

THE CHURCH SERVICE SOCIETY

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Is there a George Street in Heaven?

I shall read to you words which you will enjoy. They are words you will recognise, perhaps the best known words in the modern history of liturgy. At the end of the reading I shall ask you a question about what you heard. This is Dom Gregory Dix, writing about “Do this in remembrance of me”.

“Was ever another command so obeyed? For century after century, spreading slowly to every continent and country and among every race on earth, this action has been done, in every conceivable human circumstance, for every conceivable human need from infancy and before it to extreme old age and after it, from the pinnacles of earthly greatness to the refuge of fugitives in the caves and dens of the earth. Men have found no better thing than this to do for kings at their crowning and for criminals going to the scaffold; for armies in triumph or for a bride and bridegroom in a little country church; for the proclamation of a dogma or for a good crop of wheat; for the wisdom of a Parliament of a mighty nation or for a sick old woman afraid to die; for a schoolboy sitting an examination or for Columbus setting out to discover America; for the famine of whole provinces or for the soul of a dead lover; in thankfulness because my father did not die of pneumonia; for a village headman much tempted to return to fetich because the yams had failed; because the Turk was at the gates of Vienna; for the repentance of Margaret; for the settlement of a strike; for a son for a barren woman; for Captain so-and-so, wounded and prisoner of war; while the lions roared in the nearby amphitheatre; on the beach at Dunkirk; while the hiss of scythes in the thick June grass came faintly through the windows of the church; tremulously, by an old monk on the fiftieth anniversary of his vows; furtively, by an exiled bishop who had hewn timber all day in a prison camp near Murmansk; gorgeously, for the canonisation of Joan of Arc –

one could fill many pages with the reasons why men have done this, and not tell a hundredth part of them. And best of all, week by week and month by month, on a hundred thousand successive Sunday, faithfully, unfailingly, across all the parishes of christendom, the pastors have done this just to *make the plebs sancta dei* – the holy common people of God.”

There are two ways of hearing that moving passage. Which way was your way of hearing it?

For some, it is the continuity which is striking. In all these different circumstances the same thing. When the Turk was at the gates of Vienna and when a man and woman were being married in a country church - in wildly different circumstances the same thing. The same elements, the same story, the same faith, even the same theology. Unchanging.

For others it is the difference which is striking. They were doing the same thing, but what was noticeable is the extraordinarily different contexts. A schoolboy before an examination; an old monk on the fiftieth anniversary of his ordination. Worship for specific particular situations. What some people hear in that passage is variety, flexibility.

These two ways of hearing a famous passage about worship might help us to look at all worship. For there are elements that are unchanging and elements that are changing in all worship and in all preparation of worship. Elements of the predictable and the unpredictable, of the universal and the particular: of catholic and local.

That the unchanging elements are part of ideal, fit, heavenly worship there is no doubt. Years ago an experienced minister told me that the two invariable items which must not be omitted from a Presbyterian service were the intimations and the offering! But I am referring to the Bible and the Lord's Supper and baptism and prayer.

My question is about the changing elements, the local, the particular. Are they added on, or are they also of the nature of true and pure

worship? Thinking about, preparing, leading worship every week in St Andrew's and St George's, for me the question is about "Is there a George Street in heaven?" How much of the local is and ought to be part of our worship? In heaven God is worshipped perfectly and purely. What part has the particular, the specific, in proper worship?

Most of what I say will be about these changing elements, about this specific, that particular. You are not to think, because of that, that I wish in any way to challenge the unchanging elements. About baptism that are two discussions taking place at the moment. One is on the question raised at this year's General Assembly: the question of the appropriateness of a service of blessing for some infants. The other is the conversation begun in this month's "Ministers' Forum by Professor Whyte: a conversation about words and ceremonies in baptism. In these debates I simply ask that we all remember that we are talking about an act of worship.

The Lord's Supper is celebrated in St Andrew's and St George's well over one hundred times each year. Often we use our own order (at least an order with our name on the cover – none of the material is, I think, original). It may be that I do not read the right books, but my impression is that there is less good, nourishing material being produced today for communion orders than there used to be. If I am right in this then the Church Service Society might have an important role in helping us all.

As far as the Bible is concerned, the Church Service Society may well be able to take a little credit from the remarkable growth in the use of the lectionary in the Church of Scotland. Let me commend to you a splendid resource for the use of the Bible and the Lectionary. "The Whole People of God" is Canadian material which is used regularly in St Andrew's and St George's. It provides notes on the Lectionary passages to be given out on the previous Sunday, worship material and teaching material for children and adults—all based on the lectionary. It also contains a huge amount of other useful material. It is expensive, but our worship and the education of children and adults is worth spending money on.

So much for the unchanging, the general and universal aspects of worship. The other way of hearing the passage from Dom Gregory Dix was by concentrating on the particular, the local. In our case, George Street. I suggest four elements of the particular which have importance for worship.

HISTORY. The past life of a congregation and a building are brought into its worship. St Andrew's and St George's was the scene of the Disruption of 1843: visitors worship with us because of that and the anniversary of 1993 was an opportunity for us to think of a whole range of issues in connection with our worship. As was the twenty-fifth anniversary of the ordination of the first woman as a minister of the Church of Scotland ; since the person whose petition was responsible for the change in legislation which made possible the ordination of women to the ministry is a member of our congregation. Civic bodies asked us to share in the celebrations of the two-hundred-and-fiftieth anniversary of the design of Edinburgh's New Town with a special act of worship. These kinds of things will be different in each congregation and parish: but each will have its own story and in each that story will have its place in worship.

By history, however, I mean more than past events. The living story of a congregation and parish is part of its worship life. It happens that, years ago, a friendship grew up between St Andrew's and St George's and the German-Speaking congregation in Edinburgh. For some time that friendship has been expressed in a shared service on Remembrance Day. This adds a powerful and moving dimension to our worship – and helps us to think very carefully about what we are doing on Remembrance Day. Edinburgh Direct Aid, a charity which runs aid convoys to Eastern Europe, was born in our congregation: what should be more natural and fitting that the first convoy should leave Edinburgh from George Street on a Sunday morning, with the congregation lining the pavement singing the hundred-and-twenty-first psalm?

The living story of a congregation and parish is often expressed in its music: the quality of the music of St Andrew's and St George's is very

important for our worship. Two annual events which make huge demands on the members of the congregation are regularly part of our worship life. St Andrew's and St George's at Festival Time is a considerable undertaking in which we try to relate the gospel to the community of the arts: during Festival time this is more than usually part of our worship. Christian Aid is at the centre of much of the life of the congregation and parish: and the Sundays before, during and after Christian Aid seek to express the struggle for justice for the poor and the hope of the promises of God. I occasionally remark that the Christian year in George Street moves thus: Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, Pentecost, Christian Aid, Festival: and if that is not serious, at least it illustrates the relationship between the general and the particular, the catholic and the local, which is our theme.

GEOGRAPHY. Our parish is in the centre of Edinburgh. Very few people live in our parish, but many thousands work there. So we see our mission as a mission to the working community of the centre of Edinburgh. To further this mission we employ a Director of Outreach. My colleague, Rev Tony Bryer, is an Anglican priest: one of his tasks is to ensure that our worship is enriched by his work and his experience. So our reading of the Bible sees the disciples as people in their work-place – fishermen, tax-collectors; our preaching hears echoes of work in the parables of Jesus and tries to be faithful to them. Recently Mr Bryer used the lectionary passage of Elijah's despair as a way of examining work-related stress. The liturgy will remember the harvest of daily work at harvest time, and make sure that regularly the prayers of the people (and their language) are rooted in the work experience of Edinburgh's centre. And in our Daily Worship, the term "Office" is particularly stimulating for us.

Some of you may know the book "Only Connect", in which Robin Green makes links between leading worship and pastoral ministry: in our case, with our geography, the connections are particularly with the world of work.

ARCHITECTURE. When Alan Moses, then minister of Old St Paul's in Edinburgh, came to preach at St Andrew's and St George's, he began his sermon with these words: "The church needs buildings like St Andrew's and St George's, to remind us that God is light and order and reason and space. And the church needs buildings like Old St Paul's, to remind us that God is depth and wonder and mystery." The beautiful classical design of our building makes it easy to nourish some experiences in worship, and difficult to nourish others. This must be true of any church building, and must influence what happens in it. In St Andrew's and St George's the architecture helps us develop a theology of the people of God made into a community as we gather around the Word and Sacrament; and makes it difficult for us to develop a theology of the people of God on a pilgrimage.

The central pews in our church have been removed and replaced with chairs. This has advantages for children's' groups and adult groups, and for concerts: without this flexibility our Christian Aid book sale would be impossible. But the chief significance of removing the central pews has been theological and liturgical: it changes the way people think of God. It helps us to move from assumptions that God wants to keep us in our place and hem us in; to move to convictions that God wants to give us space and room to grow and others to be at our side with us as we grow. These convictions inevitably influence our worship.

THEOLOGY AND PERSONALITY. Every congregation has its own theology and personality, as does every minister. In our congregational plan we say that St Andrew's and St George's hopes "to seek a courageous open attitude to theological questions"; and "to witness to God's rule in the whole of life – personal, social and political". So, in such a congregation, it is to be expected that Racial Justice Sunday will be observed and that the arms trade will find a place in our prayers (late in life Harold Macmillan reflected that every time he went to church it seemed to be "Guerrilla Sunday"!). There is a place in the worship of St Andrew's and St George's for hymns written for those who are not sure (although there are not many such hymns!).

The most obvious effect on worship of the theology and personality of the congregation and its minister is in its language. Inclusive language is not a fashion to be enjoyed or left alone: it is part of the commitment to justice. “What Language shall I Borrow?”, by Brian Wren, has proved to be a valuable book in forming the language of worship in St Andrew’s and St George’s. What is interesting about this book is that it shows that our use of language in worship so often reveals deep and unsuspected things about what we believe about God. Worship influences theology just as theology influences worship.

The conversation which I have been seeking to encourage is between what is unchanging in worship and what is particular. Is there a George Street in heaven?

Revelation says there is no temple in heaven. That is often thought to mean that there is no church in heaven, that church is a concession to our human weakness. Or, another way of putting it, it is thought to mean that in heaven there is no distinction between sacred and secular. But it has occurred to me that it could be, like much of Revelation, an anti-Semitic thought: i.e. there is no Judaism in heaven, or no sacrificial system. For in the same book in the letter to the church at Philadelphia the promise is the Conqueror shall be a pillar in the temple of God. So there is no temple and yet there is a temple. There is no temple because everything transitory and human is taken up into eternity and glory and God. And yet there is a temple: particular, historical, local.

So if there is not a George Street in heaven, then I hope at least there might be a St Andrew’s and St George’s in heaven!

Andrew R. C. McLellan
Parish Church of St. Andrew and St. George, Edinburgh.

