

WORSHIP, EUCHARIST AND THE VULNERABLE GOD

I began writing this the morning after the General Election, with two headlines uppermost in my mind:

From *The Herald*: 'Catastrophic' slump in Kirk Membership.

From *The Scotsman*: Kirk membership slumps to a 'catastrophic' record low.

In response to the news that the Church had lost 60% of its membership in the past forty five years, the Depute Clerk of the General Assembly, Dr Marjory MacLean was quoted saying, 'In modern Scotland, people stay where they are, and the church comes to them'. She went on to say, 'People come into contact with us in different ways: there are more hospital chaplains, industrial chaplains and workplace chaplains than ever before'.

One of the ways 'the Church' comes to people, at the same time powerfully and intimately, is through a programme like television's *Songs of Praise*. Let me describe one edition. It was the second Sunday of this year, two Sundays after the 'tsunami' and this programme, introduced by Sally Magnusson, was billed as tackling the effect of the tsunami on faith.

At the start of the programme Sally Magnusson said that the programme would begin with one of the psalms, 'which we turn to' she said 'for a God who promises to be with us even in death', and granted the tsunami theme I had expected perhaps the *de profundis* or the disconsolate Psalm 43, or even Psalm 22 which has a certain dominical authority in the face of undeserved suffering. But instead of one of the psalms we were treated to the sanitised saccharin, Christianised version of the 23rd Psalm: 'The King of Love my Shepherd is'.

Then John Bell reflected on the story of Jesus sleeping during the storm. He said, 'Jesus decides to be part of the company of people who are in the boat. God is not removed but present on earth. It is our doubting which prevents us meeting God there': by 'doubting', I assume he meant not questioning whether God existed, but questioning whether God is still God even if He is in the boat rather than outside it. After another song, John Bell said that

Christianity is not a 'quick fix'; it is articulating what is in the depths of people's hearts. And so people ask 'Why?' We are not fully human, John said, until we can face up to things going wrong. There was then another song.

Then a Moslem cleric took part and said 'God's absolute power is beyond our comprehension'. God's absolute power.

And a Buddhist monk said that we have to accept (karma) and pray that 'God will never again send such suffering'.

Then, after another reflection from John Bell and a piece from James MacMillan's St Anne Mass, the programme ended with the hymn 'God is Love, let heaven adore him', with the lines: 'Then they find the self-same aching / In the very heart of God.'

I found myself immediately asking a question. Here was a programme, following the tsunami, presenting viewers with the Christian understanding of a God who could not do everything, a God who is to be known in His vulnerability, a God who is revealed in weakness,. But alongside that Christian understanding of the vulnerable God was being presented the image of a God of absolute power, and alongside that, the image of a God who 'sends' the suffering of the tsunami.

I think St Paul was on to something when he described faith as a 'mystery': not something which is puzzling, but something which is inexplicable to those outside the community but perfectly clear to those within the community. I want to argue that to the world outside the community of faiths (in the plural) it is confusing, misleading and dangerous to combine reflections of the view that God is known in his hiddenness, in his vulnerability, in his weakness, with reflections of the views that God is known in his absolute power, or that it is in God's nature to send geological traumas like the tsunami – views which in the *Songs of Praise* programme were articulated by a Moslem cleric and a Buddhist monk.

I do not for a moment want to question the importance of inter-faith dialogue. But I do want to question whether it makes any sense to allow those outside the community of faith to hear two totally different understandings of God.

In passing, can I say that I am not sure that fundamental differences in the understanding of God have been addressed by those who, for all the right reasons, want to promote what is called 'inter-faith worship'.

In the days immediately before that tsunami *Songs of Praise*, I had read two articles by very prominent Scottish journalists.

Here is Muriel Gray, in the *Sunday Herald*, attacking the Archbishop of Canterbury's response to the tsunami:

'All the post-tsunami talk about how a loving God could deal such a cruel blow seems particularly cock-eyed. The debate, all over the press and internet, seems to rest on the testing of faith of those peculiar people who believe in a God sufficiently hands-on to respond to their prayers ... The tsunami would only have been a test of faith to a person believing in the interventionist God of the Old Testament, the crazy guy who regularly smote down chaps for not paying him enough respect ... The timing and scale could easily be interpreted, by those of an imaginative disposition, as some deity losing patience with our year of non-stop global aggression, and deciding to show us, just 20 minutes after the close of Christmas Day, how effortlessly a God can destroy and at the same time force man to rekindle the dying embers of his humanity'.

Where in all of Muriel Gray's invective, is the God who is known in his impotent vulnerability? Of course that understanding of God is not in Muriel Gray's experience at all, because the only God she has been introduced to is the God who causes things to happen; the God who, she once explained to me in a radio programme, she had been told handicaps children 'in order to test people's faith'.

Here is the Herald's columnist Jack MacLean, praising the Editor of the Sikh Messenger on Radio 4's 'Thought for the Day', who, says MacLean, 'comes across as a dashed sight more thoughtful than any of the prattling priests who appear on the show, especially those who try to claim that natural disasters are not God's fault. I don't think they are either, but then I'm not the one with an omnipotent God.'

And neither am I, or those like me, who, Sunday by Sunday, by Sunday, conduct public worship.

It is the response of intelligent journalists like Muriel Gray and Jack MacLean which makes me ask the question **How public should public worship be?**

Those of us who believe that there are things God cannot do (like stopping the undersea earthquake which produced the tsunami), can articulate that understanding of God within the community of faith. Those of us who believe that God has been revealed to us in Jesus as a God who is vulnerable can talk about God's vulnerability within the fellowship of believers. Those of us who believe that faith is what copes with the absence of the presence of God can share that with those who have also known the absence of the presence of God in coping, within their own faith, with the ache of that absence.

The community of faith's understanding of God provided the hinterland for everything John Bell said on that *Songs of Praise*. But those outside the community or fellowship of faith, like Muriel Gray or Jack MacLean, who hear religious people speaking in the language of their faith, are hearing language (as they know it) used in a very different way: not in the currency of ordinary discourse but in a way they do not recognise. The language of faith isn't foreign to them – that's the trouble: if it was gobbledegook it could be dismissed – it is language they recognise but used by people of faith in what is, for them, an unrecognisable way. But of course, Muriel Gray and Jack MacLean are as irredeemably fixed in their antagonism to religion as I am in my attachment to it.

I wonder if this is a problem which may disappear because a generation is growing up, indeed has grown up, which doesn't have the Muriel Gray/Jack MacLean visceral reaction to religion and so may therefore be more open to the possibilities that the language of religion is a vehicle for their dreams? Is it possible that the very ignorance of religion at least means that people do not have prejudices about religion based on a false understanding of God?

So I want to ask, first of all, how public should public worship be, if those who listen in, those who overhear what the community and fellowship of faith are saying, as they wrestle with something like the tsunami, have not been introduced to, brought up in, or share with the community of faith an understanding of the God we have come to believe in.

I believe we have reached a stage today where the understanding of a God who is always vulnerable and frequently impotent is so foreign to people's

thinking that it is not only meaningless to confront them with it but actually destructive of the possibility of communication with them, because, however it is expressed, what they hear is that God is useless. Let me give you a personal example.

Some years ago I was asked to interview Ludovic Kennedy following the publication of his book, *Farewell to God*. In the course of the programme I talked to him about some scathing comments he had made about Dietrich Bonhoeffer, including one where he attacks what he said he assumed was a terrible misprint, when Bonhoeffer wrote, in that famous passage, 'God allows himself to be edged out of the world and on to the cross'. Kennedy assumed that the proof reader had not picked up that, of course, it was Christ and not God who was 'edged on to the Cross'. When I said to Ludovic Kennedy that Bonhoeffer meant exactly what he had written he found it, he said 'incomprehensible'.

So my first reason for asking how public, public worship should be rests on the incomprehensibility of what Christians like me believe about God to those who are outside the community of faith. When I joined the BBC in 1987 I argued that church services were incomprehensible to most viewers and listeners, and that to make acts of public worship the main focus of religious broadcasting was to tie religious broadcasting to an ever diminishing audience: not something any broadcaster willingly does. I now want to go much further. I want to say that expressing what many Christians believe about God is actually dangerous to the Church's mission: not only because people misunderstand it but because they cannot possibly understand it at all. Four hundred years ago Martin Luther said that outside the community of faith, left to their own, people would only understand the 'theology of glory', never 'the theology of the cross', I think he was right.

But I have a second reason. Let me return to that tsunami *Songs of Praise* programme. The Moslem leader taking part said 'God's absolute power is beyond our comprehension'. But for many of us, the Christian God is the God, who, as Kierkegaard said in his famous parable about the king who loved a maiden but could only win her love if he abdicated... the Christian God is the God who has abandoned absolute power. The Buddhist monk said that 'we simply have to accept and pray that God will never again send such suffering'. But the Christian God is the God who does not send suffering. The late John Robinson, the Bishop of Woolwich in the 1960s who persuaded

many of us to hold on to a faith we thought was indefensible, said: 'If ... a person for whom I cared deeply was killed in a plane crash, or found to have inoperable cancer, I should find it wholly unnatural to blame a divine Planner or to disbelieve in his existence because of it ... The "problem" of evil is not how God can will it ... but its power to threaten meaninglessness and separation, to sever and to sour, and to darken our capacity to make the response of "Thou"'. The poet Donald Davie puts it like this in his poem 'Ordinary God'.

'Do you believe in a God
who can change the course of events
on earth?'

'No, just the ordinary one.'

A laugh,
but not so stupid: events
He does not, it seems, determine
for the most part. Whether He could
is not to the point; it is not
stupid to believe in
a God who mostly abjures.

No, it is not stupid, but the world outside the world of Christian faith either thinks it is stupid or does not understand. So I am arguing that the world outside the world of faith is so incapable of grasping what the world of faith is talking about, and to, in its worship that it is genuinely dangerous to allow the world outside the world of faith to hear what we are saying. Forty nine years ago, George MacLeod said in his sermon at the opening of the General Assembly: 'Patripassianism (the idea that God actually suffers) is only a half a heresy, and it will take the second half of the twentieth century to make it orthodoxy'.

What language shall I borrow
to praise thee, heavenly friend?

How can we express in our worship that sense of God, not as impotent, just as not being powerful in the way that the word 'powerful' is normally used to refer to God's omnipotence, but rather, as Bonhoeffer described the God of the Bible: 'powerless and suffering', and who calls Christians to 'participation in the powerlessness of God in the world'?

I don't think we can. And I am not even sure that we should. But I think our worship should enable people who want to, as I do, to express that for themselves which, at the most basic level, means not using phrases like 'Almighty God' (which contradict people's own experience of God in his vulnerability). I want to argue that the language of our worship should be less controlled than it currently is.

Rowan Williams, in his book *On Christian Theology*, has a very revealing section on worship in which, in passing, he points out how 'theology has worked, and continues to work, in the interest of this or that system of power'. He says: 'One of the temptations of theology has been – at least in the modern era – to suppose not so much that there is a normative content for theological utterance, but that there is a normative style.....In proper reaction to what can look like self indulgent or uncritical devotional and liturgical language (which, for our purposes means the language of *Mission Praise*)¹ theologians can fall into the assumption that the mode of critical austerity in their utterances is something to which other people's speech should conform; or else, faced with a plurality of ambiguous utterances, the theologian seeks prescriptively to reduce the disturbingly wide range of meanings and resonances that exist in the more 'primary' religious talk of story and hymnody. In either case, the theologian risks breaking off one of the most crucial conversations he or she is likely to be involved in, conversation with an idiom *deliberately* less controlled, more concerned with evocation and suggestion'.

Most public worship, in my experience (and I include that which I conduct too) assumes that 'critical austerity' (to use Rowan Williams' phrase) about the transcendent God is something to which everyone's worship should conform and that we need not be concerned with 'evocation and suggestion'.

I think it is very revealing that Rowan Williams points out that the evocation and suggestion of music is always a counterbalance to the theologian's tendency 'prescriptively to reduce the disturbingly wide range of meanings and resonances that exist in the more 'primary' religious talk of story and hymnody'. In this connection I am reminded of a phrase that Alison Elliot uses about the eyes of faith which are 'lubricated by parable and metaphor'.

In the summer of 1856 Robert Lee wrote in his diary when he was at Fribourg in Switzerland: 'High mass in the Cathedral. Heard the organ played – by

far the most wonderful musical representation I ever listened to. Indeed it so surpassed anything I had heard that I felt as if I had never heard music before'. In introducing music into the worship of this building² Robert Lee was, I think intuitively, recognising that music is concerned where words are not always concerned with 'evocation and suggestion'. One thinks of Edwin Muir's famous description of 'The Word made flesh here is made word again...' and how in place of evocation and suggestion, 'the Mystery is impaled and bent / Into an ideological instrument'.

The philosopher George Steiner writes 'The lapse from ceremony and ritual in much of public and private behaviour has left a vacuum. At the same time there is a thirst for magical and 'trans-rational' forms. The capacity of organised religion to satisfy this thirst diminishes. Matthew Arnold foretold that the 'facts' of religion would be replaced by its poetry. Today, one feels that in many educated but imperfectly coherent lives that 'poetry of religious emotion' is being provided by music. The point is not easy to demonstrate; it pertains to the interior climate of feeling. But one does know of a good many individual and familial existences in which the performance or enjoyment of music has functions as subtly indispensable, as exalting and consoling, as religious practices might have, or might have had formerly'.

Because music provides space and atmosphere, it allows individuals who, today, have a whole host of very inchoate, probably unorthodox, certainly theologically untutored views about the spiritual dimension to their lives to find there space and room for their convictions, however vaguely formed. And if you want a very concrete example of that: I made a radio programme not so long ago with the Paisley sculptor Sandy Stoddart, whose huge statue of John Witherspoon dominates the Universities of Paisley and Princeton and whose equally huge statue of David Hume is only two hundred metres away.³ He told me that he went every Sunday to Paisley Abbey because the music left him free to express his convictions.

Gilleasbuig Macmillan has written in his (for me at least) very helpful recent book *Understanding Christianity* that 'Faith, it seems to me, is not so much the holding of opinions on religious matters as it is the inhabiting of an environment of nourishing imagery. The nature of that environment will be varied, and the ingredients which seem prominent will change from time to time.' In promoting the use of stained glass and music in this building Robert Lee was, I believe, providing nourishing imagery for people to inhabit.

If worship today is to embrace (and not antagonise) those like myself whose understanding is of a vulnerable God known to us through the hiddenness of the *via crucis*, as well as those who want to insist on a God who is entirely 'other' and inhabits eternity, before whom we are as dust; and if worship today is to embrace and include faiths whose understanding of God is very different, then worship has to rediscover itself as the providing of nourishing imagery, which is offered but not forced, commended but not insisted upon, hinted at but not made programmatic, and which allows people to inhabit it in the way they can. To some that may seem a recipe for indefensible subjectivism. So be it. But orthodox objectivity often leads to indefensible exclusivity!

I share with you three different responses I have had from friends with whom I have shared some of the thoughts I have been trying to express.

I have a friend who is a minister, who is gay, and found that he cannot reconcile the two. And so he has left the ministry and to all intents and purposes, I think, has lost his faith. We were talking together one day about why he believed (as he put it) the omnipotent God made him the way he is which has been a cause of anxiety and pain to him; and why that same all-powerful God had not helped him escape from his homosexuality. I tried to talk about the God I believed in, who was not all powerful, the God I have referred to throughout what I have been saying. Suddenly he snapped back at me: 'How can you give glory to God (which is what worship is) when He is sitting snivelling in the corner, saying he can't do anything about the tsunami'.

That is one of the two real problems which I have encountered as, over the past year or so, I have discussed the issues I have been exploring today with friends and colleagues: how do you worship the God who is vulnerable?

The second response came from Alison Elliot. For me the past year as one of her chaplains has been a year of intensely stimulating (but not intense!) theological reflection. Alison said to me that 'worship' was a word which she thought applied to what we do in response to the transcendent God. The God that she and I know, who is vulnerable and powerless, is a God who can be the proper object of our reflection and meditation but 'worship' is reserved for the transcendent God.

But if the transcendent and the immanent, the powerful and the powerless, the almighty and the vulnerable are faces of the same God, is liturgical schizophrenia the only alternative to the liturgical imperialism of God as 'Almighty'. In a recent article in *Theology*, Jay MacLeod, now Interfaith Adviser to the Bishop of St Albans, wrote: 'Liturgists love "Almighty God"'. In modern eucharistic rites the world over, presiders and people address God as "Almighty" over and over again, from the opening prayer, right through to the final blessing.' (And that's true of *Common Order*)

It is, I believe, in 'the Eucharist, the Mass, the Lord's Supper, the Holy Communion, call it what you will' (as Gilleasbuig Macmillan likes to put it) that the Church preserves the worship of the transcendent God with the acceptance of the vulnerable God. Because, whatever may be said about God's transcendence in the liturgy of the word, and however much the Mystery 'is impaled and bent into an ideological instrument', the Eucharist presents us with the God whose body is broken. I understand all the issues involved in the argument about the form in which Christ may be offered to us in the Eucharist, and I recognise the power of the Eucharist as a sacrament which actually constitutes us as the people of God, but these issues and the power of that symbol of our constitution as Christ's body pale into insignificance for me in comparison to my primary understanding of the Eucharist as the means by which, in worship, I, we, the worshippers, identify ourselves with the language of the body broken. The Eucharist is about a broken God inviting us to identify with His brokenness.

In another discussion about what I have been saying, my friend and former colleague Andrew Barr asked me: if worship is only for those within the mystery, how are those outside to be brought inside?

One answer to that is to go back to the practice of the early Church: faced with a society which found the beliefs of Christianity as incomprehensible as it seems many do today, the early church expected catechumens to undergo up to two years of instruction, and two years of regular Sunday worship, before they could be expected to assimilate what Christian faith involved. However desirable that might be, it is not a practicable possibility in a church where four meetings after the morning service and a quick run through the order for confirmation is what has replaced two years of catechumen preparation for membership of the Church.

The alternative, of course, is to admit that the Church of Scotland's concern to ensure that those wishing to 'join the Church' understand what faith involves has resulted in an over-intellectualising of the approach both to church membership and Holy Communion. Thirty years ago a General Assembly committee of which I was secretary opened the way to children being admitted to communion precisely because it provided the sort of environment of nourishing imagery which those who inhabited it found saying what words could not adequately say. And so those who want to belong will belong, and that belonging is more important at first than the believing which belonging to a vulnerable community sharing its experience of God's vulnerability will promote.

I could, I suppose, have spared you listening to all of this, and instead quoted Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and then asked you to reflect on what he said: 'You waited for worship with an utterly fervent heart, without really knowing what you wanted, and went away with a lighter and uplifted heart, without knowing what you had had'.

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Editor's Notes

1. The lecturer's interpolation.
2. The lecture was delivered in the Kirk of the Greyfriars, Edinburgh.
3. The statue sits outside the Court building at the corner of Bank Street and Lawnmarket.