

AN HOUR TO RAISE THE DEAD

The Art of Performance in Sunday Worship

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A SENSE OF DRAMA AND EVENT

From an early age I understood that an act of worship is a performance. I grew up in a Central Hall in Edmonton in north London. The number of people attending that church seemed to be continually declining, but the preachers who took services always seemed to have a certain amount of fire. I suppose our ministers were what we might think of now as old-fashioned ‘Central Hall’ men. Some of them may have been used to much larger congregations than the ones they got in those grey areas of the capital.

However, the worship that was presented in that place had a dramatic pattern to it. Hymns, prayers, and contributions from the choir would build up to the point when the sermon would be preached. Halfway through this preparation time there would be a natural break to allow the congregation to relax somewhat, and then the notices would be given and the collection taken. This natural anti-climax would be part of the performance because it was, in a sense, the pause before the climax that was the sermon.

The best sermons would be preached with passion from a huge pulpit space. Sometimes the preacher would move around the whole area of this Central Hall pulpit staging, and the eyes of the congregation would follow *him* (always in those days!) as he spoke. Sometimes the pulpit would be thumped to get the message across. I remember little of the content of the sermons that were preached in that place, but I do remember the performance of the worship. I learned at an early age that a service of worship is something that is performed.

Interestingly, it was also there that I began to learn the elements that make up a theatre performance. As a small boy I began to take an interest in magic tricks, and so I began to inflict very amateur performances upon the members of the church, at Sunday School Anniversaries and the like. This pastime would eventually lead me to a serious interest in all aspects of theatre, and to experiment with the elements that can create successful performances. What I have learned about performance I would now like to share with you.

A performance brings together a number of elements. At its most basic level these are story, performer(s) and space. In addition to these basic elements certain others can help to add meaning to the performance. I want, then, to look briefly at how these elements of performance come together in the theatre, because from this we can then go on to see how they come together in the performance of worship.

THE BASIC ELEMENTS OF PERFORMANCE IN THEATRE

1 The story and the script

A theatre performance begins because there is a story to be told. From the story will come the script. The script is the words that are said and the basic outline of the action. Often it will be written down, but it does not have to be. However, in the theatre a good script is always necessary for a good performance. The most superb production will flounder if the script leaves the audience wondering, ‘Why on earth did they bother?’

2 The performers

The performers have the task of enacting the story. Usually actors will be cast because it is felt that they can help to convey the meaning of the story. The performers ‘have a part to play’ in bringing the story to life. In this they bring their own experience and skills to the roles they play. In the performance they will not only be expected to recite the words of the script, but also to embody them. This means that the body language of the performers is as important as the words they say. Actors use physical techniques such as mime and gesture to convey the meaning of the drama. And in this the contribution of all the performers is equally important. Although we are used to thinking of ‘stars,’ if a lesser character in a drama does not contribute fully to the performance, the performance can be spoiled.

3 The director

In developing their parts the performers will usually be helped by the director. I am a chaplain at the Octagon Theatre in Bolton, and have often visited the theatre when rehearsals are in progress. In developing a play for performance there is usually a great deal of discussion about the way the actors will interpret their roles, what actions are appropriate to the particular characters being played, and so on. The role of the director is crucial in shaping the performance, and usually the way all the basic elements are brought together, the overall pace of the piece, and thus the final shape of the performance, is the responsibility of the director.

4 Space and levels

Performance always takes place in a specific space. There is a classic book by the great theatre director, Peter Brook, called *The Empty Space*, that, among many other insights, reminds us that performance occurs in particular spaces. The space in which the performance is presented affects its final form, for it is within the space that the actors create the movements which bring the performance to life.

I have also linked space with levels because space is not only horizontal, it is also vertical. The use of different levels also affects the final form of the performance. It is no accident that in drama kings sit above their subjects.

It is into this performance space that other elements can be added, and now it is necessary to mention them. These things are not basic elements, but they are often used in order to help bring out the meaning of the performance.

5 Scenery and props

Into the performance space may be added scenery and props. Scenery added into the working area restricts movement within the space, but at the same time shapes it to the meaning of the particular story being told. Scenery can be anything from a painted notice to tell people where the action is taking place to a full blown set.

Props may also be used to point to the meaning of the performance. Props are the things handled by performers. A magician's magic wand may help him to play the part of a magician. A telephone may help to create the idea of a telephone conversation.

Neither scenery nor props are real in themselves, but they act as pointers to the meaning of the performance that is taking place. They can be dispensed with entirely, but usually they are not.

6 Costume

Costume is also a pointer to the meaning of the performance. Costume can be anything from jeans and a T-shirt to a full blown period piece. Costumes can contribute to the meaning of a drama and even add new levels of meaning. As someone who goes out to entertain as a children's magician from time to time, I know how important costume is in helping to set the atmosphere of my performance.

7 Sound

Light and shade also assist in giving meaning to performance. Light is often used to highlight action, and to create mood.

Like lighting, sound effects can also be used to add to the meaning of what is taking place, and to help in the creation of mood and emotion, particularly if music is used.

SO WHAT MAKES A GOOD PERFORMANCE?

Having looked at the elements that go into the creation of a performance we can now ask the question, 'What makes a good performance?'

A good performance in the theatre occurs when all the elements are brought together in harmony with each other. When this occurs the script will be enhanced by the performance of the actors; the performance of the actors will be enhanced by the space in which the performance occurs; and the set, the costumes, the sound and the lighting, if these additional elements are being used, will add to the meaning of the drama. When we see a good performance we do not think about the elements that have gone to make it up. They are brought together in harmony, and we remember only the total effect of the performance.

But when things jar we notice them. If the script is poor, if the costumes clash with the scenery, if the lighting dominates the production, then the performance suffers. The key to a successful performance is to enable all the elements to work together in harmony.

If we understand this from our brief look at performance in the theatre then it can assist us greatly, I believe, as we go on to think about the performance that is an act of worship.

THE ELEMENTS OF PERFORMANCE IN WORSHIP

1 The liturgy is the script

Just as performance in the theatre begins with a story shaped into a script, so an act of worship begins because there is a story to be told. Worship begins because people have heard of God's story and want to relate their own stories to God's story. In order to help them tell these stories they form them into a liturgy or script.

Even in so-called 'free' churches, worship will have some kind of pattern to it, and

that pattern acts as the script for the service. The script of worship will be related to the basic story of worship, namely the telling of God's story and our response to that story.

Perhaps in the light of my comments about the importance of the script for creating effective performance it will be clear that the script does require proper preparation. Liturgies need to be well written, inclusive and, if doctrine is the articulation of God's story and ours, full of right doctrine! And before anyone accuses me of simply being hung up on written words, and not valuing the traditions of extempore prayer and preaching, let me say that I value these things greatly, but whenever I have heard them practised well, it has always seemed to me that the extempore has been based in the meticulous preparation of a devoted heart and an educated mind.

It is sufficient at this point to note that the script for worship is important and requires careful preparation.

2 The performers and the director

However, as we have already seen, a script, while it is an essential element of performance, is just one aspect of a whole, and now we must go on to consider the other things that must be brought into harmony if the worship is to work.

At this point, however, I need to make a comment about the difference between performance in the theatre and performance in worship. There is a major difference between the two. It lies in the fact that in the dramas of the theatre the performance is presented by actors to an audience, and despite the subtle variations that different audiences bring to each performance to enhance it or detract from it, there remains a divide between the presenters and the audience. In the performance that is worship the performance is the work of the whole people.

What is liturgy?

As Neil Dixon has reminded us, 'Liturgy is derived from two Greek words, and literally means "the work of the people." This means that the performance of worship depends upon all the worshippers, and while the worship leader may be responsible for the shape of the worship, the embodiment of the worship depends upon the whole congregation. The presentation pattern of worship must be seen to enable this.'

When we think about our act of worship we have to think about how our worship embodies the telling of God's story and our response to that story. Of course we cannot tell the whole of the story from Genesis to Revelation every week, but each week we will have this whole story in mind as we emphasise different aspects of it. And just as performance in the theatre is about embodiment of a script, so our worship must be an embodiment by all the performers, namely the worshippers.

So how are we to accomplish this? Once again understanding the way a performance in the theatre takes its elements and then embodies them can help us here. Actors must engage themselves at all levels of body, mind and spirit in order to create the performance. In the same way, I would suggest that the performance of worship will need to engage the worshippers at all these levels.

Gesture and bodily actions

Perhaps in Methodism over recent years we have been good at engaging minds, for this is the area that worship leaders have been prepared in. They have been taught that

hymns are to be chosen to match the theme or mood of the service. This is an intellectual choice. Prayers of adoration, confession and absolution have been offered, and prayers of intercession have been prepared to reflect the needs of the congregation and the wider world in an ordered, rational way. Good sermons, carefully prepared, have been our *forte*, and at their best all these things have inspired a deep spirituality. All these things are good and should not be lost from our worship.

However, thinking about performance in the theatre also suggests that we should think about bodily actions.

a) **Children and body language**

It is particularly important to think about bodily action in a situation where children are present. Children understand bodily things more than textual things. At first they learn through their bodies, and all of us, even in adult life, use body language to express ourselves and add to the meaning of our words.

As I observe it at present, in Methodist worship bodily action is somewhat limited. Worship leaders are often confined to a pulpit or a microphone or something else that restricts their movement. The movement of the congregation is often confined to standing for hymns, sitting down in their seats, and bowing their heads for prayer. Just occasionally, in more enthusiastic congregations, there might be clapping for some of the hymns or choruses. Interestingly, this is often used when children are present, and is an unconscious acknowledgement of the body-ness of children.

b) **Adoration and praise**

If we begin worship with adoration and praise, then how do we express that adoration and praise in a physical way? I have often asked performance workshops this question, and usually the physical action they have come up with is the gesture of raising the hands, possibly with the eyes looking upward. This gesture is a natural physical expression of adoration and praise. It can be introduced into worship in a number of ways. In all age worship it can be used as a gesture for the children ‘that the adults may join in with if they wish.’ As we reach out bodily so we can feel ourselves reaching out to God in praise. Our bodies help the expression of our worship.

c) **The Great Eucharistic Prayer**

As a worship leader myself, this is a gesture I use to help me express the powerful words of the Great Prayer of Thanksgiving in the Communion Service. Sometimes, when children have been present, explaining the gesture and inviting them to join me in it has been a way of expressing the importance of these words,

d) **Contrition and confession**

Again, I have often asked drama workshop groups what action expresses contrition and the sense of confession. Usually the action they have suggested is kneeling on the floor and/or bowing their heads. These simple bodily actions can give a vivid bodily expression to our words. At particular times in the Christian year, such as in the season of Lent, it may well be worthwhile, if the space allows it, to encourage the congregation to kneel, rather than simply remain seated.

Furthermore, when I was on sabbatical recently in Central America and attended worship regularly at a Roman Catholic church, there the people would beat their breasts to the words of the confession. It seemed a natural expression of devotion.

e) **Sharing the Peace**

Perhaps one of the places where we can express bodily our togetherness in fellowship is in the Peace. When shared with the children it is often greatly enjoyed, and to have the people walking around and shaking hands with each other can greatly enhance the worship.

It is possible to go on in this way thinking about how various actions can match the words in a service of worship. Further questions we might ask are, 'Does asking the congregation to stand for the reading of the Gospel help us to express its comparative significance in the performance of worship?' 'How do actions of the preacher add to or detract from the sermon?'

f) **Powerful preaching**

This last question was brought into focus for me when I worked overseas, for there I encountered a style of sermon that was very different from my own. My own sermons are mainly works of the head. I try to give them logic, and a structure that will assist the congregation to remember its main points. I try to compose little pithy phrases that will enable the congregation to link in with its ideas. My sermons are limited to no more than fifteen minutes, because I have been led to believe that after this the congregation will begin to lose the thread of my ideas.

However, the sermons I encountered in the Caribbean were rather less concerned with construction than with delivery. Certainly there were ideas behind the sermon, but what counted more than the ideas was the action of the preacher. The word had to be proclaimed with power, and so a powerful preacher would repeat his ideas dramatically over and over again, sometimes jumping up and down to get the point across. Such preachers, women and men, would often get carried away, so that sweat would pour out of them. The sermons would always last more than half an hour, sometimes an hour, and the preachers dramatically demonstrated in the performance the importance of the word of God. The ideas were rather less important than the drama of a performance charged with expressing something of supreme significance. It was often extremely effective, and at no point were children removed from such a performance.

g) **Children in worship**

In fact, since coming back to this country I have often wondered about the way children are frequently physically removed from worship. Overseas it is expected that children will be present for the service, and therefore they know they have a place in it. In this country it may be that the very act of removing children physically from the place where worship happens teaches them bodily from an early age that most of what happens in worship is not for them.

h) **Body language of the worship leader**

In addition to the points made above about preaching, it is also important to note that the body language of the worship leader can help or hinder the service. Worship leaders whose body language conveys carelessness or casualness, no matter what their words might say, will certainly detract from the service. Actors are often charged to claim their space and will use body language to express this. This might well be something for worship leaders to remember.

Also, as I have already mentioned in thinking about adding body language to the

Great Prayer of Thanksgiving in the Communion Service, bodily action by the worship leader can assist in conveying the meaning of the events being celebrated. For instance, lifting the bread and cup in communion gives those things significance, breaking the bread and lifting it high adds to the performance. When children are present in communion such gestures dramatically convey the importance that is attached to the things being used. Maybe when our new service book is prepared it will give some guidance as to simple actions that might be appropriate at various points in the liturgy, in the same way that it already points out when the congregation should stand and sit.

j) What other physical actions might help in enhancing our worship?

i) Processions

For example, what about processions? The use of processions seems largely to have died out in Methodism, although there are still some churches in my present circuit in Bolton which continue the practice of having a procession on the day of the Sunday School Anniversary, ‘Sermons Sunday’ as it is called. Many churches still have the practice of uniformed organisations processing in with flags at the beginning of the service, and out again at the end.

However, such a restricted use of processions may leave untapped a rich source of performance. They can bring all the age groups in the church together, and there are days in the Christian year when it may well be very appropriate to have a procession. Palm Sunday immediately springs to mind. Processions can help us to dramatise aspects of our faith that are hard to express in other ways. Some of the things they help us express are ideas such as the Church as the Pilgrim People, the Journey of Faith, Jesus as the Way, the Good Shepherd, and so on. Many Christian themes can be expressed by using a procession in worship.

ii) The sign of the cross

Another gesture used by many Christians, but perhaps traditionally associated with Catholics, is making the sign of the cross. This very simple gesture expresses taking up the cross. It may be done in an unthinking way, but so may repeating the Lord’s Prayer. To use it in worship seems to me to be no better or no worse than using the traditional ‘hands together and eyes closed’ gestures that many of us still associate with prayer.

3 The worship leader is the director

In all of these things the role of worship leader is vitally important, for whoever is leading the performance of worship will be responsible for directing the bodily action of the people. Usually we think of the worship leader as simply responsible for the final form of the script, selecting the hymns to be sung, deciding when and how prayers are to be said, and so on. In her or his preparation for a service a conscientious worship leader will devote considerable time to getting the script right. The sermon, even if it is not to be preached from a full script, will be meticulously prepared. The prayers will be thought about carefully, and the hymns chosen to reflect the overall theme of the service.

Shape and movement

All these things, as we have seen already, are vital, but alongside them the worship

leader should also give some thought to directing the overall shape of the worship, telling the congregation when to stand, sit, move, *et cetera*, and, importantly, pacing the worship.

If theatre takes the role of the director seriously, then I believe so must we. It makes for extremely shoddy worship if people don't know what they are expected to do, or, in the kind of words I have been using, how they are to embody the script.

How many times in Methodism have I seen people tripping over each other in the communion area because they have not been told where to stand, or how to move to distribute the elements? Worship leaders are directors. They should take this role seriously!

They should also, I would suggest, take note of the other basic elements that go into the creation of an effective performance, and be aware of how these other elements add to or detract from the performance of the people's worship.

4 Space and levels

Once the script for the service of worship has been planned, it is then helpful to think about the next basic element of performance, namely the space in which the performance of worship is to take place. By their design some worship spaces are very constricting.

The preacher and the pulpit

In some of the old Methodist chapels the pews were fixed to point to the preacher, and the preacher was placed in a high pulpit six (or sometimes even ten) feet above contradiction. This style of architecture was a very deliberate way of arranging the performance of worship. It made the preaching the central activity of worship, and often the rest of the space in such a chapel would contribute to the same idea, so that, for instance, a balcony would curve in to focus attention on the pulpit.

Sometimes the golden bars of the organ pipes would point down at the preacher, and at the same time carry his words up to heaven. This style of architectural space ideally complemented the text of the traditional 'hymn sandwich' style of worship that I, for one, grew up with.

But this kind of church building is not the only style of architecture that uses space to shape a pattern of worship. There are some parish churches too that have fixed their pews, but often these churches will make everyone look at the altar. In such churches the pulpit might well be pushed to one side. Clearly preaching is less important here. What is seen as important in these churches is what the priest does at the altar. Often in these churches the other parts of the space arrangement will emphasise this point. Choir stalls will narrow the focus and concentrate the attention. Sometimes a stained glass window will reflect up and down to the central focus. Clearly this space has been designed to reflect a script where the worship centres in the eucharist.

Winston Churchill is credited with having said, 'We shape our buildings and then our buildings shape us.' This is particularly true of church buildings where the space inside has been created to match a particular kind of script. Such buildings can create problems. If we want to change the script of an act of worship then sometimes the space of the building can act against change. Developing a more eucharistic style of worship in a building where the communion table is tucked under a large pulpit is not impossible, but the space of the building can work against it.

The way space works

A good deal of my understanding about the way space works in the presentation of performance has come from watching the rehearsals and the performances at Bolton's Octagon Theatre where I am chaplain. This modern theatre is able to arrange the seating for performances in a variety of ways. Over the past year I have seen performances 'in the round,' on a traditional 'proscenium arch' staging, and various approaches in between. Each of the different stagings has contributed in its own way to the different performances. For instance, one of the plays in the round was a dense mystery thriller. The atmosphere of the play was enhanced by the dense, almost claustrophobic, quality of the set. An Old Time Music Hall was presented on a proscenium arch staging that seemed to add to the expansiveness and exaggeration of the characters.

These few examples remind us that when we come to present worship it is a good idea to consider the space where it is to take place. Space can be used in a confining way or in an enabling way, inclusively or exclusively. If we have a space for worship that is permanently fixed, and which cannot be changed, this will inevitably restrict the possibilities for changing the performance of worship. In such a case it is important to think about what the space was designed to do, and follow a liturgy (script) that is in harmony with it.

Changeable space

However, if we have a space that is changeable this can help us change the performance of our worship. It might well be worth trying different shapes to reflect different themes. For instance, the theme in the JLG Lectionary for the Second Sunday after Pentecost in Year 2 is 'The Church's Unity and Fellowship.' This could be enhanced by creating worship in the round. The sense of unity and belonging together in Christ could be expressed by arranging the chairs in a circle, maybe with the people gathering round the Lord's Table in the centre. If this is tried, however, it is important to include everyone in the circle, for those left out of circles can easily feel excluded.

Semi-circles, instead of straight rows of chairs, also help to create a feeling of involvement, but this shape also gives more authority to the person or persons in the centre of the semi-circle, by isolating them from the rest of the group. This is a reminder that different shapes give authority, and perhaps power, to different people. It is worth looking at different spaces and the way they bestow authority on those who use them.

Think about the way people shape themselves in the space for worship. If they come in to the space and separate themselves out, then perhaps they are wanting to express an individuality in their worship that can deny the corporateness of the event. Generally speaking, the more people place themselves together the more they are together as a community. I remember being terribly impressed with the way the men at Friday prayer in a mosque moved from private to corporate prayer in the simple act of moving together.

Perhaps one way to bring a church community together is to bring them together in the space they use for worship. If you can avoid people separating themselves out for worship than your worship might begin to express its corporate nature. Taking a few chairs away can help togetherness, but in declining congregations don't turn this into musical chairs!

If you want your children or young people to be part of a corporate act of worship then do not let them separate out into groups. Mix people together and they will feel together. It may even be helpful to use a different space for worship from time to time. In my own church, for some people our worship was improved when, during the summer, we were able to use our car park for worship. Changing the space for the worship brought people together in a new way and enhanced the event. Changing the space of worship can create new patterns, which can enrich the performance of worship.

Levels in worship space

What about the different levels that operate in the worship space? Because, generally, Methodists regard preaching as an important part of worship, the preacher is raised up to express this. Some modern Methodist churches are perhaps less sure about the importance of preaching for they have pulpits that no longer isolate the preachers or raise them quite so high. Just as using different spaces can express different things so can different levels, and it may be that putting things more or less on one level is a more appropriate way of expressing the doctrine of ‘the priesthood of all believers,’ than having a preacher towering over a congregation.

Height does give authority to things. Perhaps we should ask what we think we are doing when we raise up the flags of the uniformed organisations.

5 Scenery and props

This last question leads naturally into a consideration of the scenery and the props we use in the performance of our worship. Traditionally Catholics have had no problems with adorning their worship space with all manner of things, whereas those of us who belong to a Protestant tradition have often been used to mostly bare-walled buildings, with maybe a text over the pulpit, or the Commandments written in fancy writing on either side of the preacher.

However, just as the scenery and props in the performance of the theatre are supposed to enhance the performance, so can the things we bring into our worship space to create the setting for our worship. Just as the scenery of the theatre is there to contribute to the meaning of the performance, so the things we put up in our worship space should contribute to the meaning of our worship. Unfortunately the Puritanism that is part of the Methodist tradition has meant that often things have been added to our worship space in haphazard ways rather than with any planning. Furthermore, once something has been added to the worship space then, for a variety of reasons, it becomes very difficult for it to be removed.

Walls and banners

What do we have on the walls of our worship space? In some churches memorials to the dead almost seem more important than the present day worship of the congregation.

Many congregations now use banners on the walls of their churches, and there is much to commend this. Banners can also bring artistry and creativity into the performance of worship. If they are good, they can provide visual pictures that can help children and adults to enter into an experience of worship, and begin to appreciate some of the great Christian themes. It is, however, important to use banners sensibly. It is sometimes possible for their messages to conflict with other parts of the

service. It is difficult, for example, to preach about the seriousness of the claims of the gospel over a banner full of cartoon-style animals.

In traditional Catholic worship, after the Holy Thursday eucharist the altars are stripped, colours removed and some of the adornments covered. This dramatic action seems appropriate preparation for worship on Good Friday. On one occasion I went to a Good Friday service in a Methodist church where a large banner proclaimed ‘He is risen!’ The message on this banner is, of course, true, but to have it so blatantly displayed on Good Friday made it almost impossible for me to concentrate on the solemnity of the day.

Incidentally, even the untrained eye can often tell a great deal about a church from the style of its banners and where they are placed. Similar comments might also be made about other things such as pulpit falls and lectern hangings. So congregations should beware!

But other things can adorn our walls and enhance the performance of worship too. The pictures that the children create in Sunday School can be used to bring recognition to their contribution to worship. The crafts of adults added to a Harvest Thanksgiving service can enrich that worship. Sensitively chosen slides can focus thoughts for prayer and meditation, particularly in all-age worship.

I remember that one year during Holy Week one of my churches ran a series of painting days and evenings for people of all ages, children and adults. People who felt they had little talent were encouraged to come and make collages, and help to create a giant screen. Others were encouraged to use the talents they had to create pictures. All the efforts were put on the walls of the church on Holy Saturday so that our church was a blaze of colour on Easter Day. It greatly enriched our worship.

Permanent fixtures

Then there is the matter of the things we use in our worship. I have already made some comments about the placing of the pulpit, so I would like to look now at some of the other things regularly used in our services. In thinking about the way props are used in the theatre I made the point that props are to be used as pointers to the meaning of the performance. We could make a similar point about the things we regularly use in worship.

Things we regularly find in the worship spaces of Methodism are the communion table, the Bible, a cross, the things we use for the offering, the things we use for communion services, and the baptismal font. Most churches have flowers in the worship space, and sometimes our worship space includes temporary items such as Christmas trees.

The holy table

What these things look like and how we use them can add to or detract from our worship. Let me make some comments about these matters, hopefully without being too controversial. First a word about the communion table. The communion table is an important contribution to worship in its own right. It is there to help us to enact a memorial of Christ’s Last Supper with his disciples. It is there to focus our attention on Christ and the saving sacrifice he made for us. So where we place the communion table and the way we use it ought to reflect the significant place it has in our worship.

One way to recognise its significance is to make sure that it has its own space. If it is

overshadowed by the pulpit, then the pulpit will inevitably be seen as more significant. If it is placed so that the minister can stand behind it, that becomes a way of including the congregation in its celebrations. In this respect it is interesting to note that much of the renewal of Catholic worship that has taken place in recent years has come about through the simple device of moving the main table from a high altar where the priest was forced to celebrate the mass with his back to the congregation to a more central position, so that the priest now faces the congregation and includes them in what is going on.

If giving the table its own space is important, so is not using it as a kind of gather-all for all the other things we use in our worship that we are not quite sure what to do with. To spell this out a little more, let me suggest that to place an open Bible upon a communion table is to make the Bible more important than the table. This arrangement conveys a clear signal, namely that the table is simply something that holds the Bible, not something significant in its own right. In any case, the Bible is not a symbol; it is a book from which to read. A church trying to develop a more eucharistic style of worship might well think about separating Bible and table, maybe by linking the Bible more closely with the place of preaching. The Bible should be read from the place where it is to be expounded.

Bibles, crosses and flowers

Similar points can be made about the placing of a cross or flowers on the communion table. A cross on the communion table detracts from the meaning of the table. Crosses are scenic additions designed to enhance the performance of the worship, and they are best used as items in their own right, preferably, in my view, on a wall somewhere. Incidentally, we should also ask what kind of message is conveyed by the more ornate crosses that decorate some of our churches.

If flowers are brought for display in church they are not there just by way of decoration. They remind us of the part of God's story that tells us that he is the Creator, and that all things are part of his creation. They are there to make their contribution to the meaning of the worship. But if we place flowers on the communion table we once again make the table a mere stand for the flowers, rather than something to be focussed upon in its own right. Flowers do have a place in the worship space, but, as I would constantly emphasise, so does the communion table. To use as a mere stand for flowers something which has such an important part to play in the performance of worship seems to me to be undervaluing it, to say the least. A separate display stand or table for flower arrangements would serve the worship better.

In the light of this thinking, it almost goes without saying that the purpose of a Christmas tree in the worship space is to point our thoughts to the Christmas message. We would be well advised to keep it clear of any of the things more regularly used in worship, and smaller trees should certainly not be placed on the communion table!

However, while a Bible and flowers may well be inappropriate things to place on the communion table, to bring the collection and place it upon the table seems perfectly acceptable. In the service of worship, as many worship leaders remind us in their prayers, the offerings represent the offering to Christ of the lives of the worshippers. To place this offering on the table where we make the memorial of the offering of Christ seems a highly appropriate thing to do. If, as our Service Book allows, the bread and wine are also brought to the table from the congregation, then the sense of

offering is increased. The involvement of children in this offertory can dramatically express their involvement in the sacred performance.

The font

Finally, in thinking about the things we use to enable our worship, a word about the baptismal font. A high doctrine of baptism is not expressed by having a very small font that is hidden from view and taken out only when it is to be used! A font that genuinely reflected the fact that baptism is a point of entry into the church and a sacred sacrament would always be in view, in a space apart to give it authority.

6 Costume

A little booklet which casts a somewhat humorous and yet serious eye over the history of the things Methodist worship leaders have worn for worship is called *Blackbirds and Budgerigars - A Critical History of Methodist Liturgical Dress 1786-1986*. It was written by Norman Wallwork and published by the Methodist Sacramental Fellowship. Anyone interested in this subject would find this booklet helpful. All I want to do now is to point out that whatever is worn for leading worship will make a statement of some sort, and worship leaders would be well advised to think about the kind of statement their costume is making.

Costumes make statements

Personally I do not think it matters what worship leaders wear, as long as they are aware of the different kinds of statements that different costumes make, and as long as the costume that is worn contributes something to the worship rather than distracts from it. While to some extent what contributes to worship and what distracts from it will be a matter of personal preference, my experience of theatre does suggest that there are certain things that may be inappropriate. Informal clothing cannot fully express the dignity of worship. I once watched a young local preacher conduct a traditional ‘hymn sandwich’ style of worship in a red shirt and boiler suit. It seemed very incongruous. On the other hand, over-elaborate costuming conflicts with simplicity.

Bright colours may make unintended statements, and whilst thinking of colours, we ought to remember that, in many parts of the church, particular colours express particular offices (for example, only a bishop wears a purple clerical shirt and cassock), and at the eucharist, stoles of different colours are used at different times of the Christian Year.

Personally I feel that, as each kind of drama in the theatre has its own costume, so various kinds of costume can assist in enabling worship to express different things. Everyday wear can express the idea of the ‘priesthood of all believers.’ A black gown can give authority. A white cassock alb can express light and joy.

The dress of the congregation!

So far, of course, I have focussed on the costume of the worship leader, but it is equally interesting to note that what members of the congregation wear for worship will also be making statements about the way they are approaching the service.

When I worked in the Caribbean, it was clear that people took their worship extremely seriously. Best dresses were still the order of the day, and everyday wear contrasted sharply with ‘Sunday best.’ In the black ‘Church of the Cherubim and Seraphim’ the

whole congregation have special costumes reflecting their place in the Body of Christ. Some are literally costumed as Prophets, Apostles, Teachers and so on. Their worship costumes clearly mark out their activity.

But what of the costumes we see in the Methodist Church today? Does the fact that so many people wear leisure clothes to worship mean that worship is now a leisure time activity? Does what our children wear to worship help them to grasp the idea that this is an important activity?

7 Light and sound

Candles and lighting

Traditionally the Church has always used light to enhance its worship. Candles (which, incidentally, also contain the dramatic element of fire) were used to focus attention on the communion table. The Easter Vigil was a time for rekindling the light after the darkness associated with Good Friday. For the early Christians, each evening began with a service of the Lighting of the Lamps. Stained glass windows were used to provide points of focus and sometimes to act as dramatic backdrops to the services of worship that took place beneath them.

In our own day many churches, even Methodist ones, are not averse to using candles for Christingle Services or Candlelight Carol Services (often with a lack of thought of fire risks that would not be tolerated in any theatre). Also, much modern church architecture uses light, both natural and artificial, to direct the eyes of the worshippers. If light can be used in these ways, it is interesting to think about how it might be used in other ways also.

A bright or moving light will always direct attention to something you wish to focus upon. For instance, a spotlight focussed on the font in a service of baptism might help to contribute to the significance of the event. If the light in your worship centre is poor, think about how it might be improved even in simple ways. Worship in gloomy light creates gloomy worship.

Candles can also be used creatively. Our baptismal service includes the possibility of the newly baptised child being given a candle. The logistics of this need careful working out, but it is a very powerful symbol where it does occur.

Sound reinforcement

Sound can also be used in creative ways. Many of us these days work to a background of music on the radio, record or tape. This is probably particularly true for young people. We use music as a background to the things we are doing. We might even use music to help us create a mood. It is possible to do similar things in worship. Music used to help create a mood for prayer, or to provide a background for meditation can be extremely effective. The meditations that Frank Topping has brought out on tape are a model for the kind of things I am referring to here. However, such things must be well rehearsed, and the sound system used must be appropriate to the size of the worship space. A sound system which is so quiet you cannot hear it is a great source of aggravation.

This last comment also applies to amplification systems. These seem to have sprung up in almost every church over recent years. Presumably they have been installed to assist the congregation to hear those who are called to lead worship. I cannot help reflecting, however, that in live theatre most of the acting (apart from specialist cases

like some modern musicals) is still accomplished without such microphones, and that if amplification systems are put in place to overcome poor diction then actually the actors have failed. Worship leaders whose voices need amplifying would, I feel, be better off learning how to project their voices than thinking they can rely upon a microphone. Good microphone technique is something that has to be learned and still relies on voice projection, and microphones and sound systems can be very restricting. If the microphone is static then the worship leader might well be forced to lead very static worship. If the microphone is corded, then the cord can easily distract the worship leader and thus distract the worshippers. I do recognise that amplification systems can assist those with hearing difficulties, especially via a loop system, and in enabling children to share in leading worship, but, especially with children, training must be given. In the theatres all props are rehearsed with from the beginning and particularly so if microphones are to be used. In presenting the performance that is worship we should learn this lesson.

CONCLUSION

In all this I am not suggesting that we strive for theatricality. In pointing out these things theatricality in worship is the very last thing I am looking for. Theatricality would detract from worship by making people aware of the details of the performance rather than enabling them to participate in the performance of worship.

Worship, for Christians, takes place when all the participants in the service are enabled to offer worth to God by celebrating his story, particularly the story of his action in Christ, and when they find appropriate ways to express their response to that story. But in the end, just as successful performance in the theatre depends upon bringing all the elements of performance into harmony, so does the performance of worship. If we are aware of the elements that go into the creation of the performance of worship then we can begin to think about how we can use them to enhance worship. That is really what this is all about.

If I have helped you to think about ways in which you can enrich your worship by examining and using the elements of performance and bringing them into harmony then I shall have succeeded in my task.

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