

## **Tearing down the Temple: deconstructing worship**

**Like all of you, I have my preferred styles of worship. At my most reflective and honest I know that these preferences are driven by a multitude of factors, of some of which I'm aware of and some of which lie deep in things I am not able to fathom completely; my personality 'type', my own biography, associations with people and places I love. So I'm deeply suspicious of most of my own attempts to make sense of why we worship in the way, and certainly in the style, that we do. I know that my (and they feel to be instinctive) reactions about such things as Café worship, messy church or even fresh expressions are not really based on those things themselves, but on my own fears of being asked intimate questions in a public space, my own desire for neatness and order and my own loyalty to and growing appreciation of tradition. Particularly perhaps during Lent I'm anxious to be disciplined about my own thinking and to avoid the temptations that beset any speaker on worship. And I think that the best way of avoiding some of those temptations, the best way of skirting panic reactions or exposing you to my unbridled prejudice, or even worse, my own rather obvious vulnerabilities, I want to tunnel back as far as I can into the question of what worship really is for Christians. What on earth, or in heaven's name, is it that we are doing when we gather to worship God, in the name of Jesus and in the power of the Holy Spirit? And in doing this, as yet another defence against myself, I am going to invoke some allies from traditions other than my own. I want to begin with a poem, written by an Anglican priest called David Scott. I think this is a poem that says a great deal about the proper limits of what we are doing when we attend or lead worship. He writes from the point of view of the priest of the Church of England that he is and the poem is called The Priest at the Door:**

**I sit at the door of the church  
and see who comes in and who goes out.  
They don't hand anything in  
like they used to, animals or grain.  
I don't have to receive anything  
to put on the altar, or pass anything  
to my assistant to be slaughtered  
and the blood drained and flung.  
I am grateful for that, not**

having been brought up to it.

Instead they get books and papers  
snippets of news, and the magazine.

Somebody else does all that.

I have no ephod to divine the truth,  
no incense to burn, no curtain,  
to close behind me. I have only the agony  
of knowing I have little,  
and the slow job of resisting  
any attempt to make it more...

David Scott gets right to the heart of the matter straightaway. He knows that though he might be called a priest – he is not a priest in the literal and classic sense that that word once had. Being a priest used to be, about doing something – receiving offerings from the people and then offering them to the gods (or God). It used to be about cutting throats and spilling blood and doing something that made God happy and that put people right. But now he has nothing – no curtain to a holy place, no way of getting with more certainty than anyone else to the truth, nothing to do. He says that he has little and only ‘the slow job of resisting any attempt to make it more’. He says that he is grateful not to have to slaughter animals or drain blood because he was not brought up to it. But of course, he knows, and you and I know, that there are much more profound reasons why he has nothing like that to do. Making sacrifices, pleasing God by killing an animal or by offering something, the whole business of especially holy places where God is particularly present and where there are especially holy people who can carve a path to God, all this has been swept away. Jesus, who said that he would bring down the Temple, who was killed himself and at the moment of whose death the curtain in the Temple was torn in two, has put an end to all of that, to that whole way of understand to and relating to God. He showed us a God who becomes a sacrifice rather than demand that others are sacrificed in God’s name, a God who loves us before we can even save up the money for a turtle dove, the God who does not stand at the pinnacle of a transaction system in which you can work out what to give in order to get favour, but a God who is simply love.

**Jesus destroyed the Temple, the temple in Jerusalem and, one might say, effectively everyone else's temples too. I know that the Romans did it literally in AD70, but before then Jesus had done it figuratively and decisively. The new sect that developed after this death and resurrection was therefore profoundly peculiar in the ancient world. They were understood to be atheists, because they had none of the trappings of religion or worship; no priests, no altars, no sacrifices, no ecstasies or frenzies of blood, nothing that the people around them could understand as worship. So people concluded, and in many ways they were absolutely right, that the people known as Christians did not worship. They called themselves a priestly people, but they had no priests. They gathered together, but they didn't make any sacrifices – they ate a meal together, read the scriptures and gave out money to the poor. They had no special buildings, meeting in homes, often just crowding out the spaces in the fanciest villa of the most well off member. They remembered what God had already done for them in Jesus Christ, and exhorted one another to resist the temptation to 'make it more..' to make it about something that they could do. If anything, what Christians did in their gatherings was a kind of anti-worship.**

**If any of you watched the BBC series Rome a few years ago you will have some idea of what 'worship' was like in the ancient world. It was, to put it simply, bloody, systematised, visually and in almost every other way spectacular and immensely popular, because it was exciting and also because it was about trying to get something done – to make it rain or conceive a child, or defeat some enemies or whatever it was that needed doing. Ordinary homes would have had altars to all sorts of Gods to whom offerings would be paid – thank offerings, but also offerings in the hope of a result. And public life was dominated by great religious spectacles, in which impressive and eroticised scenes amazed the people. Blood and sacrifice – sometimes in very dramatic forms - were common features of small scale and imperial scale religious practices. There were processions and parades, festivals and celebrations. Roman religion was popular, dramatic, often ecstatic, and certainly spectacular. It was expressed in grand and awe-inspiring temples, the kind of spaces to make people feel small, but thrilled. It was violent, energetic, and sensual. And the people loved it. The Jewish temple was another kind of grand spectacle, a place of blood and violence and sacrifice – where religion was also an expression of**

national identity, a place of high feeling and emotion, of mystery and fascination, a place for unifying a people and a highly potent symbol of shared longing.

But the practices of Christianity were strikingly different, even a subversion of these things. If worship really is what we see in the Roman Empire and in the Jewish Temple, then the practice of Christians cannot actually be called worship at all. And perhaps this is the real secret of its radical nature. The rituals of the emerging Christian church were not like the ones of the surrounding cultures, and if anything they were actually profoundly subversions of them. It was precisely an alternative to cult and worship. Becoming a Christian required a religious commitment that was also a renunciation. The first Christians did not worship at all, one might say. This was much more than a simple case of not having access to temples and images and bulls with throats to cut and all of that. It wasn't simply that they *couldn't* do these things, but that they chose not to, and more importantly still, they knew that they didn't need to.

Christian worship is not worship in the literal sense – it is perhaps only so in a metaphorical sense, and certainly in a subversive sense. And if this is a true insight, then what I want to warn us against is the danger of forgetting this metaphorical subversion and of reverting to literal worship. That, I think, is much more important than whether or not you use pews or chairs, whether you are catholic or Pentecostal in style, high church or low. I'm not saying that I think we can all have a lie in on Sundays, because I do think that Christian anti-worship, Christian assembly for the public reading of scripture, the sharing together of bread and wine and for giving to the poor is vital. But I do think we should beware of the temptations of literal worship, especially in a time when we are in danger of panicking because church is not popular. For then we might be tempted to turn our metaphorical worship back into that of which it is a profound subversion, to turn it back into spectacle and transaction, rather than the patient acknowledgement, recognition, and internalising of what it is that God, and not we, have done.

Some of you will no doubt already think I'm talking nonsense. But for those of you who think there might be something buried deep in my words that makes some sort of sense, then I need to own up that I didn't get to these thoughts entirely on my own. I have been much influenced, not only by what might be thought of as

some of the insights of the Reformation, but also by an article by the Roman Catholic theologian James Alison. In his book of 2006 *Undergoing God*, he includes a chapter called 'Worship in a violent world' and he argues that in Christian faith, 'worship' has not its usual and literal meaning, but must mean something more like a subversion from within of the kinds of cultures in which worship is understood as something to do with sacrifice, frenzy and violence. Christian 'worship' is strangely unlike the worship of the gods in ancient, and indeed, modern cultures, and is in fact radically subversive of such traditions. He writes,

**'God has no desire for us to worship him for his sake; he needs no worship, no adulation, no praise, no glory. No divine ego is flattered, stability maintained, nor any threatened petulance staved off, by our worship.'** (Alison, 2006, p.37)

Of course, the Christian tradition has always known this and there has been a repeated rhythm in which Christians have forgotten this, reverted into literal worship patterns and practices and then been stirred to remember that this moment of subversion is necessary. The Reformation, I think, was one such moment. We need always to remind ourselves of how very radical and abnormal Christianity is, that worship is not for us the transaction designed to change or influence God's mind, the spectacle of escapism or the violence of sacrifice, or indeed the stirring of a crowd - which is so dangerous. Christian worship is something much dull than this in one sense, but also much more beautiful – the slow, steady, wide awake heart-beat of a new life, unspectacular, but truly integrated with life and responding to the God who does not want our 'worship', but only to love us and re-create us.

If you go to classic or official statements about what Christian worship is, you will often find things that point to this understanding that it is not 'worship' in the classical sense at all. You can find countless statements from Orthodox theologians, for example, that we do not worship because God demands or needs our worship, but only because of our constant need, not for ecstasy but for grace. The Orthodox are clear that worship is not about 'liturgical escapism' from the world, but about the shaping of our lives so that we can go out in service to the world. This is not public fun or private entertainment, but the necessary and beautiful shaping of our lives in the light of what God has already done, not what

**God might need to be persuaded to do. Christian worship is not, in a sense, worship at all.**

**The classic kind of worship emerges still within our cultures. People love and need to be entertained. People love to be able to manipulate ‘the gods’. People delight in public spectacle and in the euphoria that comes from being part of the great crowd, singing with one voice, delighting in a sense of victory and triumph over enemies. We all like the sensation of manipulating the world so that it looks and feels different – even if only for a while.**

**Christian worship is a space where the people of God come together to remember in the profoundest sense and to let the great story of who God is and what God has done for us shape us as community and as individuals. It is about the public reading of scripture, the sharing of bread and wine in imaginative memory and the giving away of possessions. This is about forming us, about healing us, saving us, equipping us. Christian worship offers us the gifts of ritual and rhythm, of repeated action and word in which profound themes may slowly over years become the background and the foreground of our lives at their best, offering the deep resources of the hope of generations to us as we encounter what it means to be human in the sight of God. It’s a space where you can be honest, and where you can actually find that you don’t have to pretend to be anywhere where you are not. It’s not all about being joyful, or indeed all about being sombre, not all about being extrovert or ecstatic, or all about being reserved and quiet. It gives good space for every range of experience and feeling, from ecstasy to devastating grief and despair, from outrageous hope to solemn lament, from excitement and inspiration to the ordinariness of any day, never manipulated or forced into the open, but simply given an honest and real space. And it’s a space where you can find language which might take your experience and heal it and transform it, a space in which mature human beings are made – into the fullness of Christ.**

**It won’t be spectacular and it isn’t a spectator sport. In Christian worship desires are not stirred and manipulated, they are reformed and re-shaped for good, over time. In Christian worship we are given nourishment for every day, not a momentary escape from it, something much more like daily bread than Sunday cake. In Christian worship, we are given the courage to do even the unpopular thing.**

The pull of worship in the old, literal, sense is hard to resist. And it resurges again and again. The temptation to make worship popular, attractive, crowd pleasing and pulling – is ever present and it is strong today. There is always the temptation for worship leaders to think that we can ‘make it more’ – and give people what all of us want, the ability to manipulate the gods and – while doing it – to have a great time. When Christians became powerful in the Empire of Rome, they did not hesitate to build new kinds of temples and to resort to the temptation of worship. But there were always those who were determined to keep up the work of radical subversion and to undermine this almost irresistible urge. We know of course the story of the Reformation, but there were earlier movements too, which rebelled against the impulse to turn prayer and worship into transactions with the divine, to return to the people the spectacles for which they longed and the powerful dramas of grand, public ritual.

But perhaps we should look closely at the Reformation movement form which some of us here come to see how this was at least partly about the need to subvert again a resurging sense of literal worship. We have mainly learned about the *theology* of the Reformers. But the Reformers worked very hard to change liturgical practice, to change what actually happened in the worship of the church, because they knew that in that space the faith was being made and re-made. They knew that the communion service was not simply an enactment of pre-determined theology, but is always actually saying something profoundly theological in the way it is performed. One of the things that Calvin saw happening in medieval worship was that communion was becoming a spectacle, and that the elevation and adoration of the consecrated elements was becoming something like ‘worship’ in the classic sense. Alongside that the ‘mass’ understood as a sacrifice was returning to the church a sense of worship as transaction, as something we do in order to influence God. For Calvin it was absolutely at the heart of the faith that God is sovereign, that God is not in our hands to be persuaded or manipulated. The important thing, perhaps, is not that we should be free in worship, but that we should recognise that God is free. Mechanical action cannot produce divine grace. Calvin celebrated communion as a place in which we receive spiritual nourishment from God as we are united with Christ and a place in which we are exhorted towards and equipped for holy living and mutual love. This is the subversion of worship. We could all joke no doubt about the plainness, the dourness even of

Reformed worship. But for Calvin and others it was important that the worship of the church was not in a space radically unlike ordinary life, that it was absolutely unspectacular, plain, ordinary. For, he believed that it was in the ordinary that God's theatre was open for business. For Calvin, it was necessary once more to reform worship in the subverted paradigm. He wanted people to pray and worship often, so that they could be formed within the language and grammar of the Bible and the practice of the sacraments. But there was a stripping away of elements that might mislead the faithful. He loved, apparently, the beauty of art and had paintings in his home. He was not a dull or uncultured person. The plainness of Genevan worship was nothing to do with a moral reaction to the culture of his time, but rather was an expression of a deep sense of what Christian worship needs to be. It is not that churches must be ugly (for there is true beauty in plainness) but only that worship is not a spectacle or an escape (it is NOT theatre), but the real business of human life and formation. It was the stuff of every day rather than public holiday. It was bread rather than cake.

Here is another example of this Reformation subversion and return; if you go to the parish church at Southwold in Suffolk, you will find folded up in a side aisle, an Elizabethan communion table, now rather dusty and neglected. You could easily miss it. It was replaced, probably in the time of Archbishop Laud, by an altar against the East wall. The Laudian altar is of course not a literal one and the priest at Southwold does not sacrifice animals on a Sunday morning – at least as far I know. But the Elizabethan communion table provides a much more powerful subversion than its replacement altar. Here was the original café church. The people, in the Elizabethan era, gathered for communion around a table – all on the same level – an ordinary wooden table (with no saints' relics encased in a corner of anything like that) – gathered as they would in ordinary life. There can be no mistaking this table for the altar of sacrifice – it is instead a sacred fellowship meal in which all may eat and drink and in which God's grace is shared rather than sought. And this Elizabethan communion table is even round. It is a plain table – there is nothing to admire in it except that. It does not pretend to be a gateway into a holier space. It does not draw crowds or inspire gasps of admiration. It is unspectacular, ordinary, workaday and, to my mind, the perfect table around which to celebrate the presence of the Jesus who turned over tables in the Temple.



It is both fascinating and disturbing, if you give any credence to what I've said so far, that much of the material you can find about leading worship is about how to make worship attractive, appealing, stirring, visually and in other ways spectacular. It is striking that many of the new, large churches of our time meet in theatre style spaces, where the engagement of the worshipper is in the very minimal, but vulnerable, role of spectator. It is encouraging though that, even within circles in which the popular, theatre-style worship of the mega-church is successful and admired, there are those voices who urge that this will not nourish the Church, that this is not, in the end, Christian worship. Dan Kimball, pastor of an emerging church in Santa Cruz California, tells of Christians who are naming a dissatisfaction with mega-church worship and a need for smaller, more intimate, and more ordinary spaces in which to be formed in the faith. Dan writes of the dangers of what he calls American Idol worship, of worship which takes its models from the world of the most spectacular, and national, entertainment. He senses what I sense too, that this is a return to classic worship, and not the subversion of that which must then become worship in the spirit and truth of Christ. There is also the testimony of Sally Morgenthauer, who for years advocated the development of 'worship evangelism' (worship designed to be attractive to seekers), but who has more recently very publicly recanted her earlier work and now urges upon us the dangers of making worship an end in itself, and of trying to make it do more than it does.

One of my favourite quotations from James Alison is this one. He writes,

**'When people tell me they find Mass boring, I want to say to them: it's supposed to be boring, or at least seriously underwhelming. It's a long term education in becoming un-excited, since only that will enable us to dwell in a quiet bliss which doesn't abstract from our surroundings or our neighbour, but which increases our attention, our presence and our appreciation for what is around us. The build-up to a sacrifice is exciting, the dwelling in gratitude that the sacrifice has already happened, and that we've been forgiven for and through it is, in terms of excitement, a long drawn-out let down.'** (Alison, 2006, p.45)

Sometimes we can be beguiled into thinking that worship should be entertaining, popular, and dramatic, partly at least because we want people to be attracted to it. We have come to think of it as the main way in which we draw people to the Gospel. But if worship is actually the staff of spiritual life for those who are part of the Christian community, it is not going to be wonderfully exciting, because the life

we are being prepared to live in Christ's name is not like that. **Worship** is a healing and a re-shaping of our desires. It is spiritual exercise, spiritual bread. It is more like disciples breaking simple bread in days of fear and hope and telling to one another again the repeated story of what God has done, than it is about offering a lamb on the altar or getting carried away with swirling songs and flashing lights. It needs no emotions to be stirred up, it needs nothing to be done to make Christ appear, because Christ is here already. We don't need to make something happen in worship. It has already happened that Christ has come, that the Word became flesh. We need to find ways of making ourselves present before Christ, but that is all, that is really all. And this will not always be exciting or comforting or exhilarating or mind-blowing. But it will always be needed and Christ will always be there. Some would say that liturgy is to be defined as 'the work of the people', but of course the 'work' has already been done. What we are doing in worship is simply to let this be known in us and let it's being so shape and remake us. This is not personal enrichment in the sense of something always pleasurable, but it is personal enrichment in that it may make me the kind of person who is rich enough in spirit to empty myself, and even give all I possess, in faithfulness to Christ.

I love the theatre. I love the cinema. I love to be carried on a tide of beautiful music. I enjoy ecstasy as much as anyone and I know its temptations. But I know that those things will not in themselves carry to me and engage me in the faith to which I have given my life. I know that Christian worship is something other than this. The writer Marva Dawn describes worship as a 'royal waste of time' and I think that's helpful in some ways. **Worship** is not 'for' anything, and when we think it is we are in danger of getting lost. It is not 'for' God – to flatter or persuade. It is not 'for' us in the sense of entertaining us or allowing us a brief and welcome escape from the world's struggle and pain (though we need this sometimes and can find it elsewhere). In the world's terms worship is not for anything and it is very peculiar indeed. What it does is welcome us into a space where all the things we are 'for' are put into a new perspective.

I have often heard it said that worship needs to be distinguished very clearly from learning. And that we've gone wrong because we've made church look too much like school. I am actually no longer persuaded that this distinction holds. I am more worried that we have now elided worship with entertainment and sometimes with

evangelism. And I am more impressed by the thought that true worship is actually more like education in the very best sense. It is about being led into a different place, about growing into a more mature person with others, about learning to speak a new mother tongue until you are fluent. It may involve some hours of patient listening, even of repetition and internalising, of acquiring new ways of thought and the ability to transcend yourself. It has nothing to do of course with any particular model of learning – of sitting in rows or sitting round tables, powerpoint, blackboards or interactive screens. But it might have to do with something you do for years and which prepares you for life, in which you discover classic texts as well as learn to frame your own words well, in which you re-discover the world and find a future filled with hope and possibility.

I think that all our different worship traditions are vulnerable to the temptations to revert to literal worship or to make worship ‘more’ than it is. I am certainly accusing neither ‘catholic’ worship nor Pentecostal worship and neither do I think that Puritans could ever have been satisfied with what was achieved at the Reformation. And I want to applaud those who are braver and more creative than me in looking for fresh ways of conducting Christian worship in these our times. I simply want us to remember that Jesus did pull down the Temple, that the first Christians did not worship in any sense that the people around them could identify as such, that we do not need (thank God) to placate God or to put on a spectacle to impress. What we do all need is to be drawn into gatherings in which we will learn how to live the faith we have been given, how to follow Christ, and how to be so schooled in selflessness that we shall have courage to take up even a cross, should we ever be asked to do so.

I repeat often the story that Maya Angelou tells of meeting someone who told her that they were a Christian. She responded to this announcement by saying, ‘Already?’. Being or becoming a Christian is a long game, and it will take a lifetime and more. It needs the patient rhythm of repeated remembrance and persistent memory. It is not rooted in worship in the classic sense at all, but in the subversive and radical experience of the Christian community where we know, at our best, that the work is done, that Christ has died, Christ is risen and Christ will come again.

