us in Christ. In him the new age of God's kingdom has arrived. There is now only one age - the present time which will be ultimately fulfilled. To respond in Christian worship is to recognise what time it is. It is also the expression of a new relationship with God in the Christ who is alive. To think about Christian worship in these terms is to realise how this depends upon a radical change in perception of what worship is about. As we respond to Christ's call to each one of us we receive the grace and gift of faith, so that when we come in community to worship it is by 'faith working through love'.<sup>1</sup>

Of course there is very little evidence in the New Testament about how the early communities worshipped apart from a few hints here and there. But Paul and the gospel writers do tell us about this new phenomenon of life in Christ. The gospels, while noting many of the historical details of Jesus' mission and death are chiefly concerned to express the reality of the living Christ, known in the communities in which they lived and worshipped. So also Paul with his own experience of Christ urgently declares that the old has passed away in Jesus and the new creation has come. This is the time of grace and freedom and strength in the Spirit to witness to God's present kingdom. The fact that in the early days of the Christian communities worship was centred round the weekly celebration of the resurrection (on the Lord's day), and the annual commemoration of Easter, tells us that the New Testament vision had taken a great hold upon them. There was reality both about worship and discipleship.

### The First Three Centuries

There is also very little evidence of what worship was like in the first three centuries. The most detailed account is in Justin, at about 150 where the eucharist is described in outline. Readings from the prophets and from Paul are mentioned (but it is inconceivable that there would be no gospel reading). After the readings and prayers and offertory there is the president's prayer of the great Thanksgiving, followed by communion. It is

<sup>1</sup> Galatians 5:6

a simple rite. One has the feeling that in 150 and perhaps for another century there was still the New Testament vision of the end time and the clarity of worship mirroring that. By 350, however, everything had changed.

The reality of worship in the grace and freedom of the living Lord had begun to be overlaid with human preoccupations with drama and ritual. While the pattern of worship before the fourth century had been strikingly marked by the unique, single commemorative celebration of the passion and resurrection of Jesus, now there would be a growing number of commemorations of the historical events of the pre-Easter Jesus. The attitude towards worship instead of being in the mode of the present end time of God's love towards all humankind in Jesus will begin to be cyclical, giving a re-run and re-presentation of the events of Christ's life. This would affect the eucharistic celebration too, ending in the high Middle Ages with the understanding that the mass was a propitiatory sacrifice.

### The Jerusalem Rite

Jerusalem in the fourth century had become a popular place of pilgrimage. People would come from far away places to venerate and worship at the sites associated with Jesus. How it happened is not known but some have ascribed the exotic rites in Jerusalem at this time as being due to the genius of the bishop, Cyril. A good example is of one of the services held on the Friday before Easter Day in the later fourth century in Jerusalem. We owe this account to a pilgrim called Egeria. 'In the morning ... round about eight o'clock (there is brought to the bishop) a gold and silver box containing the holy wood of the cross.. All the people go past one by one. They stoop down, touch the holy wood first with their forehead and then with their eyes and then kiss it.... The whole time between midday and three o'clock is taken up with readings. They are all about the things Jesus suffered, demonstrating to all the people by the testimony of the Gospels and the writings of the Apostle that the Lord actually suffered everything the prophets had foretold ... You could hardly believe how every single one of them weeps during the three hours because of the manner in which the Lord suffered for us.'<sup>2</sup> Before this time there had never anywhere been a separate celebration of the passion on Good Friday apart from the Paschal celebration of Easter Day. Now pilgrims took these services and ideas back with them to their own parishes and dioceses, together with relics and so the new mode of worship spread widely and quickly within another two hundred years. Gregory Dix also comments on the Jerusalem liturgy that, '...it came to be thought primarily as the representation, the enactment before God, of the *historical process* of redemption, of the historical events of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus by which redemption had been achieved.'<sup>3</sup>

### The Calendar

The Calendar was formed piecemeal through a millennium, as is well known, and there were historical reasons for many of its commemorations and seasons. So Lent, being the preparation, originally of a few days for the preparation for baptism of the catechumens at Easter became the 40 days of our Calendar. By the sixth century there was a rule that this season was truly penitential for all people and that in it we were not to say alleluia (for presumably the Lord had not yet risen!). Christmas also was a late arrival (about the fifth to sixth centuries) and this came to have a preparatory time of penitence in Advent. With these commemorations and seasons in place we have now arrived at the possibility of Advent to Pentecost becoming a cyclical re-presentation and re-enactment of the historical events of redemption. Of course Christian communities would have been reading the accounts of the events of Christ's life, as well as the passion, from the time when in the late 60s there were written gospels being produced. But then it would have been in the context always of the risen Lord. The new outlook abandoned that clarity of insight into the gospel and substituted, bit by bit, what the Galatians were reproved by Paul for - 'You observe days, and months, and seasons, and years! I am afraid I have laboured over you in vain.'<sup>4</sup> J. Louis Martyn, commenting on this passage in Galatians says, 'By adopting the Teachers' holy calendar in their quest for salvation, the Galatians are behaving as though Christ had not

<sup>2</sup> John Wilkinson, *Egeria's Travels*, SPCK, 1973, page 138

<sup>3</sup> G. Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy*, Dacre Press, 1945, page 305

<sup>4</sup> Galatians 4:10-11.

come, thereby showing that they do not know what time it is.’<sup>5</sup> However, it was not until the high Middle Ages that the apogee was reached and the outlook became quite set. A. D. Nock wrote, ‘The eucharist, a meal and thanksgiving linked to the symbolic act by which Jesus made his disciples willing partners in his death, became the re-enacting of that death. Medieval piety developed the drama of Holy Week with increasing realism and in the domain of the Greek church the popular attitude still is that at every Eastertide Christ rises, and that if he did not the crops would not grow.’<sup>6</sup>

## The Reformers

The reformers of the sixteenth century swept away these mediaeval mysteries but they were not able to recover the gospel outlook mirrored so faithfully by Paul and the early Christian communities in their worship. There remained an overlay of the pre-Easter Jesus in his passion and death and the obsession of the Middle Ages with sin and death, obscuring the vividness of the portrait of the living Lord. However, wherever the Calendar remained, as in the BCP, it became a useful structure for the reading of Scripture at the different seasons and so allowing the ‘story’ to be read as a basis for faith rather than for re-enactment. They were sure of the ‘once-for-all’ nature of the gospel in Jesus.

## Today

Beginning in the nineteenth century there has been a huge and detailed research into the origins of liturgy from the earliest texts onwards. It may seem churlish to remark here that the vital element we need to be clear about in the origins of worship is its connection with the good news in Jesus but this has rarely been commented on by liturgical scholars. The same is true of the reforms of liturgy that have taken place in the Western Church during the last half century. There has been a small but enthusiastic movement to restore what was called, as long ago as the 1920s, ‘our catholic heritage’. Supported by the then flourishing religious communities there was a steady recovery of the mediaeval rites of re-enactment of the commemorations of Christ’s life and death. Within this recovery there came the now quite ubiquitous rubrics such as the forbidding of Alleluias in Lent. There was a felt need for something ‘more’ than the reformed rites allowed. But as we have pointed out, the problem lay not with the reformed rites as such, but with the inability of all reforms since the sixteenth century to recover the basic understanding of worship in terms of the gospel. Of course it is true that wherever the Lord’s people have gathered together in worship he is present to and with them whatever the all too human distortions brought about by false theories of worship. But it is important both for faith and for Christian growth in discipleship, and for the local Christian communities, that we let the false theories fall away and to see how the touchstone of worship is gospel rather than the traditions of rites. That is why in this paper the crux of worship at Easter has been used to highlight a deep misunderstanding about Christian worship since at least the fourth century. For it is at Easter that we are nearest to the gospel’s good news in Jesus, in his life as well as in his death and resurrection. In short, wherever there is a sort of pretence in any worship service that we are unable at that particular moment to acknowledge and praise the Lord as the risen Christ, we are undermining our own faith and clouding the vision of others. This is particularly true of services on Good Friday and Holy Saturday. So also when Lent is regarded as a preparation for these services there is the heightened anticipation that beyond Good Friday, on Easter Day, we shall then be able to greet the risen Lord. We note that in the recommended book for use by Anglicans, at the Easter Vigil, it is suggested, ‘The president may introduce the vigil of Easter using these or other appropriate words -“As we await the risen Christ.”’<sup>7</sup> The gospel has at this point vanished!

## The Simplicity of Worship

<sup>5</sup> *Galatians*, The Anchor Bible, 1998, page 418.

<sup>6</sup> A.D.Nock, *Conversion*, OUP, 1969, page 234

<sup>7</sup> Lent, Holy Week and Easter Services, SPCK, page 228.

Christian worship is of great simplicity. By that we do not mean that there should be a return to the monochrome versions of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. There has been a confusion in the West in the opposition to medievalism where it is thought that the alternative is puritanism of one sort or another. From the beginning there has always been a right diversity of forms of worship. What is not negotiable is the presupposition of the New Testament that worship is about a relationship with God in Christ and that our worship, of whatever kind, should always reflect that. The old tag, *lex orandi: lex credendi* can be turned round to this - what a person believes: that is how he worships. As has been noted, the church in Jerusalem set a dangerous precedent in its 'advanced' ritualism. Today there is the same sort of yearning for 'experience' of one kind or another. In the words of one liturgical scholar, 'We need a modest but joyful recovery of a few things: movement, light, space, variety of texture ... music, colour, symbol.'<sup>8</sup> But we have to say that the modern reformers of liturgy seem to have forgotten that it is faith that sets worship alight and brings to life the words we use as we all come as a community with Christ before the Father. The cyclical use of the Church's year has meant that we have again reached a version of worship which indeed parallels the changing seasons of the planet!

But let us not let it rest at that. Simplicity involves seeing all the commemorations of the Church's Calendar irradiated with the glory of Easter, telling us what time it is. It links us with real life bringing the memorableness of our worship right in to the heart of our being. Length of services, multiplicity of choices and 'enrichments' in worship lay burdens on the worshippers. They are no substitute for the directness and clarity of worship which springs from our freedom in Christ. 'For freedom Christ has set us free; stand fast therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.'<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> G. Guiver, CR, *Anglican Religious Communities Year Book*, Canterbury Press, 2001, page 176

<sup>9</sup> Galatians 5:1