

Reflections on Sermons on Worship

We asked the Revd David Beckett to reflect further on his sermons on worship which he preached in 1988 in Greyfriars Kirk in Edinburgh and which can be found on the Church Service Society website.

Why did you decide to preach this series of sermons and what did you hope to achieve?

Following the union of Greyfriars with Highland Tolbooth there was a wide spectrum of worship styles within the new congregation. Since the 19th century Greyfriars had enjoyed formal, liturgical services and a strong choral tradition, whereas our weekly Gaelic worship had no praise other than Metrical Psalms lined out by a precentor; anthems, responses and a weekly Creed had not been part of the Gaels' experience, and they were not familiar either to the Tolbooth's English-speaking members. I hoped that, by focussing on principles and explaining why we did what we did, there might be wider appreciation of different facets of our heritage.

How did you come to select the eight themes?

I think to some extent they probably selected themselves, several being concerned with the different parts of the regular Sunday morning service we had then. The first three sought to relate what we were doing to the mystery of the Trinity, which seems to me absolutely central to our exploration of both worship and doctrine.

In your first sermon you make the observation that you believe that one of the main ways that the Church is failing is that it is trying to scale down God and worship to the level of our understanding. Can you say something more about that?

Every leader of worship must be familiar with the problem of creating a 'one size fits all' liturgy. There is no one 'right' way, and some very helpful services break every rule beloved of liturgical purists. But all-age worship, which seems to me a wonderful aim, can too easily become children's worship; services designed for newcomers, at which everything is explained or is too simple to require explanation, can become very tedious for those who are already 'far

ben'; and sermons which are so accessible that they fail to acknowledge the real problems people have with faith leave people thinking the Church has nothing to offer them. (I have a belief that the Children's Address has done more than anything else to empty the Church of Scotland of young people, but this perhaps is another issue.)

People sometimes justify worship that seems to me a bit diluted by pointing to the simplicity of Jesus' teaching. His stories and his theological teaching were indeed usually simple, but they were never simplistic; we can spend hours writing or meditating on every sentence that he spoke. Our challenge, I believe, is to open windows on to new vistas and new possibilities for worshippers; the extent to which we meet that challenge will depend very much on the leader's breadth of reading and depth of devotional life. It is an enormously privileged task, but leading worship that is both doxological and helpful can't ever have been easy, and perhaps it is less easy than ever in an age which is used to looking for quick answers and snappy soundbites. We have to be aware of cultural changes and to some extent adapt to them, but not to the extent of laying aside the perspectives which only the Church, and no other agency, can possibly provide. I believe it is true that quite a high proportion of our members no longer believe in an afterlife. Perhaps it is not surprising; when did you last hear a thoughtful, Biblically-based sermon on death and what we hope will follow it?

How are the messages from the sermons still relevant today?

Their aim was to encourage reflection and deepen understanding, and to give reassurance to any members who were finding it difficult to adjust to a new style of worship. If I thought at all in terms of a message, I suppose it was that what we were doing in Greyfriars week by week was comfortably compatible with the Reformed tradition. We all tend to imagine that 'the Kirk's way of doing things' is what we ourselves have always known. Sometimes members who have grown up with individual cups are astonished to discover that the common cup is ever used within the Church of Scotland.

If you were to give the same series of sermons today, what would you change and why?

Good question. I think that, as before, I would hope to relate it to people's

situation in their locality, and their concerns, questions and expectations might be quite different from those of Greyfriars thirty years ago.

Whether I was once again addressing a local situation or attempting a more detached academic treatment of worship as a theme, I would hope to fill two big gaps in the Greyfriars series. The first is the lack of reference to children – of whom there were almost none in Greyfriars in the 1980s, though happily this has since changed. In both the parishes I served I tried to integrate the children with the adult congregation, and found that the summer months, between Sunday School sessions, provided a wonderful opportunity at early services for innovative worship at which we often had a lot of fun. These used to be presented as ‘Family Services’ until I learned how hurtful that title can be to those who are not part of a nuclear family. Sometimes we moved around the church week by week and thought about the use that was made of different spaces and pieces of furniture.

The other gap that I would certainly try to fill in any repeat exercise concerns the sacraments. The Panel on Worship, and before it the Committee on Public Worship and Aids to Devotion, have often recommended that Holy Communion should be celebrated more regularly than is usual in the Church of Scotland. In retirement, since being a member of St Giles’ where there is Communion at a main Sunday service every week and four or five celebrations every week, I have become more convinced than ever that this is the direction in which we should move. With the sacrament so readily available, I now feel there is something missing in a service that does not proceed from pulpit to table. Ministers often go to great lengths to devise participatory services involving senses other than just hearing. Having grown up in the Judaic tradition, Jesus understood this need very well, and provided the Church, at the Last Supper, with a supremely powerful and evocative way of meeting it.