

‘Standing and steps. That’s why I could never have been a priest Too much standing – too many steps.’ A lovely quote from Alan Bennett. But standing and steps notwithstanding, worthy worship is a big thing with me, so I’m thrilled to be tackling this for my first Lent talk.

In 987AD Prince Vladimir of Kiev fancied sexing up his religious practice, so he sent mystery worshippers to St Sophia’s cathedral in Constantinople. They reported back ‘We did not know where we were, on heaven or on earth. We just cannot forget the beauty!’ Do worshippers leave our churches with a sense of ‘We cannot forget the beauty?’

Recently a member of the Russian Orthodox Church visited St Paul’s Cathedral for Matins. Clearly the choir weren’t having the best of days. Because he commented to his host afterwards that he didn’t feel worship was actually taking place, nor that those attending came expecting worship: a damning indictment of one of the UK’s leading cathedrals! Does worship actually take place in our churches? Do people come with a sense of eager expectation? ‘I was glad when they said unto me Let us go unto the house of the Lord!’ As I drive around the diocese here and there on a Sunday morning, I pass worshippers going to church. Their faces often have a steely miserable look to them. I was glad when they said unto me, let us go unto the house of the Lord. Sometimes there is a young woman in a bright summer dress with a spring in her step and a song in her heart. Lucky church, I think. Worship unlocks the mystery of God in the world. Classically the word worship means giving worth, giving worth to our selves, our work, our leisure, our relationships, our church and supremely giving worth to the God of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. Before that God we stand as nothing, yet his grace alone convinces us that we are his beloved child, cherished and special.

The definition of the word liturgy is the work of the people, with liturgy being the great connect with our everyday lives and God’s desire for us permeating every moment of our every day. Worship therefore is not the icing on the cake, something we do for an hour or so a week and then get on with life. Worship and liturgy are the cake, and give life a taste to die and live for. It is right that worship should be seen as the church’s shop window. It should excel, keying in to nothing less than the worship of heaven. We cannot forget the beauty.

Whenever I worked as a parish priest with ordinands on placement, we used to devise special acts of worship. The ordinands concerned were enthused and informed by the latest scholarship on liturgical practice, about which I, a dinosaur, inevitably was a bit rusty, But my final check when we had completed our worship draft was to ask where in this marvellous creation were people going to be moved. And if we couldn’t come up with a few possibilities, we went back to the drawing board.

The Sports Broadcaster, Adrian Chiles, spent one Lent going to a different mass every day. He then wrote a review of the 46 daily masses he had dropped in on It is both a funny and sobering read, caught well by the extracts below:

1. The nearest parking spot was miles away so I ended up cutting it fine, sprinting to the church. Breathing hard, I pushed against a closed door with a piece of paper stuck on it: “Wednesday. No Mass. Priest’s day off. All attempts to contact him will be futile.” He can’t say that, can he? What if God said that?
2. The clue’s in the word: Communion is about communication. It’s not even about the homily; it’s about really communicating the words of the liturgy rather than just intoning them for the millionth time.

3. The majesty of the setting was simply irrelevant; for me there was no sense of wonder. It was entirely in keeping with the rest of it that they didn't share the Peace. Miseries! I felt more warmth and love in Caffè Nero a few doors along.

There are poignant moments too

4. There was a Polish lady next to me one Tuesday morning in Our Lady of Grace and St Edward's in Chiswick. She held a tiny passport-sized photo in a miniature, gilded frame. I took it to be her mum. With tenderness almost unbearable to behold, she occasionally stroked her face. Therefore with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven.

5. One Friday lunchtime at St Patrick's in Soho Square I chose my pew, but before my bottom touched the seat I sprang back up in alarm as I realised there was someone in a sleeping bag motionless at my feet. I looked around at the rest of the congregation but no-one else seemed very concerned, so I shrugged inwardly, knelt and prayed for him, or it may have been a her. Who knows? No use worshipping Christ in the sanctuary unless you pity him in the slum.

6. Then there was the Church of the Sacred Heart and St Catherine of Alexandria in Droitwich Spa. If you're passing, do go and see the mosaics: they are simply breathtaking. The priest's sermon mentioned a trip across a lake in India. Walking through the dark churchyard after the service, a lady behind me said to her friend: "That was good; you don't think of them having lakes in India, do you?" Oddly, I knew what she meant.

The Making of Westside Story is a behind the scenes look into the 1984 recording sessions conducted by the musical's composer Leonard Bernstein with Kiri Te Kanawa as Maria and José Carreras as Tony. It is an excellent example of how a conductor painstakingly draws out the very best in performers (some with definite attitude) to enable a truly mass-like act of worship. YouTube it at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j3SEW63LsaM> If you can only spare a few minutes, listen to One Hand, One Heart at 54.00. Bernstein tells how his hardened daughter was moved to tears – the highest accolade for any act of worship. I recently consulted widely about worship, and people thought the following areas were worthy of attention.

1. Setting the scene James Jones, Bishop of Hull then Bishop of Liverpool championing the Hillsboro victims, said that anyone entering church for the first time deserved a medal. Think about it. More often than not, you are faced by a heavy door which clanks open revealing a dark interior. If you are lucky, someone shoves some books at you. Are they selling them? Have they mistaken you for the juggling act? Where do you sit? On the altar? In the choir stalls? In someone else's pew? The service starts. Hymn Number 42, the cheery priest announces, if you are lucky. Sometimes the organ just launches forth with a hymn tune. Which of the sundry books you have been presented with has hymns in it? What is the difference between hymn numbers and page numbers? When do you stand and sit? YouTube Mr Bean singing Hallelujah.

Welcomers should be visible and attentive, particularly alert to those unfamiliar with the church and worship lay-out. Best if books and bits of paper are limited to a maximum of three, hymn book, prayer book and bulletin, the latter giving a clear map on how to negotiate the other two. As the service progresses, who can be identified as bearing overall responsibility and owning the direction of this act of worship? Who has the chief unscripted voice and how effective is it – how well does it draw you into worship, put you at your ease, include you, make you feel a part rather than apart? Does the person celebrating come across like a skilled conductor producing orchestral harmony, or someone who fails to harness the performers, resulting in a cacophony?

Can you see beyond the person presiding to Christ, or does that person block him with their own agenda? Do they grandstand, perform or act as conduit, do they guard the gate or do they open the gate? Do they seem sincere, engaging, inspiring, transformational? When they celebrate communion, are you caught by a sense of awe, as if this is both their first time and their last time? Adrian Chiles: I really don't think it's too much to ask for priests to look pleased to be there. Too often I've been faced with a stony-faced priest speaking of great joy while looking as if he's just opened his phone bill. Don't get me wrong, I don't want happy-clappy, just a general sense of "oh good, this is nice".

How dignified or how regimented is the administration? In some churches you wouldn't be surprised by a blue motorway sign over the chancel arch. Right Altar Rail, Left Altar Rail: Get in right lane NOW! I attended communion at a Cathedral where two burley officials blocked my way to the rail. One was to stop me distracting the choir. The other was to point out the communion rail as if I hadn't noticed it already. What gives you pause during the act of worship – is there space for pause? Were there awkward silences where people leading that section physically failed to be in place, or lost their place in the text? Where were you moved? 'It is good, Lord, to be here!' blurted out St Peter on the Mount of Transfiguration.

Did the worship start well and punctually? Was there a good sense of pace? Many prefer worship that lasts no more than one hour, which is more than achievable. Did the worship end well? Was hospitality offered as worship ended, and how are newcomers included? What was the quality of the beverages?

2. Music

Hymns should be chosen sensitively, to resonate with the theme of the day, but more importantly to set the mood for the various stages of worship. The opening hymn should be a rousing one, drawing people into opening their hearts to give praise. Like Cwm Rhondda before a Rugby International. Hymns around the readings, Gospel and sermon should be of a more meditative nature. Hymns centring on the offering, and preparation of the elements if the act of worship is a Eucharist, should obviously have a strong offering and sacrificial theme. Final hymns should be missiological: 'Who will go for us?' God cries in the midst of the incense-filled and awe-inspiring Temple 'Here am I, send me,' Isaiah whispers. Count me in Lord!

The pace set by the accompaniment is crucial. By and large hymns enabling worship taking place on the first day of the week, marking Christ's resurrection, should be sung at a joyful speed rather than a dirge. Choirs, music groups and orchestras should go with rather than against the grain of worship, neither dissonant nor overwhelming.

3. Readings

We are chiefly a literate society, which no longer has to be read to. Almost all the members of the congregation could read the readings for themselves, so value needs to be added, where the reader will have rehearsed, owned and taken the reading to heart, and through emphasis and dramatic tone will draw the congregation's attention to detail they might miss on a cursory reading. When there is more than one reading, it is good to have a variety of voices. The Gospel contains several voices.

The Revised Common Lectionary sets out the readings for any particular Sunday, but should be used as a resource, a servant rather than master, with evidence that the person responsible for worship

has checked whether the readings are appropriate for a particular context, abbreviated where necessary. Three long readings: cut!

Adrian Chiles again: At Sacred Heart in Fareham at 7am one Wednesday morning, I sighed a little as an impossibly ancient lady in a woolly hat stepped forward to do the reading. This could take a while, I thought. But it turned out that in her younger days she could only have been an actor or Radio 4 newsreader. Her voice, clear as a church bell, sang out. I swear even the angels and cherubs around us cocked a pleased ear.

The Psalmody is a veritable hymn book of the people of God, deployed over three millennia, boldly recording the peaks and troughs of life and faith. Yet so often the Psalm is the point where the quality of worship takes a total dive. Rather than opting for something which is badly sung, badly recited, with a patronising and confusing refrain, worship could be enhanced by a variety of approaches, including plainsong and metrical versions as well as traditional chants, with a said-psalm employing a variety of antiphonal styles. When I was Director of Ordinands I used to take ordinands away for a weekend at the Benedictine Abbey in Ampleforth. The Psalms set to plainsong sung by a couple of monks haunted you for weeks. I was glad when they said unto me, Let us go to the house of the Lord... You just couldn't forget the beauty, the beauty of holiness. One year when Easter was early our local comp was still in session, so I went to do an assembly on Holy Tuesday. Assembly in a secondary school is the closest thing to a near-death experience you'll ever get. I sang the Palm Sunday Gospel in plainsong. When he came into Jerusalem, the whole city was moved. 'Who is this?' people asked. They replied, 'This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.' A vicar singing in front of six hundred teenagers: how naff can you get? Yet when I finished, you could have heard a pin drop. And then they just all broke into spontaneous applause, even though clapping was strictly forbidden. It wasn't forbidden that day.

3. Sermons Anyone who thinks that preaching has had its day should watch stand-up comedians, such as Michael Macintyre and Rod Gilbert, who always perform before packed audiences. Most of it is observational stuff, a lot of moving around and exaggerated facial expressions, a lot of related humour with the regular punch that has depth and pathos. Short and sweet seems the order of the day: 'If you don't strike oil in ten minutes, stop boring!' Whilst the sermon should link with the readings before it, it is a mistake to try and comment on every verse that had been read, and instead better to concentrate on one reading, one verse.

Relevant personal anecdotes were welcome, with appropriate humour, with the precedent set by the parables. People yearn for a preacher who, steeped in prayer and the Scriptures, was simple, sincere, genuine, natural, honest, and human, making connections through common stories, and hard-won experience.

Complex theology and poetry are not easily communicated through a sermon medium – better a short, punchy extract, with the fuller text either supplied on the service sheet. Or get people to google it afterwards.

Whether preaching from a text or off-the-cuff, eye-contact seemed key. Most thought that a text made for a tighter sermon, off-the-cuff was more verbose. Is the sermon illuminating, well-timed, penetrating, creative, fresh, imaginative, striking, awakening, provocative – while not being trite, clichéd, clever, cute, silly, obtrusive, awkward, puerile, faddish, corny or boring?

4. Intercessions Theory and reality were often at variance here. In theory it seems healthy to have the intercessions led by members of the congregation, who bring their distinctive personal

spirituality and air it in the midst, boldly making connections with the scriptural themes and hymnody and local and wider needs of the world and the church.

Reality reveals severe frustrations, intercessions prone to be quite lengthy essays, like Times' leaders which hectored the Almighty and patronised the congregation, diktats from the lectern rather than prayer in the midst, some even trying to score points over petty church politics, or even repeat the notices: 'Lord, we ask you to bless our bingo evening on Thursday night, beginning at 7 pm with entrance 2, which now includes a buffet supper with wine extra, approved by a majority of 7:8 at the PCC...'

Clearly substantial and continual teaching is required to call and recall intercessors to genuine prayer, to give them the nerve to be simple rather than try to impress, to remind them that the prayer our Lord gifted to his church for all ages was less than fifty words.

It is probably good that intercessions are led by the priest from time to time, to share and encourage good practice, daring to be simple and say very little, using words to spring prayer and reflection in those listening, using heart-felt prayers of others which have stood the test of time, resonating with themes swirling around in this particular act of worship, being both comforting and disturbing, daring to take people in a new and challenging direction, such as 'May the Blessing of God Almighty, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit be with you... ..and those you hate...' Dare to be multi-media. Cut out the photo from the Guardian front page and hold it up as you walk silently around the congregation, praying over the picture.

Stephen Cottrell, Bishop of Chelmsford, urges us to have the nerve to renegotiate the Sunday contract. Simply look at the stuff we do, where we do it, when we do it and why do we do it. One new priest unfamiliar with Anglo-catholic worship noticed the head server did a Monty Python silly walk every time he got to a certain spot in the sanctuary. Afterwards he asked what was going on. 'Oh, there used to be a tall kneeler there!' So much falls in that category.

For me the Eucharist is the beating heart of worship. Firmly I believe and truly that when the priest touches the bread and wine something marvellous and wonderful happens and we all feed on Christ, the Christ who took and blessed and broke and gave. The Eucharist is a royal command performance decreed by King Jesus, do this in remembrance of me. Jesus did not give us a constitution, or a rule book, he gave us a meal.

But I don't think he ever intended the meal to be so, so complicated. He intended it to be the great connect. Whereas we have made it the great disconnect. We have to think very hard and very urgently how to connect with Brexit UK in 2019.

Just a few ideas. Why not get the sidespeople to bake the bread, buy the best bottle of wine on offer that week, rather than the usual Hayes and Finch Chateau Liverpool Sickly Sweet. Bring the wine up at the offertory, uncork it with aloud pop.

The point is simple. You want every kitchen table to connect as an altar, every meal to be a Eucharist, so that when you break any bread bun in two you hear him 'This is my body, broken for you.' Every time you relish your second glass of Bordeaux you hear him, 'This is my blood, shed for you.' Work out simple words of explanation which catch people: 'We think very carefully of how Jesus shared a special final meal with his friends, and as we share in a similar meal we pray he may be with us now: The Lord is here! And end with 'You go out with the taste of Christ on your lips; give people a taste of him in your lives!' Go in Peace to Love and serve the Lord and thrill people with life in all its fullness!

The last word to Adrian Chiles Be honest: when did you last come out of Mass thinking, "Do you know what, I really wish that had been a bit longer"?