07 Symbolism in worship

Readings: Jeremiah 18:1-12; Hebrews 9:19-28; St Luke 11:37-42
Psalm 80, read antiphonally

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

On these Sundays when we have been thinking about worship, we have considered the place of Scripture and Prayer and Music in the offering we make here. This morning we turn to the more elusive subject of symbolism – which embraces not just what we do, but also the intangibles such as the setting and the mood, the atmosphere and expectations of our worship. Symbolism pervades everything we do in church, whether we are consciously aware of it or not. All language about God is couched in metaphor and symbol, because we cannot picture energy or spirit in the abstract. Think of the number of images in "Guide me, O thou great Jehovah" – they add up almost to a special language. And there are other ways than language in which symbols – pointers – are effective. Jeremiah found one in that acted parable about the potter, Jesus in the footwashing on the night of the Last Supper.

I believe that in the Church of Scotland we have undervalued symbolism because it has so often been confused with all the ritual and the ceremonial that cluttered up the worship of the mediaeval Church. In the days before the Reformation, things had slipped back almost to pre-Christian levels whereby proper rituals carried out in proper ways were thought to guarantee the right results – exactly the position that the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews had been anxious to refute. Ten Hail Marys were sufficient penance for a little sin; big sins might require a pilgrimage before they were forgiven. The fate of a soul after death was affected by the number of masses said by the survivors with that soul in mind. Different saints had different powers; it helped to pray to the right one, and worship had become so much a matter of going through the right procedures in the right way that bells had to be rung during Mass to tell the people what was going on at the altar; that was how they knew whether to be on their feet or their knees. It is no wonder the Reformers were determined to re-shape the Church's worship, so that God's Word should be heard and understood by all the people, and God's praise opened up to all the worshippers. These were right correctives for the 16th century; and it is interesting that many of the insights central to the Reformation have been taken on board now by the Church of Rome since the Second Vatican Council.

All reactive movements, though, have a tendency to push the pendulum too far the other way. The Reformers themselves were remarkably balanced in the way that they re-structured worship. John Knox had been involved in the production of the Church of England Prayer Book; he brought out a Book of Common Order from which Sunday services could be read in Scottish parishes. Ceremonial was cut to a minimum, but there was in the material of worship a strong sense of catholicity, an awareness of the great resources of the Church's heritage. As with the music we were thinking of last week, it was from 17th century English Puritans that the most extreme views came, and in the years following the Covenants Scottish worship became little more than a torrent of words. Any scrap of paper used in prayer or preaching was regarded as a weakness in the preacher, or as indicating lack of trust in the resources of the Holy Spirit. Bible readings were expounded in a Lecture, then interpreted at great length in a Sermon. Worship at its most dreich was a matter only for the ear and the brain; the one concession to the eye was identifying the figure on the cutty stool each week [The place of penance in full view of the congregation (ed.)]. Emotion could be generated only by tear-jerking words from the preacher; and so preaching became the supreme ministerial

qualification, an art form in itself, with a floridity of language and cadence and gesture that makes most of our efforts nowadays seem positively wimpish by comparison.

What was lacking in those austere wordy services was the recognition that all worship is symbolic, whether it involves much ceremonial or not. What happens in church, and even more the way in which it happens, sends out signals which are picked up on a non-verbal level. If the words and the non-verbal signals do not match, it is the non-verbal which will likely have the stronger impact. It is difficult communicating God's love in a building that exudes gloom and pomposity. Scotland is full of adults who've been put off church in childhood – not so much by what they heard there as by the impression it has left of dreariness and boredom and a suspicion of hypocrisy, of things that did not seem to add up as they should.

As with music, it was largely from Old Greyfriars in the ministry of Robert Lee that the Church of Scotland was set free from worship that depended wholly on the ear and on the brain. The stained glass at our east end, installed in the 1850s, was the first in any parish church in the 300 years since the Reformation. Members of Greyfriars were given a service book with responsive parts in services. When Dr Lee was forbidden by the General Assembly to read prayers, he learned the entire book by heart and went on using it. So we have quite a long tradition here of worship that is helped by music, colour and by flexibility of approach. And we are also accustomed to movement. Normally, our service begins from the back, with a prayer for the presence of the Holy Spirit, which gathers us all up and reminds us that worship can start before the minister is in his place. This beginning is, I think, more appropriate than the customary "prayer with the Choir" which drives an unhelpful symbolic wedge between the choir and the rest of the congregation. No doubt there will be other ways that we can find of reinforcing content with action and symbol once the building is re-furbished and the layout made more flexible. One piece of symbolism that survived all the Puritans' stripping and is still widespread in Scotland, but which we have lost here, is the carrying in of the Bible at the start of services; it's something we might usefully restore. [The custom was indeed restored, soon after these sermons were preached.]

The desirability of worship that is not expressed in words alone has been corroborated by two changes in the field of secular communication. One is television, which has greatly reduced most people's power to concentrate when there is no visual stimulus. The other is education. Children learn now, much more than they used to, through participation rather than through sitting still and listening. These things both point to a truth that always was there in the Scriptures, but which we in Scotland had not paid enough regard to: that our worship should involve all human senses, and that there are other methods of communication besides talking. This completeness, which the Hebrews with their rituals in the Temple understood so well, is the reason why so many parishes are now involved in worship that our forebears would have been astonished by – employing banners, pageant, mime, dancing, and a host of endlessly inventive visual aids from teddy bears to lumps of dough, paper streamers, cans of Coke, and a blindfold sniffing of flowers. Each of these may make a point, and all of them may have some value. But it seems incongruous that in the search for more involvement they consistently bypass the one form of worship that's enjoined on us by Christ. The Lord's Supper contains all the elements that innovators want to introduce: drama, movement, touch, taste, sharing, communal activity, yet it is still offered less to Presbyterians than to members of any other mainstream Church. Perhaps when we are thinking of the use we are going to make of our re-furbished building, we should ask if it's not time to make the Sacrament available more often.

Psychologists can point to a whole code of body language in our dealings with each other, language which may tell a very different story from the actual conversation we are having. The same principle applies to what takes place in church. We're conditioned to imagine that we have a choice between worship that's symbolic and worship that isn't; but this is a quite false distinction. As soon as we come through the church door we are in the realm of symbolism, in which architecture, stained glass, furniture and flowers and music, and small things like the changing colours of the pulpit falls at different seasons, are all sending out their coded messages. And everything we do when worship starts is going to be symbolic, whether it is consciously intended to be so or not. The individual Communion glass is as symbolic as the common cup – although it symbolises something very different. An Elder standing in the chancel, hand in pocket, staring at a hymn book with his mouth shut, is as symbolic as a priest genuflecting before a reserved sacrament. Exchanging recipes before the service starts is heavily symbolic of the way we see what we are here for; so is hunting out our bus money in the offering, as though it were a sort of intermission. One of the most crucial symbols to the atmosphere of worship is the welcome people meet with when they come in. Especially for newcomers, visitors and people making their way back after a long absence, impressions will be shaped as much by their reception as by the content of the service. All of us, whether at the doors or in the pew, can help to make sure that church does symbolise the community the body of Christ ought to be.

Everything, in fact, that happens here is going to send out vibes of one sort or another. We are dealing in the realm of signs and pointers, with our sights fixed on realities bigger than we can hope to grasp, and higher than we can fully reach. In our search for worship that points to the glory of God, that affirms the love of God, proclaims the Word of God and exudes the joy of those who have found faith in God, it's essential that the symbolism which inevitably is a part of worship should be sending out the right vibes and affirming the right things.

To the God whom we can't apprehend except by signs and symbols, to the Son in whom all symbols have become reality, and the Spirit who enables us to search and to explore the mystery of God, be all honour and glory for ever. Amen.

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