St Mark's Church

Living Thinking Faith

'Why don't we . . . ?'

Questions about worship

3 (more) Sermons

by

Ian Wallis

Vicar

One

Why don't we always use authorized liturgies?

(1 Corinthians 11.17-28 & Mark 2.23-28)

THIS IS THE FIRST of three sermons in response to questions I've been asked in recent months relating to worship at St Mark's. It is now nearly two years since our last major worship review, the outcomes of which relating to this service were gathered together in the leaflet, *Worship at St Mark's: Foundational Insights, Aspirations and Commitments*, which is readily available on the card stall and which has largely determined our course during the intervening months.

But nothing stands still for as I commented in that document:

> *Worship is the beating heart of a church – vital, life-giving, resourcing everything else we do. In certain respects, it is like a living organism with shape, structure and inner coherence. And it is one that needs to evolve and mature as we journey on in faith and make fresh discoveries of what it means to follow Jesus Christ in this time and place.*

So it is within this context that I offer these sermons in the hope that they will stimulate further discussion and discernment. Today's question is this: 'Why don't we always use authorised liturgies?'

Come back with me to the evening of 2 June 2009 when I was instituted and inducted into the living of this church and parish. During that service, I was required to make various oaths and declarations, including one relating to *only* using forms of service which are authorised or allowed by Canon.

Aware of the range of worship materials then in use at St Mark's, which extended well beyond official Church of England liturgies, I was not willing to make a commitment that in all likelihood would not be honoured so I decided to omit the word 'only'. An omission which I thought had gone unnoticed (certainly neither the Bishop nor the Archdeacon commented on it) until, after the service, I was surprised by how many members of the congregation approached me to express their appreciation and, in some cases, relief.

Since then, our worship has continued to evolve and, perhaps, increasingly to draw on material from other sources including home grown. I hope this process hasn't been accidental or arbitrary, but is a response to the particular characteristics, needs and aspirations of this congregation. And it is a response that has been guided by a foundational insight informing Anglican worship from the outset, namely, *Lex Orandi – Lex Credendi*, that is, 'the law of praying is the law of believing.'

This dictum is worth unpacking because it bears witness to the conviction that there is an intimate relationship between what we believe and how we worship.

By contrast, I remember a comment made by a Fellow of a Cambridge college, when, as chaplain, I had just recited the Grace in Latin at a formal dinner, he turned and whispered in my ear, 'I didn't understand a word of that – excellent, just as I like it!

Well, that is not the Anglican way and it is not the St Mark's way. As the legend of our logo expresses succinctly, we aspire to 'living thinking faith'. Faith that is reasonable and relevant yet pioneering and fearless, informed (but not constrained) by the orthodoxies of human inquiry. Faith that is willing to live with the complexities and uncertainties, the opportunities and challenges, characterising the human condition. And it is this approach to faith which needs to find expression in our worship and which, in turn, feeds our discipleship in an on-going process of reciprocity and growth. Put simply, the words we use in worship matter, because faith relates us to matters of ultimate concern.

Yet even more fundamental than *Lex Orandi – Lex Credendi*, the link between what we believe and how we pray, is the conviction that at the heart of Christianity is a person of faith and not a set of beliefs about that person. You sometimes hear churches categorised as either 'Jesus churches' or 'Pauline churches'. By this is meant, I think, that in the case of the former, the ministry of Jesus as attested in the Gospels is the principle source of inspiration whereas in the case of the latter it is the letters of Paul and the teaching they contain.

Of course, these need not be mutually exclusive, but there is value in this distinction and, unless I've formed the wrong impression over the past three years, then the majority of us relate and respond to the authority of Jesus and his kingdom vision, more readily than to Paul and his attempt to express theologically the significance of the risen Christ. And this emphasis, as you would expect, inevitably shapes our liturgy.

In a moment, I will offer one or two examples to illustrate this distinction, but before doing so, let me underline another Anglican insight into worship which we seek to affirm, namely its formative function.

We are familiar, perhaps, with the expressive nature of worship – we sing hymns and offer prayers to give expression to inner convictions, concerns and hopes. But the content of those hymns and prayers can also, often subliminally, shape our beliefs, inform our outlooks and orientate us to God, one another and all creation in a particular way. Few understood this better than the archetypal Anglican, Charles Wesley, who recognised the importance of hymns as a means of teaching the faith and forming beliefs.

But the formative function of worship embraces all components of a service. And this recognition, along with our rootedness in the ministry of Jesus, are two of the reasons why we sometimes part company with authorised liturgy. Prayers of confession are a case in point.

I think it's fair to say that most Jesus scholars would maintain that Jesus believed human beings possessed a capacity to do and say wrong things, but not that they were inherently sinful – evil to the core. Otherwise, he is hardly likely to have recruited into his number some of the characters that he did.

To reflect this insight liturgically, we need prayers of penitence that challenge us to acknowledge wrongdoing in terms of what we have actually said or done rather than to engender a sense of all-pervasive unworthiness or inescapable depravity. This distinction is vitally important.

Think for a moment, if children grow up in a climate where they are regularly told by their parents that they are worthless and capable of no good thing, the likelihood is that they will end up believing it, to their own personal detriment as well as, in all probability, the detriment of others. But if children are affirmed and valued and, within this climate, disciplined when they err, then they are more able to address their mal-practise without feeling worthless or disempowered.

Now is not a similar dynamic at play in worship? If every time we come to church we are told that 'we are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under [God's] table' or, to borrow a phrase from the General Confession of the *Book of Common Prayer*, that 'there is no health in us,' then the chances are we will end up inhabiting the role, with all that implies in terms of self-loathing and lack of confidence that God could love us and entrust to us the kingdom.

And what is at stake is no less significant when it comes to forgiveness which in Jesus' ministry is the generous outpouring of God's graciousness not in response to repentance, less still as a reward for it, but as a means of transformation. For Jesus, forgiveness comes first (as the English word implies) and liberates – enabling us to break free from whatever diminishes or prevents us from inhabiting the fullness of our God-given humanity. As Jesus demonstrates repeatedly, God is energisingly and unconditionally present, ever calling us into covenant and collaboration.

But is that the impression you gain when a priest pronounces, 'Almighty God, who forgives all who *truly* repent'? or when, during the intercessions, the bidding and response is used, 'Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer'? After all, why wouldn't a gracious, forgiving God wish to receive our prayers? Do we really need to beg God to do so?

And the commitment to being true to Jesus and rooted in his ministry, rather than in theological reflections upon his death and resurrection, also accounts for why we often use alternative eucharistic prayers or Great Prayers of Thanksgiving as we tend to call them. The authorised prayers of *Common Worship* pretty much all articulate the same theological conviction, namely that Jesus' death was a substitutionary sacrifice to atone for human sinfulness or, to express it in another way, Jesus died in our place to deal with our inherent malevolence and deviancy.

Prayer A, 'Through him you have freed us from the slavery of sin, giving him to be born of a woman and to die upon the cross;' *Prayer B*, 'And so, Father, calling to mind his death on the cross, his perfect sacrifice made once for the sins of the whole world;' *Prayer C*, 'All glory be to you, our heavenly Father, who, in your tender mercy, gave your only Son our Saviour Jesus Christ to suffer death upon the cross for our redemption; who made there by his one oblation of himself once offered a full, perfect and sufficient sacrifice, oblation and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world;' *Prayer D*, 'In love you gave us Jesus your Son to rescue us from sin and death;' *Prayer E*, 'So, Father, we remember all that Jesus did, in him we plead with confidence his sacrifice made once for all upon the cross; *Prayer F*, 'As we recall the one, perfect sacrifice of our redemption;' *Prayer G*, 'He offered his life for sinners, and with a love stronger than death he opened wide his arms on the cross … Father, we plead with confidence his sacrifice made once for all upon the cross;' and, finally, *Prayer H*, 'He opened his arms of love upon the cross and made for all the perfect sacrifice for sin.'

And yet for all this emphasis upon Jesus' death as a substitutionary sacrifice, it is highly questionable whether he would have shared this understanding. After all, throughout his ministry, Jesus had been freely and without condition extending to secular and profane alike the blessings associated with God's favour without any recourse to the sacrificial economy of the Jerusalem Temple. For Jesus, God's presence was not mediated by priests and animal holocausts, but by lives responsive to grace and ready to live in its light.

And this conviction of Jesus about the goodness of God being available here and now for all who will receive it, is realised and celebrated through his practice of hospitality – of feeding the hungry, even the 'undeserving' poor, and welcoming the lonely, even those rightly ostracised by their communities, and attributing to those of no or low estate the dignity of being the subject of divine attention and good will.

For Jesus, the open-table of hospitality is the new altar where God is encountered in the sacrifice of sharing and through the communion of food and friendship, available for all.

But there is almost no reference to this wonderful inheritance of Jesus in the authorised Eucharistic Prayers which interpret the last supper as a Passover meal in which the bread and the wine symbolise his body and blood, the new sacrifice for our redemption.

I ask you, it is likely that this was Jesus' intention? Jesus, whose ministry embodied God's presence, freely accessible for all without any need for blood to be spilt or lives to be taken? Jesus, a Jew, for whom the consumption of blood would have been abhorrent?

Is it not more likely that Jesus, at table with his apprentices, aware that his own life was in danger as a consequence of his vocation, entrusts his ministry, his life's passion, to those whom he had prepared for that task?

And what would have been more natural and profound than to have done so using the raw material of the kingdom vision they had shared, the bread of sustenance and the wine of celebration.

> *One final time, in the company of his own, Jesus took bread, blessed it in God's holy name, broke it and gave it to them, saying: This is my body – my vision, my life – I entrust it to you.*
>
> *Later, he took a cup of wine, gave thanks, and offered it to them, saying: This is our new relationship with God, forged from forgiveness, sealed with my blood.*

Now there is so much more that I would have liked to offer by way of an answer to why we don't always use authorized liturgies, but hopefully I have managed to present at least a little of the rationale behind our current approach. And I invite you to respond so that we can gauge whether the worship that is currently offered here is helping to satisfy your sacred hunger and spiritual needs.

For, in the end, whether we use authorized services or draw on material from other sources, liturgy is the servant of the people, not its master, whose sole value is as a vehicle for worship in spirit and truth. For Sunday and its rituals, very much like the sabbath and its observances, was made for humankind, and not vice versa.

Two

Why don't we regularly recite the creed?

(James 2. 13-26 & Luke 6.31-38, 43-49)

THIS IS THE SECOND of three sermons in response to questions raised by members of our church community in relation to worship at St Mark's. I offer them, however, not simply as a response, but also as an invitation for us all to engage in further reflection and discernment as, together, we seek to enable the worship of this church to evolve organically and fruitfully, within the Anglican way.

'Why don't we regularly recite the creed?' is our focus this morning and to ensure that we all have at least one experience of this rare phenomenon at the 10 o'clock service in recent years (although it is recited each Sunday at 8.00 am), I thought it would be helpful to include the so-called *Nicene Creed* in its customary BCP position between Gospel and sermon.

I wonder how many of us felt able to join in or what was going through your minds when you said, for instance, 'For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven, was incarnate from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and was made man' or what you experienced when you heard, 'For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end'?

It is here, I think, that we encounter our first difficulty, namely that although the creeds are intended to be ecumenical – instruments of unity and coherence – in the context of this congregation they would almost certainly have precisely the opposite effect. Paradoxically, the inclusion of the Nicene or one of the other authorized ecumenical creeds would prove to be a source of disharmony, exclusion and, quite possibly, departure.

In the light of this, what pastoral expedient could there be for following such a course of action, thereby placing the expectation on everyone to conform by uttering words they either don't understand (after all, most of the ancient creeds grew out of controversies many of us would now struggle to relate to and are couched in the language and mind set of worldview different from our own, unless you happen to be a middle-Platonist) or, comprehending, are unable to identify with, let alone affirm?

Equally, I would wish to acknowledge those of us who miss not being able to recite familiar words or affirm their beliefs in a formal manner or participate in this substantial component of Christian tradition and inheritance. To these I would say, thank you for your forbearance and for doing without that we may try to accommodate within our number more than would otherwise be the case.

But, you know, our difficulties with the creeds extend beyond pastoral concerns. There are, I think, a number of other problems of a more fundamental nature. For one thing, creeds are misleading in that they convey the impression that Christianity is principally a matter of orthodoxy – of right belief – of being able to affirm tightly formulated propositions about the nature of God, the identity of Jesus, the human condition and the origin of the universe, which are intentionally prescriptive and excluding of alternatives. Propositions claiming a great deal on behalf of God and yet which can be assented to in the mind without having any impact whatsoever upon attitudes, behaviour or commitments.

According to the Nicene Creed, to be Christian is to 'believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father; through him all things were made.' But is that really the case? Who is in a position to know or has authority to make such a pronouncement? And where does it leave followers of Jesus committed to his kingdom vision who either can't make head nor tail of such a formulation or, comprehending, are unable to accept it? Is their faith inadequate or misguided?

For another, creeds give the impression that Christians from ancient times have accepted their contents, acknowledged their mandate and drawn on their teaching to inform worship and shape practice.

Both of these impressions are demonstrably wrong. Unless our earliest sources completely misrepresent him, according to Jesus, as our readings this morning emphasise, faith is a way of life much more than a set of beliefs. Now, of course, this way of life is informed by key insights, convictions and commitments, but they are not those articulated within the catholic creeds.

For Jesus, God isn't a distant reality who has to contrive a costly rescue mission in order to enter space-time and save us from sin and its enduring consequences thereby drawing us into an heavenly eternity in the fellowship of the holy and undivided Trinity.

Rather, the sacred life of God's presence and reign is woven within the fabric of our being, waiting to be awakened by gifts of grace and forgiveness – liberating us from all that diminishes and oppresses, releasing within us a passion for justice and peace, drawing us into covenant and collaboration with the Ground of Being and with all who are animated by the breath of life.

Furthermore, it is simply unsustainable to maintain that the creeds represent the distillation of early Christian belief and the consensus of believers.

From the very beginning, diversity characterized Christianity – acrimony too. The New Testament bears witness to both. For example, there are four gospel accounts and not one. And with the discovery, especially in the middle of last century, of other Gospels and early Christian literature we are able to gain a much fuller appreciation of just how diverse and nuanced Christian belief was from the outset. The only common denominator was Jesus and his living memory.

Nor should we be naïve about the circumstances giving rise to the creeds which were the products of councils attended by bishops. Think for a moment about the Government's recent consultation on gay marriage to

which the House of Bishops made a submission, apparently, on behalf of the Church of England. Was General Synod consulted or were the Dioceses or the parishes? Not that I'm aware of. In truth, it was a submission expressing the views of the bishops, but not mine nor those of many other members of the Church of England.

There is little reason to think the situation was significantly different at, say, the Council of Nicaea in 325 – a gathering convened by Emperor Constantine at which he or his ecclesiastical adviser (Bishop Ossius of Cordova) presided when, from what we can gather, the doors were pretty much locked until a set of beliefs that the 300 or so assembled bishops were willing to sign to up had been agreed. The political motivation behind this concerted attempt to impose uniformity upon an inherently diverse phenomenon is beyond reasonable doubt After all, it is difficult to unite an empire around a religion that cannot be defined, controlled or mediated through establishment figures.

And even if the assembled bishops did all believe that the Son was *homoousios* ('of one substance,' a word proposed by Constantine to break the episcopal stalemate) with the Father, we can be confident (as the following Arian controversy attests) that many, many Christians did not and still don't.

Creeds are misleading because they distract us from the heart of our faith which is not a set of beliefs, not even a book, but a person – Jesus of Nazareth. And you cannot define any person definitively, less still the person of Jesus. Someone who from the outset engendered speculation and innovation as followers struggled to account for this extraordinary, inexhaustible life, generating a spectrum of interpretations – rabbi, prophet, healer, sage, high-priest, suffering servant, sacrificial offering, Lord, messiah, saviour, king, archetypal human, son of God, God's embodied word, to name but some of those included in the New Testament.

To insist that one of these must be correct at the exclusion of others is a bit like protesting that if I am husband to Liz I can't also be a son to my father or a priest to a community or a companion to my friends. These are not necessarily incompatible and nor are different testimonies to Jesus' identity

and significance, whether in creedal form or any form, because in the end they are personal affirmations not ontological truths. They express how Jesus is appreciated by particular persons at particular times. We can learn from them and may choose to adopt them, but they shouldn't be imposed upon us.

And to prioritize one particular affirmation such as the Nicene Creed is to diminish the testimonies of others as well as to discourage the rest of us from discovering who Jesus is for ourselves in our own experience.

What is more, for all its elevated Christology, the Nicene Creed (and to a lesser extent the other ecumenical creeds), actually diminishes Jesus by transforming him into a divine messenger on a mercy mission whose only notable accomplishment was to die. What does that say about his life, his ministry, his humanity; and, by implication, what does it say about ours? After all, if there was nothing noteworthy about Jesus apart from a miraculous birth and sacrificial death, there is little hope for the rest of us!

No, to my mind, what is urgently needed is a church willing to release Jesus from a theological straightjacket that has reduced his humanity to little more than a brief excursion within the story of salvation. We need to find both the courage and the wherewithal to risk bringing the Galilean into focus once more, embracing all the challenges and contingencies this entails - so that his human being is, once again, able to inform, inspire and, yes, interrogate ours.

For Jesus and his undying life is the heart of Christianity and his ministry is the only authentic measure of our faith. Surely, it is time for orthodoxy, right-belief, to give way to orthopraxy, right-practice, that followers of Jesus may be defined not so much by their creeds, but by their actions and find a common cause in the service Christ.

Three

Why don't we sing some of the familiar hymns?

(Colossians 3. 12 – 17 & Mark 14. 22 – 28)

THIS IS THE THIRD of three sermons looking as some of the questions relating to worship at St Mark's which have been raised in recent months. Today we explore why we tend not to sing some of the 'golden oldies' – hymns that some of us have grown up with; but, equally, why it is that we sing the hymns that we do.

We begin, though, with an excerpt from a letter written early in the second century by Pliny, then governor of the Roman province of Pontus-Bithynia, Asia Minor, to emperor Trajan in which he describes the conduct of some Christians he had encountered:

> *They had met regularly before dawn on a determined day and sung antiphonally a hymn to Christ as if to a god. They also took an oath not for any crime, but to keep from theft, robbery and adultery, not to break any promise and not to withhold a deposit when reclaimed. (Book 10, Letter 96).*

Pliny's letter is interesting for all sorts of reason, but for our purpose it confirms what references in the New Testament (including our first reading, Colossians 3.16; also Ephesians 5.19; 1 Corinthians 14.26; Acts 16.25) suggest, namely that the singing of hymns has been a component of Christian worship from the outset and, in particular, hymns to Christ. In truth, some of these hymns may well have been included in the New Testament. Consider, for instance, the following verses from Paul's letter to followers of Christ at Philippi:

Though he was divine,
he did not cling to equality with God,
but made himself nothing.
Taking the form of a slave,
he was born in human likeness.
He humbled himself
and was obedient to death,
even the death on the cross.
Therefore God has raised him on high,
and given him the name above every name:
that at the name of Jesus
every knee shall bow,
and every voice proclaim that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

(Philippians 2.6-11; cf John 1.1-18; Colossians 1.15-20;
Ephesians 2.14-16; 1 Timothy 3.16; 1 Peter 3.18-22; Hebrews 1.3)

In the practice of singing hymns, Christians appear to have adopted a tradition already established in early Jewish worship, as is evident in our gospel reading where, at the conclusion of what purports to be a Passover meal, Jesus and the disciples sing a hymn – probably some of the psalms now contained in the Hebrew Scriptures (cf Hallel Psalms 114-118). And it is worth pointing out that the Book of Psalms initially came into being as a hymn book, perhaps for use in the Jerusalem Temple after it was rebuilt following the Jewish return from Babylonian exile in the sixth century BC.

Singing, then, has been significant within Christian worship from the outset. And this shouldn't surprise us given that singing must be all but an universal currency as a means of self-expression, engendering a sense of community and emphasising shared convictions and aspirations.

Whether at a pop concert, football match or karaoke night at a local pub; whether in a Hindu Temple or an Olympic Stadium, people like to sing. Many cultures tell their stories through the medium of song. Many barriers have

been overcome by people, previously alienated from one another, finding a common voice. Many a grieving heart has gained comfort and many an aspiring soul inspiration through words set to music.

And in recent decades the therapeutic benefits of singing have increasingly been recognised within the scientific community (cf Sidney De Haan centre) and are even beginning to influence government policy (cf £40m National Singing Programme). Singing exercises major muscle groups in the upper body and improves the efficiency of the cardiovascular system; it promotes well-being, reduces stress and aids pain management. It seems, then, that Ella Fitzgerald was on the right lines when she said, 'The only thing better than singing is more singing.'

Now these observations are valuable, but in themselves do not account for the role of singing within Christian worship whether past, present or future. Although, I must say, the prospect of working out in church rather than going to the gym could prove attractive, but is likely to result in too many long hymns with exhausting tunes.

Acknowledging, then, that singing in a liturgical context has more to offer than stretching our vocal chords and inducing the 'feel-good' factor, brings into focus what is particular about singing within a Christian community, namely the words we proclaim and the tunes accompanying them.

Both are important and both are significant theologically, for music, no less than verse, can deepen faith, communicate profound truth, raise our horizons and mediate encounter with the mysterious otherness of God.

Whether it is the inspiring refrains of 'Guide me, O thou great Redeemer' (Cwm Rhondda), the reassuring rhythms of Crimond's setting of the Twenty-Third Psalm or the intricate cadences of Vaughan Williams' setting of Bianco da Siena's 'Come down, O Love divine' (Down Ampney), music possesses the capacity to minister to us – resonating within, taking us to the edge, giving texture and colour to human emotion and aspiration, bearing witness to another country.

It is for these reasons that music features substantially within our worship and in different ways, including the accompaniment of hymns. We try to select tunes of not only the correct meter to carry the words (although that's always advisable!), but also that help to reinforce or explore further the substance of the verses. And hopefully you will have noticed that whenever we introduce a new hymn more often than not it is sung to a familiar tune. What is more, the attuned among us will also appreciate how Andrew and other of our organists play each verse slightly differently to add further nuance and emphasis to the words.

Which brings us to the words themselves and, specifically, to addressing why is it that some hymns are conspicuous by the absence. Is this simply down to the preferences and prejudices of whoever is responsible for making the selection? I hope not although there is inevitably a measure of arbitrariness within the process because the sheer number of hymns. At St Mark's, for example, we use *HymnQuest* a database giving access to nearly 41,000 texts and that is only a subset of what is currently available. Quite simply, it would be impossible to be familiar with them all.

The first two criteria for selection (if that doesn't sound too grandiose) are, firstly, identifying texts that resonate with the thematic component of the service (whether defined by a festival, sermon series or scriptural readings set for the day) and, secondly, perform the appropriate function or transition within the liturgy: gathering in praise, attending to the Gospel, participating in the Eucharist, venturing forth in the service of Christ.

The next set of criteria reflect the kind of community we seek to be, namely inclusive. So gender inclusivity is a priority, but particularly challenging with older hymns that tend to reflect the social norms of their time. Some can be amended without loss of meaning or poetry; others, are simply unredeemable; others again are somewhere in middle.

But inclusion extends beyond gender to embrace, for instance, those judged by society as disabled. The recent visit of Professor John Hull alerted us to how 'blindness' is often used within the Christian tradition, including hymns,

as a metaphor for sinfulness or faithlessness: 'Amazing grace! How sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now am found; was blind, but now I see' (John Newton). Again, sometimes alternatives can be found, but not always and here, as throughout, a balance needs to be struck. For example, would you include Charles Wesley's, 'Christ, whose glory fills the skies', with the following second verse:

> Dark and cheerless is the morn
> Unaccompanied by thee;
> Joyless is the day's return,
> Till thy mercy's beams I see;
> Till they inward light impart,
> Glad my eyes, and warm my heart.

We also seek to be a peace-making community, within our own number as well as beyond; militaristic or triumphalist language, therefore, tend to be avoided. A community of practical faith so we look for hymns that challenge us to engage with the world and to translate the Gospel into daily living. A truthful community that is able to be honest about human nature and willing to recognise our capacity for evil as well as for good.

As I mentioned in the first sermon of this series, St Mark's draws its inspiration much more from the life and ministry of Jesus than from interpretations others placed upon his death – yielding a this-worldly focus shaped by Jesus' kingdom vision in which God seeks collaborators in transformation more than sinners preoccupied with personal salvation. Companions of Christ committed to embodying faith as authentically and fruitfully as he did and, through going so, to become workers for justice and channels of grace. Hope, of course, remains central within this vision, but it is one invested in a renewed earth before entrusting itself to what lies beyond the grave.

For this reason, hymns expounding the sacrificial, atoning death of Jesus and its benefits as well as those given over to heavenly speculation feature relatively infrequently in our worship, but they do feature, especially during

Holy Week and Easter when, amongst others, we sing classics such as Isaac Watts', 'When I survey the wondrous cross', Samuel Crossman's, 'My song is love unknown', and Edmond Budry's, 'Thine be the glory, risen conquering Son.'

Which brings us to the theological content of hymns – how they relate us to God and, indeed, what kind of God they relate us to. In this respect, hymns possess both a devotional and a pedagogical function. Clearly, this is a massive area meriting a sermon in its own right, but on this occasion let me simply stress the formative influence of worship and with this the importance of singing hymns that bear witness to the faith we seek to practice and the beliefs animating our humanity.

To this end, we try to sing hymns that exercise a restrained humility over what is knowable about God and to sit lightly upon theological anthropomorphism and cries for divine intervention. Hymns able to open us up to transcendence whilst, respecting the mysterious otherness of the sacred, inviting us to look upon, even to experience, the God of Jesus Christ.

It is time to draw to a close. By now I hope it has become a little clearer not only why we sing hymns, but also why it is that we sing the hymns that we do. Along the way, I hope you will have gathered that selecting hymns for each service is a challenge and, yes, it would be much easier to run with our favourites as well as with the standards of feast and season – and sometimes we do (Christmas Eve and 'Away in a manger' immediately come to mind – through gritted teeth!). But to do so all of the time would quickly become artificial and inadequate as the words we tried to sing cleaved to our tongues and failed to resonate with our deepest convictions and profoundest hungers.

And whilst we would never wish to suffocate the life-giving capacity of language or imprison ourselves within a particular theological stance, it is our responsibility to take what we sing seriously so that, as much as it lies in our gift, each of us, whatever our personal journey, is able to sing wholeheartedly and with integrity.

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