

THE CHURCH SERVICE SOCIETY
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"GRASPING THE HEEL OF HEAVEN"

***Some Issues in Contemporary Liturgy and
Music***

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I am honoured indeed to stand here today and have much looked forward to my visit to Scotland. I came as a member of a sister church, and as one who has no specialist knowledge of The Church of Scotland, and who might very easily misunderstand how you think theologically and liturgically, and might therefore equally easily be misunderstood. So I come to you both with a proper humility and also with a determination to speak, not so much about things in your church, but about truths that I trust to be applicable to every church, in the hope that you will shape them and filter them so that they address your own particular circumstances.

Let me give you something of the shape of what I am hoping to do. I want first of all to look at three fundamental truths that I believe need recovering and rehearsing if we are to make sense of the whole

business of liturgy. I then want to move on to describe, as far as I am able, the particular pressures for change in our worship in the last generation and to explore how these affect the music we employ in worship. And then I want finally, in a more miscellaneous section, to look at a very few rather practical outworkings in terms of music and the liturgy.

Let me begin with my three fundamentals.

The first is this. Worship is about nothing less than putting us in touch with the reality of God. When Christians gather for worship, what matters above all else is that their sense that "God is" is confirmed and that their communion with him is deepened. Much else may seem to be on the agenda when we come together for "divine service", but nothing should be higher on it than a yearning to encounter the living God in a way that escapes us for much of the time.

I have given this lecture the title "Grasping the Heel of Heaven" and I confess to having used it before as the title of a chapter in my book on the eucharist, *Lively Sacrifice*. For me it is a shorthand way of calling to mind some deep truths that I believe we neglect at our peril. Christians, when they come to worship, have their feet on the ground. They earth their approach to God in the realities of their world and of their daily lives. There is no leaving of the cares and burdens and sins that beset them in the church porch like a rucksack when they come to

worship. These are part of what we bring and what we offer (and offer for transfiguration no less) so that our worship is always in touch with our present reality. Nevertheless, though our feet may be on the ground, and we are not floating lightly in the air, we are nevertheless on tiptoe, a tiptoe of expectation. We are reaching up to heaven.

We are reaching up to heaven because we need to renew within ourselves (or, more accurately, we need to let the Spirit renew within us) the vision of God, the lovely mystery of the Holy Trinity, and our part with the assembly of the angels and the saints. Christian worship is never something we make or devise. It is an eternal reality, that is not dependent on you and me, something to which we are sometimes privileged to be joined fleetingly. We "plug into it", so to speak, for a while. That leads into the Sanctus that different churches translate differently, but which the Church of England's old Prayer Book puts thus, "*Therefore with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven, we laud and magnify thy glorious name, ever more praising thee*", is, for me, as key a part of the liturgy as any. It is an enormous encouragement that in worship we simply climb on board. But it is also a challenge to do just that, to see that in worship nothing less will do than being in communion with the living God and having a sense of heaven.

"Grasping the heel" is all we do. Most of us, most of the time, will never capture more than a fleeting

glimpse of the heavenly reality, but a fleeting glimpse is all we need to sustain us. Indeed more than a fleeting glimpse would be too much to bear.

And I suppose my worry for the Church and its worship is not the worry that we sometimes fail to glimpse the vision, to grasp the heel, but that, to be honest, we are not even trying to do so. It is not our primary aim. It is often simply not on the agenda. Granted, God is a God of surprises and, yes, there are moments when we are least expecting it. I do not rule that out. Nevertheless, I think it to be true that genuine encounter with the living God and communion with the whole company of heaven, and the deep sense of peace and joy and renewal that follow from these, are more often given to those who yearn for these things, and open up their hearts to receive them. The vision of heaven is for expectant Christians, not for those who look for nothing but security. To paraphrase the Letter to the Hebrews, when we come to worship, *we come to stand before Mount Zion, and the city of the living God, heavenly Jerusalem, before myriads of angels, the full concourse and assembly of the first-born citizens of heaven* And this is not, or not entirely, a vision for the end and for the judgement. Daring anticipation of the heavenly realities as it may be, this is what we are up to week by week in Christian worship. And that is a vision that needs renewing and sharing with all out people.

Worship is about nothing less than putting us in touch with the reality of God. That is my first fundamental.

The second follows from it. It is prayer that needs to be at the heart of worship. You will all have had the experience of sharing in worship where every liturgical rule or principle seemed to have been broken, the scriptures have been ill-read and the sermon lacked theological prevision or even sign of preparation, and the choice of hymns seemed inappropriate, but where nevertheless you came away with a real sense of worship. And, conversely, you will have had the experience where worship had been skilfully put together and carefully celebrated, but where somehow some ingredient seemed missing and the whole thing never quite worked. I believe that the ingredient present in the first case and missing in the second will nearly always turn out to be prayerfulness, both in the minister who leads and in the whole assembly sharing in the service. There is a kind of prayerful approach to God, that is not much different from the yearning for heaven of which I have already spoken that is not so much an element in a service, more a kind of undercurrent that gives quality and authenticity to everything else. This prayerfulness is something that the Spirit gives through the words and actions of the liturgy, but more often, I suspect, through the silence and the music of worship. Indeed my own picture of it is of a prayerfulness which surfaces in the times of invitation to prayer, of silence and of music, and

which then goes underground, so to speak, through other stages of the service, but which sustains the worship as a kind of undercurrent, surfacing at appropriate points. I wished we talked less about "taking services" or "celebrating the liturgy" or "offering worship", though all these phrases have their point, and more often of "praying the liturgy", seeing it through all its stages with a prayerfulness that helps to shape each part. The scriptures that are heard prayerfully are heard with a very special sort of attention. The hymns that are sung prayerfully have a quality all of their own. The sermon which is heard prayerfully is one in which both preacher and hearers are drawn into something deeper than human discourse.

People expect, when they come to worship, to be invited to pray or at least to say prayers or hear them said. But, on the whole, people see praying as one of a number of items in worship. "*Next we sing a hymn, then we have the prayers, and then comes the sermon ...*" rather than prayer as what undergirds the whole exercise. They may not be very good at praying at home, but they will probably believe, nevertheless, that prayer is principally private, personal and essentially domestic. We need to develop a greater consciousness of corporate prayer, often silent but no less communal for that, as the bedrock of the liturgy.

My third fundamental is this. God turns our worship into a gift and a blessing. You can sometimes sense in the approach to worship of a particular church

community rather too many objectives. There are churches where evangelism seems high on the worship agenda or, in a slightly different tradition, good sound teaching, or sometimes a preoccupation with fellowship. At a theoretical level at least I want to maintain that worship has only one objective, if indeed the word "objective" can be allowed at all. That objective (though it is in reality more an instinct than an aim) is simply to offer worship. That is the way in to renewing our sense of communion. To offer worship, with all the purity, sincerity and longing that our hearts can muster. Nothing else - "worship in spirit and in truth". But all those people who want to protest that surely worship is also about preaching and converting and deepening fellowship are half right. But it is not that we set out to make worship a means of proclaiming the gospel or making new converts or drawing Christians together. We set out simply to worship, but God makes it into all those things and more. It is the same divine characteristic manifesting itself in the liturgy that we also find in many areas of our life. We offer something to God, and he does accept it. Poor and half-hearted and inadequate though it may be, he does accept it and affirm it. But then he takes it, touches it with his divine touch, and returns it to us as gift and as blessing. What we offered as worship turns out, by his providence, to be something that attracts new Christians, or makes more compelling the claims of the gospel, or gives a better sense of belonging to one another among the worshippers.

And if our worship sometimes seems to fail to do these things - people aren't being touched or converted, the faith is not suddenly becoming clearer or a community is not, apparently, being built up in love - we must not always assume that we need therefore to make our services more overtly evangelistic or friendly or simple or whatever solution we grasp at. What we probably ought to do is to look at the quality of our worshipping, of what we are giving to God to be turned into gift and blessing. When people experience a Christian community utterly engaged in its worship, totally caught up in it, grasping the heel of heaven, then something rubs off. God makes of it a gift and blessing both to those who offer worship and to others too.

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Those are my three fundamental truths that govern all that follows. I believe passionately that all three of them need recovering and rehearsing in every worshipping congregation. And, though they may seem self-evident and are certainly not novel, they do seem, at best, strangely taken for granted and, at worst, neglected or even forgotten a good deal of the time.



I move now to a different sort of question. What have been the reasons for changes in worship with the last generation? This is one of the areas where I am in most danger of talking from an English and Anglican perspective that does not ring true for you. Please make allowances and do a bit of translating into your own ecclesiastical and cultural setting.

What have been the reasons for changes in worship over the last generation? I find myself giving seven answers to that question, with an eighth rather different one as a kind of postscript. None need detain us very long, but I think they are worth exploring.

The first is the desire to address God in contemporary language. This has more obviously affected the churches that have large banks of liturgical text, but I suspect that every church has been challenged by it. For in the end it has been a theological, rather than a liturgical shift. The desire to address God in the ordinary language of the day, or something as close to that as formal public rhetoric can ever be, is to say something about the kind of God in whom one believes. To refuse to change, to insist on a God who is addressed in forms used in no ordinary human conversation, is also to make a theological, not just a literary, stand. We declare in what kind of God we believe by the way

we address him and sing his praises. For some churches this desire to speak to God in a new way has had devastating effects on the liturgy for good or ill. In the Roman Church it has meant almost the total abandonment of the accumulated liturgical culture of a thousand years, including its music. For some churches like my own it has introduced deep divisions about worship forms where previously liturgy had seemed to be the source of unity, the place where family likeness was most powerful. We have little common prayer; I hesitate to speak of common order! For other churches, where worship has always had a greater variety and at least theoretical spontaneity, the desire for a new language in worship has probably been easier to accommodate, but even there the multiplication of translations of scripture has meant the collapse of a set of shared ideas and memorable phrases, and that has given to worship a different feel.

The second answer is in relation to the move in the direction of all age worship. Our immediate forebears did not expect children and adults to worship together. Provision was made for children, in those remarkable Sunday Schools with hundreds of children that many parishes still remember, but which have shrunk now to next to nothing in most places and been replaced by other approaches entirely elsewhere. The shift from recognising children as the church of tomorrow to their being the church of today, by virtue of their baptism, has led to a lot of questions about their place in the

worshipping community on a Sunday. The question is at its most acute where there has been a move to make the eucharist more central to Sunday worship (and that has affected nearly all churches to some extent or other) but where a church's discipline does not admit children to communion. But even without that particular question, with all its theological and pastoral ramifications, the growth of "all age worship" or "the family service" has changed and is changing the face of Sunday morning in many churches.

There has been, thirdly, the quest for spontaneity, variety and informality. Obviously that arises in part from what has already been said, but it also represents something of the cultural expectations of our day. We have lived through a period that has sat light to history, that has more reverence for the new than the old, and we have grown used, in front of our television screens, to entertainment of a high calibre, to attractive presentation of nearly everything that might appeal to us, and, we are now told, we have in the process grown less able to listen for very long or to concentrate for many minutes. We do not any longer commit to memory or set out to learn; children are not taught to do so. Why bother? It is all on disc and ready to be summoned on to a screen. We do not any longer look to our national leaders for oratory or rhetorical skills; they must communicate with us informally - the politician's fire side chat. It is simply not a formal or a reverential age. The Christian Church does not regard its weekly worship

as entertainment, but its worship is nevertheless not immune from the expectations that are being created. Changes in worship owe much to these cultural pressures.

And so, fourthly - it is the other side of the coin - there has been in the churches a loss of confidence in our heritage and our tradition. And I think I mean here both the shared heritage and traditions of the Christian Church, and also our own denominational heritage and traditions. A religion that looks back to a series of historical events at its foundation, and to a Master who walked through the pages of history, cannot sit too light to its past, and through many of the Christian centuries people have delighted in their heritage, and worship has consciously built on the religious observances as much as the faith of those who have gone before. The spirit of the age (strong in its sense of the pastness of the past in our new age when so much seems fundamentally different) has made us question the relevance of much of our tradition, and lose our confidence in it. We have perhaps too easily abandoned in worship, as in other areas of church life, the heritage into which we have been invited to enter.

What have been the reasons for change? Here is a fifth. There is all too often a need to contain everything in one hour a week. Of course there are churches with a full programme of weekday worship, study and fellowship, producing well-informed Christians well-equipped for service in the world, if

only there were time left after all the worship, study and fellowship to go and face the world. But for rather more people the reality is that the time for corporate Christian activity is an hour a week. The pressures of modern life dictate that they will not come as they used to, twice, sometimes three times, a Sunday, and when they do come they begin to be restless, unless the liturgy or the preaching is exceptional, soon after the hour is up. Everything that Christian people need to be put into worship and find themselves getting out if it all in an hour in a week. That represents quite a change, and of course it is made all the more challenging by the fact that even the one hour a week won't be one hour every week. Increased mobility, longer leisure, and pressure of other Sunday activities will make going to church one option among several, and church will not always win even with the faithful.

Here is the sixth reason. Worship has changed because of the easy availability of new liturgical material, including, indeed especially, music. There seems to be an insatiable demand for new liturgies, new anthologies of prayer, and new hymns and songs and choruses. And the demand can so easily be met, via books and copyright licences and overhead projectors and computers and illegal photocopying. Think of the energy expended in the past in revising a hymn book and the passions aroused in the local church about whether to adopt it. And cannot the minister can sit at his or her desk and produce a customised service sheet, different every week, with

a new song each time, and everyone be spoilt by choice.

Seven: there has been the Liturgical Movement. However broadly or narrowly you define it, there has been through sixty years or so a remarkable flowering of liturgical scholarship. It has never been narrowly academic, but always with a pastoral concern. It has been thoroughly ecumenical and has led to a conscious convergence of the worship rites, especially the eucharistic rites, of the churches of the West, catholic and reformed. Two generations of clergy have been influenced by it during their training and moved into pastoral responsibility with some of its assumptions and something of its agenda. In some ways it has tempered the influence of the spirit of the age. for it has, for instance, had a reverence for the past that has been quite confident that the liturgical practices of the early centuries have much to teach us. Its influence extends far beyond those churches that readily speak in liturgical terms, and someone one day should do some interesting work on the relationship of the Liturgical Movement and the Charismatic Movement.

All these things - language, the all age worship phenomenon, the spirit of the age in terms of informality and variety, the loss of confidence in the tradition, the time constraints, the explosion of new material, the Liturgical Movement - have all made for change in our worship, and no doubt it is a change in which there has been loss and gain.

My postscript reason, the eighth, is of a different kind. Has the principal reason for change been an openness to the Spirit of God? I don't just mean by this that we ought to include the Charismatic Movement as much as the Liturgical Movement among the causes of change, though clearly the Charismatic Movement has influenced patterns of worship well beyond churches that call themselves charismatic, not least in relation to musical repertoire. But has the whole process of change been very much the work of the Spirit of God? I believe it has, but I give this as a separate sort of answer to the others, because it is not so much an eighth answer as the one that lies behind the others. Surely the Spirit of God has been at work but, as always, through all sorts of pressures, some of them apparently secular and many of them cultural? Yes, the Spirit of God has been at work in the liturgical upheavals of our time, and, for some, radical change has been a direct response to the Spirit's bidding. Perhaps most of us will recognise it as a more complicated process, but one through which nevertheless the Spirit has been able to bring about new things.

This whole process of change has brought about something that has been little less than a crisis for music in worship. All that I have described had added up to a vast shift in style, in all but the most conservative church communities, with radical change required for the musicians. The words of worship have been questioned or changed with

implications for the whole traditional musical repertoire. Alongside this has been a demand for music culturally very different from the past. More fundamentally there has been an emphasis on participation that has questioned seriously the idea of music sung by professional singers in the presence of a silent congregation, and this does not mean only the cathedral tradition, but even the anthem singing by parish church choirs.

At the same time as these liturgical changes the world of church music has been affected by other shifts. Changes in music education are producing a generation of young people who have never learned to sing in their school years, and find the communal singing we take for granted in church alien, but who have learned to play a variety of musical instruments. They have even learned composition. Approaches to the teaching of music in schools has changed radically and present the Church both with new problems and with new opportunities. On the whole we have been quick to see the former and slow to grasp the latter.

Another force for change for church music has been the growth of the recorded music industry. People are listening to high quality music (I mean high quality of performance) more than ever before, and Classic FM and other radio stations are opening up classical music, including church music, to many who have not enjoyed it before. There ought to be an implication about the willingness to listen to music

in the liturgy, but to that I will return. But certainly there is an implication for standards of performance. The poor but reverent performance of small choirs of elderly voices that can still be found in a number of churches is often an offering to God undertaken with love and faithfulness. For those who have been listening to the radio or a CD in the car on the way to church it can be a dreadful cultural shock.

More serious still, perhaps, is the divorce between serious musicians and the Church. Where today are the successors of Haydn, Schubert and Bach who wrote for the liturgy of the Catholic Church and whose melodies have also found their way in the hymn tunes of the Reformed churches, or even the successors of Vaughan Williams or Britten in our own century? There is John Tavener, though there are important questions that arise from the fact that he turns almost exclusively to the music and the theology of the Orthodox Churches, but otherwise we find that church music and the world of contemporary composition have moved apart. God is not getting the best tunes today, and it is the liturgy that is impoverished as a result.

For, if we are to have worship, we must have music. Of course it is possible for a human being to draw close to God without it. But for most of us music helps. We can draw closer to God through music in worship, though we shall not all respond to one kind. Music is in nearly every soul, and nearly every soul can find something of the divine, even if God is not

named, in music, Music is a gift of the Creator, and one cannot but suspect that the conversation at the heart of all things, the divine discourse of the sacred trinity, sometimes breaks into song. Not only because the Creator God must ever be creative, but also because music unites and draws together, and the trinity is the ultimate expression of unity. You have only to watch the effect of a good first hymn in worship. A collection of individuals are tuned in to things divine, bound mysteriously together and drawn into prayer. "The one who sings prays twice," Augustine of Hippo is credited with saying. Music adds a new dimension to our prayer.



So, with our concerns that worship shall be nothing less than putting us in touch with the reality of God, that prayer shall be at the heart of worship, and that we shall receive God's blessings through the worship we offer, and with this picture of radical change in worship, not least in the music of worship, what are the areas where we should be vigilant or active? I must be very selective, and this lecture has been designed more to stimulate reflection on this question than to give answers. Here, however, are five areas that I can indicate only briefly that merit attention.

First we need, as individual churches and ecumenically, to continue the search for a satisfying liturgical language, properly contemporary and accessible, but also poetic, resonant, memorable and embedded in our own cultures. This applies not only

to what we would strictly call liturgical texts, but to translations of scripture that we use in worship and to the provision of hymnody and other worship songs. Without such satisfying language we shall ourselves be dissatisfied, we shall be less able to offer worship that is adequate, and we shall continue to alienate a cultural world, including the world of composers and musicians, that has come to believe, not entirely erroneously, that we have abandoned our musical and liturgical heritage without a thought for what we have done.

Secondly, we need to argue the case that, as far as liturgy and music go, old and new belong together. The wise worshipping community will draw from its treasure both the old and the new. Churches need not be divided by their liturgical and musical preferences, but the formation of ministers and the training of church musicians should include the skill to draw on all the Christian centuries in devising worship. Traditional hymnody, plainchant, Taize, Kendrick, Iona, Palestrina - none of these need to be kept in isolation. In a multi-cultural age, worship must draw all these together and skilfully work them into a satisfying unity, where souls can be stimulated to holiness, and often, discover, with surprise and perhaps delight, that the stimulation has come from where they least expect it.

Thirdly, we need to rediscover what it means to "sing the liturgy". In the past in churches in the Catholic tradition there was a sense in which song broke out

all through worship. There were the musical settings of the common texts of the service - *Kyrie*, *Gloria*, *Sanctus*, etc. And there was singing at other points, proper chants for almost everything, the lections included. Sometimes that was over formal and the singing reserved to the clergy, the whole experience in danger of being exclusive and esoteric. But it did have the very real merit that it provided a model of singing the liturgy. In the Reformed tradition the emphasis has been more on a spoken, a said, service, punctuated with hymns or occasionally psalms or anthems. We need to recover how music can break out in a variety of styles through the service, in balance of course with the spoken word and with silence. The influence of Taizé worship has opened up this possibility for some. Penitence can be sung, intercession can be sung. Cantors, if necessary without help of choir or organ, can lead congregations, if necessary unaccompanied, to break into songs in ways most of them have not yet imagined. "Singing the liturgy" - music, spoken word and silence held together in proper balance - is an ideal for all to explore. Music is not the icing on the cake. It needs to be part of the mix itself.

A fourth part of a strategy, quite a different one, is to develop real lines of communication with the world of education. We need to challenge gently the way that school worship songs have moved right away from our traditional hymnody, and indeed have little overlap with the more popular chorus culture. We need to find a common core of hymns and songs that

can still find a place in school worship and church worship. Additionally we need to grasp the opportunities provided for the church by the fact that school music encourages instrumentalists, composition, arranging of parts, so that we also encourage this flowering of musicianship, as well as benefiting from what it can offer us. We need both to create organ scholarships in our larger churches and also to develop instrumental groups in churches of all sizes, so that church once again becomes a natural place for people to express their musicianship.

And finally - and this is very much a coming back to where we began - we need to help people, through clear teaching and preaching and through sensitive leading, to recover the art of praying the liturgy, bringing to public worship all the insights they have gained in their personal prayer and contributing it to the liturgy so that there is an undercurrent of prayer to sustain and enliven it. And, as part of that, we need both to place a greater emphasis on silence, which is often the seedbed of prayer, and also to encourage music which often stimulates it. In a world where people are learning afresh to listen to music and to allow it to draw spiritual depths out of them - and this is happening to people who claim no religious allegiance and happening often anywhere but in church - we need to help them to learn how listening to music in liturgy can lead to a stillness of the soul and can stimulate prayer and yearning for the living God. By all means let worship be

participatory, and sometimes that will mean "having a good sing", but participation can be a more subtle art, and sometimes when I sit entranced by music, utterly silent, utterly still, I can grasp the heel of heaven, where, as John Donne put it "*there is no noise nor silence, but one equal music*". That, please God, for all the silence and the stillness, is participation, and participation that turns into prayer, prayer that puts us in touch with the reality of God. In the end nothing else matters and nothing else will do if worship is to be true.