THE LIFE IN LITURGY

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Introduction

I begin by thanking the Society for the privilege of being President for an extended term in extenuating circumstances. Due to Covid, a two year sentence was extended to three with no right of appeal. But it has hardly been onerous, and I am much indebted to the ***sine quo non*** who is Douglas Galbraith. Douglas, as many perhaps suspect, suffers happily from FILY syndrome - the acronym for Flourishing In Later Years. His energy, enthusiasm, integrity and industry are always on the ascendant. I imagine that when he reaches his first century he will be organising retrospective conferences on 'How AI has Helped or Hindered Liturgical Progress.'

I have not perused many previous addresses given by retiring presidents, but I dare say that – depending on the speaker – some talks will have been culled from prolonged academic study, some from the experience of successful local church initiatives, some from scouring out-of-print liturgical studies in Gaelic, Sanskrit or Swahili; and some as the result of a vision of heaven brought on by sleeping on a stone pillow. The background to this talk is basically the work I have been doing over three decades across denominations in the United Kingdom and overseas sometimes engaging with ministers and priests in seminaries, more often with lay people in conferences or congregational settings.

Liturgical Formation

My starting point is a term which I had never come across until I became involved with the **National Network of Pastoral Musicians** in the USA. This is a predominantly Roman Catholic organisation which, in its heyday in the 1990's, could attract up tp three thousand full or part time parish musicians and clergy for a four day conference. Different entirely from the RSCM, it aimed at educating those who shared in the preparation and leadership of worship for their ministry in as holistic a way as possible. Musicians were not just catered for by hearing the latest choral offerings from a selection of publishers, but were enabled to learn about the liturgical year, the purpose and best practice of different worship services, the best practices of proclaiming the Word (for which read articulating the scriptures in public) and of leading congregational prayer.

A title frequently used in that gathering which leapt out at me as something rather alien to Calvinist discourse was that of **Liturgical Formation.** This term implies that there are theological and spiritual consequences of being engaged in liturgical practices, whether these be as elaborate as a High Episcopal Mass as might be celebrated in Old St Paul's off the Royal Mile, or equally an hour of silence in the Quaker Meeting House in Victoria Terrace also just off the Royal Mile, or indeed whatever happens in Carruber's Christian Centre on the Royal Mile. The vastly different diets of worship offered in each of these places will – for good or ill – affect the belief structure and devotional life of regular attenders.

Such a perception is not limited to one denomination. The American Baptist and activist Jim Wallis, in one of his early books stated his conviction that the community and its practices which surround both cradle Christians and those who have had dramatic conversion experiences will be determinative of their perception of who God is and what discipleship involves. Once at a CND demonstration, I found myself walking alongside a full member of the Salvation Army. I remarked that I had always thought that Salvation Army adherents avoided such partisan activities. He replied:

> But I didn't come to faith in the Salvation Army. I came to faith in a Quaker Meeting Hall. I have always believed that peace-making is a Christian duty, not a concept. That is what I am here.

Texts Sung in Public

Because the major participatory activity which most Christians actively and corporately engage in during public worship is singing, it is important that we realise the effects that repeatedly sung text can have in shaping belief. This, of course, is not a phenomenon peculiar to religious precincts. I am not going to parse **Rule Britannia** or suggest it be de-promenaded. But think of its text...

Was Britain the first land to appear when the earth cooled?
Did angels, who normally sing the *Sanctus*, gladly chorus *Rule Britannia?*
If Britons 'never ever shall be slaves', is it all right to enslave other nations?

Patriotic songs are not peculiar to England. Consider the Scottish ditty entitled *The Garb of Auld Gaul* which has much worse poetry and this ambiguous allusion to Scotland's national dress: '*No effeminate customs our sinews unbrace'.* Such songs were written, often with government collusion, to get the nation behind the expanding empire, which needed recruits for the control of its overseas territories.

A century later, on the other side of the Atlantic, the USA had to deal with the consequences of Western imperialism, namely the huge slave populations which British, Dutch, French, Spanish and Portuguese nations had shipped to its shores. Thus you have the popular Stephen Foster, a supporter of slavery, writing a song which suggests that runaway slaves long to go back to their former plantation. The refugee or runaway laments:

All de world am sad and dreary
ebrywhere I roam.
O darkeys, how muy heart grows weary
far from de old folks at home.

At the same time James Lowell, an abolitionist, writes a lengthy text to stir the consciences of his fellow citizens. It concludes:

Men whose boast that ye
come of fathers, brave and free,
if there breath on earth a slave
are ye trully free and brave?
If ye do not feel the chain
when it works a brother's pain,
are ye not base slaves indeed,
slaves un worth to be freed.

We might do well to cast our eye quickly over the treasures of missionary hymnody still sung in the lifetime of many people here:

Let the Indian, let the Negro,
let the rude Barbarian see
that divine and glorious conquest
once obtained on Calvary

or O'er heathen lands
afarthick darkness broodeth yet;
arise, O Morning Star,
arise and never set.

I wonder how many children of the post war era had their attitude to immigrants shaped by seeing the metal effigy of a black man's head on the table at the front of their primary Sunday School. Named in some places *Black Sambo*, he had a hand outstretched for missionary pennies. They were placed on his hand by a line of children, each of whom turned Sambo's ear so that he swallowed the coin. And all the while the other children sang:

Do you see this penny?
It is brought by me
for the little children
far across the sea.
Hurry, penny, quickly
though you are so small.
Help to tell the heathen
Jesus loves them all.

All this is by way of preface, because I really want to concentrate on how – for good or ill – what we sing shapes our understanding of our Lord.

Jesus in Hymnody

A decade ago I was asked to give the last in a series of Advent lectures sponsored by St Martin-in-the-Fields in London. Each of the lectures pertained to Jesus, and the organisers asked that I might address the way in which his life and ministry were celebrated in the Church's song.

First I looked at two of the most ancient hymns of the Church found in Philippians 2: 6-11 and Colossians 1: 15-20. They refer to Jesus in terms which may fairly be called:

Expansive ….. having primacy over all creation
Incarnational..... in him God, in God's fullness, chose to dwell
Inclusive ….. all things are held together in him.

Then I consulted what – at that time – had been the dominant twentieth century hymnals in the Methodist, Anglican, Presbyterian and Roman Catholic Churches - books such as *The Revised Church Hymnary, The English Hymnal, Hymns Ancient and Modern*. These signature and formative hymnals of the 20th century depicted Jesus as:

limited rather than expansive
ethereal rather than incarnational
sectarian rather than inclusive.

Such perceptions were evident primarily because, while there was a plethora of material regarding the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus, there was a paucity as regards his life and ministry.

I take two examples which may be of interest to the majority of people here. In the Revised Church Hymnary of 1927 and the English Hymnal of 1906, we find songs about Jesus in three categories.

Advent and Birth RCH 23 EH 28
Life and Ministry of Jesus 14 0
Death and Resurrection 30 36

Of course, all these books did was to follow the pattern of the Apostle's Creed:

Born of the Virgin Mary
comma
Suffered under Pontius Pilate.

Now that is a big fat comma.... It subsumes 33 years of lived life including three of active ministry. If one looked further at what constituted hymns about the life of Jesus, one finds in the main pastoral themes favoured:

Jesus with children
The Calling of the Disciples
Non-specific acts of healing
The Stilling of the Storm

In the lyrics of the day, we find attributes of Jesus which have little by way of scriptural underpinning. These range from the disturbingly silent baby:

The cattle are lowing, the baby awakes

but little Lord Jesus no crying he makes.

and the pandered pre-adolescent:

And through all his wondrous childhood
he would honour and obey,
watch and love the lowly maiden
in whose gentle arms he lay.

to the passive, depressive and tongue-tied saviour:

Forever on thy burdened heart
a weight of sorrow hung,
yet no ungentle murmuring word
escaped thy silent tongue.

There is still a selection of predominantly Victorian hymns used with children in which we can discern these lasting hallmarks of Jesus:

a) He is *'gentle, meek and mild'* and as such is the model for childlike behaviour
b) Jesus loves them because they are *sinners* who need dealt with
c) The possibility of Jesus taking children to heaven is imminent

He his little child will take
up to heaven for his dear sake.

These songs had a value as palliative spirituality for children living in eras when child mortality soared and the first death a child might be aware of would be that of a sibling. But were they appropriate for children of the mid and late 20th century, when child labour and high rates of child mortality were on the downward slope?

Have things Changed?

Someone may want to suggest that this is all in the past, and things are very different now, to which I make two responses:

Firstly, irrespective of what may have been published in recent years, the majority of those who carry authority in the church for liturgy have perceptions from hymn texts shaped more by the theology of Cecil Frances Alexander than Brian Wren and as regards melodies more by Arthur Sullivan than Graham Kendrick. Let me take two of many examples.
Several years ago in the small New South Wales town of Taree, I was asked - at short notice – to conduct a men's Bible Study at 06.30 a.m. There was no

time to prepare; so I shared with a gathering of around sixteen men some reflections on the miracle of the raising of Lazarus in John's Gospel. I first read through selected verses and then asked if there was anything people had noticed for the first time. It was a professor of Dental Medicine who seemed quite perplexed by one word in the text. The New English Bible stated that:

When Jesus saw Mary weeping, and the friends who were
with her weeping, he was indignant. (John 11: 33)

This man could not conceive that Jesus would ever have become indignant. As a Christian of over forty years, he had 'never known Jesus Christ to be angry.' At the end of the meeting I asked him why he had taken issue with the biblical text. In reply he cited lines from a fond hymn which appeared in the 1927 Revised Church Hymnal:

No one marked an angry word
who ever heard him speak.

It was the hymn which shaped his belief, not the Gospel.

In 1988, the supplement *Songs of God's People* was published, as a consequence of which I was asked to introduce the book to the Glasgow Society of Organists. It seemed that the president might have made up his mind, as when he introduced me he ended by saying, 'After we have heard Mr. Bell, we will be able to decide whether we should buy a copy of the book and use it. Or, as one of our members has suggested, buy a copy of the book and give it a ritual burning.'

One of the main bones of contention was the inclusion of a few Scottish folk tunes. This was regarded as anathema and objected to with vitriol, especially by an Anglican cathedral schooled organist who cherished the English Hymnal. This book's editor was Ralph Vaughan Williams who peppered it with English, Welsh and Irish folk tunes.

Secondly, if one looks over popular collections in the twentieth century, not much has changed. Here is a very brief digest of two popular hymn collections:

In the 1995 edition of *Songs of Fellowship*, the thematic index has a category entitled JESUS. These are the sub-categories:

Kingship
Nativity

The cross and redemption
Sacrifice (the lamb)
Second coming
His name
Resurrection

His words? No. His company? No. His miracles? No. His anger? No. His compassion? No.

In Kevin Mayhew's *Catholic Supplement* from the same decade, there is no category headed Jesus. The nearest we get is Christ the King.

What we sing -for good or ill – shapes what we believe. And that is as pertinent to congregations which have jettisoned hymnals in favour of the latest screened offerings from commercial Christian publishers.

I just want to love you, Lord.
I just want to love you.
I just want to love you, Lord
and keep you up above me

(I made that up, but I haven't got a tune for it yet). But let not my criticism of populist worship songs come from personal disaffection. In September 1996, the editor of *Resource Christian Music* (an Australian publication) wrote to hymn writers drawing their attention to a recent 246 page analysis of several thousand contemporary worship songs from such stables as Vineyard and Hillsong, comparing them to songs commonly sung in the immediate post-war era. The writer – who clearly comes from an evangelical stable – wrote:

In my opinion, the most disturbing statistic is the decline in the number of songs which give a clear gospel message. Of the post war songs, 7% contained a clear gospel message compared with 1.3% of contemporary songs. Similarly , with reference to the cross the figures are 31% down to 11%; the blood 19% down to 5.4%, the name of Jesus 52% down to 28%; Heaven 33% down to 2.1%.The only reversal of this trend was in reference to the Holy Spirit, up from 8.8% to 14.5%.

If my arithmetic is correct, this means that 38% of the lyrics are extra biblical, probably concentrating on devotional sentiment and the need to feel more than the desire to believe.

Words can never say
how much I love you.

Words could never tell
how much you mean to me.
Words are not enough
to say what's in my heart
so I'll say it
again and again.

… I didn't make that up.

The Larger Christ

At the 1910 Edinburgh Missionary Conference the president of the gathering, the American academic Dr John Mott coined the term *The Larger Christ*. It's an interesting phrase and for me it suggests that the larger Christ, the bigger Jesus, must always be omnipresent not just in the mission and preaching of the Church, but also in its song.

There are two understandable impediments to writing songs for the Life of Christ suitable for inclusion in liturgy. The first is that when we deal with Jesus, we are dealing with a person, not a theory or a problem or a feeling. Hymn-writers, understandably find these latter realities easier subject matter. There is no shortage of contemporary writing which deals with the high emotions - gratitude, praise, elation.

There are, admittedly, an increasing number of songs which are issue- based. While the Victorians extolled muscular Christian, mission abroad and well-behaved children at home, since the mid seventies writers – particularly in New Zealand and developing nations - have produced songs which deal with the environment, discrimination, inclusion, global plenty and poverty. And as for theories and theologies, especially regarding creation and the atonement, here are people from all theological spectrums who produce texts. But when we come to Jesus, when we come to the 33year-sized comma which separates the Virgin Mary from Pontius Pilate, we have to deal with a person who among other things:

enjoys eating, even in the company of prostitutes,
tells stories about everything from pig-farming to minimum wage rates, calls his adversaries snakes, and one senior royal a fox,
in contrast to which he speaks of himself as a mother hen.
He is a consistent breaker of petty regulations and protocol
and in every encounter where men and women are involved
he favours the women, even those who are tabooed
because of gynaecological complications.

This is more sinking sand than solid rock for wordsmiths.

But equally for melody writers or people who write to known tunes, what kind of music can support non-traditional language registers both for Jesus and for contemporary issues. Imagine this text sung to the tune of 'Praise, my soul, the King of Heaven'.

Jesus spoke of economics
and he paid his taxes too.

Or this to the tune of 'Who would true valour see'

Let us welcome in our church all homosexuals

Such potential discord is less of an issue for countries in the global south where many tunes are not predicated on the diapason tone of the organ and diatonic four part harmony. There's a lovely line in a song from Tanzania about Jesus first sermon to his home congregation:

The elders in the synagogue were shocked by Mary's son
that he was destined to become the Christ for everyone.

Or what about this line in a harvest song from the Philippines:

Sweet potatoes fill our bags
when the garden yields its due.
Chickens run and pigs grow plump, children too -
your gracious signs that you make all things new.

There have been recent moments in the musical life of the United Kingdom when writers and musicians managed to break the linguistic and musical moulds, but not always to great acclaim.

In 1974 Stainer and Bell published Sydney Carter's *Green Print for Song* which in terms of both musical and textual idioms was ground-breaking. Carter was not writing primarily for the guitar groups who played at the folk mass or youth service, he was writing for all. And he was telling the story of the Gospel in fresh language:

Said Judas to Mary,
'Now what will you do
with your ointment so rich and so rare?'
'I'll pour it all over
the feet of the Lord,
and I'll wipe it away with my hair,' she said.

What common metre Genevan psalm tune could easily cradle that lyric?

Carter's texts were controversial, not just because they required tunes which did not always sit easily with the organ, but because they said things which were so credible that they were offensive. Fifty years ago, the Church of Scotland commissioned a collection of 'contemporary hymns' called *Songs of the Seventies.* It was to supplement a less than universally acclaimed Third edition of the Church Hymnary. But even though Presbyterians wouldn't use the terms, it was denied both *imprimatur and nihil obstat*...all because of one line in one song.

The song was *Friday Morning,* which is the testimony of the unrepentant thief who has been in a cell near Jesus, and who believes that God should be blamed for the death of an innocent (a perspective not far removed from substitutionary atonement). Verses 1 and 2 end with the comment:

'It's God they ought to crucify
instead of you and me'
I said to the carpenter
a-hanging on the tree.

But it was the first line of the third verse which persuaded the Fathers and Brethren of the General Assembly to refuse to endorse the book they had commissioned. For that included the words:

'To hell with Jehovah'
to the carpenter I said,

'I wish that a carpenter
had made the world instead.'

I think it is a very prescient line, because in the day we call Holy Saturday Jehovah did go to hell to harry it.

Here's a verse from another writer of that period, Michael Hewlett :

When God Almighty came to be one of us,
masking the glory of his golden train,
dozens of plain things kindled by accident,
and they will never be the same again.
Sing all you midwives, dance all you carpenters,

sing all the publicans and shepherds too.
God in his mercy uses the commonplace,
God on his birthday had a need of you.

When you have such realistic and vivid poetic expression, what kind of tune is required? The fond Victorian canon fails us. So Hewlett chooses the folk tune *The Keel Row* to animate his text. Stainer and Bell have to be congratulated on their boldness in publishing such texts, and similar others which appeared in *Partners in Praise,* a Methodist supplement published in 1979.

From what I have said so far, there are at least two contestable conclusions:

The first is that for many of us who grew up in the first thirty or so years of the post war era, and who hold responsibility in the church, the hymnody which shaped us had a limited and therefore defective Christology which has not been well supplemented or supplanted.

The second is that we need authors in the present day who will, in their work, give articulation to a larger Christ and not have his humanity eclipsed or diminished by substitutionary sentimental praise.

I have been giving a historical perspective, because I believe we should be conscious of the significance that sung text in the past has had on the theology of us presently assembled. Further, those of us who have responsibility for choosing and leading the song of the Church must be aware that our choices will shape the life and faith of those growing up in our congregations.
Having said that - and as a physical antidote - I would highly commend the new supplement to CH4 entitled *God Welcomes All.* I was at its launch on

Sunday and have not had the time to look through it in detail, but I am totally impressed by the great variety of styles and sources and the total integrity with which the joint editors Iain McLarty and Phil Meldrum selected the material the vast majority of which comes from the 21st century. I say this with total objectivity. Apart from a Zoom conversation with them when the book was first mooted, I have had no connection with it or their working group at all.

The Prayer of the Church

However I want to move away from hymnody and refer to the another influencer as regards liturgical formation, namely the prayer of the Church.

The Seeming Omnipresence of Sin

One of my recent fascinations has been leading Bible studies and retreats on the miracles of Jesus. I always begin by indicating that there are twenty-five out of the thirty-one miracles of Jesus which involve the healing of individuals – body, mind and spirit. I then ask participants how many they reckon happen after an acknowledgement of sin: one to five, six to ten, or eleven and above. Most people go for the six to ten bracket, and nearly everyone is astounded when I say none.

There is, admittedly, one miracle which is the result of Jesus forgiving someone. This is the paralysed man who is brought to Jesus by his friends. But he makes no confession of sin. Jesus instinctively recognises that guilt is a contributory factor in his immobilisation and so says – without prior confession - ' Your sins are forgiven.'

Why do so many people who read the scriptures think otherwise? What has encouraged the notion that sin is so omnipresent? The issue has long fascinated me....almost since childhood.
For reasons beyond my comprehension, when aged between eleven and fourteen, I went on Sunday mornings to the Boy's Brigade Bible Class, the Morning Service and then the Church Bible Class. Each one began with a prayer of confession. On my first foray into evening worship in my childhood church, I discovered that the congregation, all of whom had been at the morning service, engaged in a prayer of confession at the beginning of the evening service. I fell to wondering what these lovely burghers of Kilmarnock had been up to in the six hours between the two diets of worship. Not to omit the Anglican communion, I remember on the first occasion

I went to an Episcopal Eucharist, that I counted four occasions on which I was enjoined to admit to my sinfulness.

I'm also aware that when lay people are asked to lead prayers of intercession, despite their having been a prayer of confession earlier in the service, there is often a further allusion to personal errancy at the point when we should be committing ourselves to empathetic petition.

There are two issues which arise from this, admittedly anecdotal, evidence. The first is that while confession might be good for the soul, too much confession might be bad for it. Every time we come into the presence of the King of Glory, it is right that we should feel both wonder and unworthiness. But unworthiness is a different emotion from guilt. I suggest that over-exposure in public devotions to our ability to do wrong is both bad psychology and bad theology.

Bad psychology, because self-flagellation with words can be as harmful as its physical equivalent. If from our liturgies, individuals believe that our primary purpose in prayer is to tell God how bad we are, sometimes (though not always) with no reassurance of divine forgiveness, what does that do to our self- esteem? You who are more engaged in pastoral care than I am may have been puzzled - as I invariably am when asking someone if he or she loves themselves or forgives themselves - to discover that the answer is not yes or no but tears. Tears which are often indicative of a malnourished self-esteem.

Bad theology, because it would seem to me that one intention of the ministry of Jesus was to liberate people from perceptions of God which were despising of the world and its people. Hence his continual ministry of fulfilling the law, by revealing it in all its liberating glory, rather than a morass of constricting limitations enforced and policed by the Pharisees.

Here is a perception along these lines by the late Bishop of Winchester, John Vincent Taylor in his book *The Christlike God* (p55)

> How regrettable it is, how unnatural in fact, that through the centuries the confessional stalls around the walls of many churches have received the secrets of so many sins, and have not been equally available for the confidences of men and women and children who have been overtaken by the ecstasies or insights that declare the reality of God.

Had this other side of personal experience been invited....it might have redressed the imbalance and made the churches everywhere as mindful of divine initiative as of human failure.

This reminds me of the story of an elderly lady in a Stirlingshire Roman Catholic Church in the immediate post-war era. She was so besotted with her failures that she wrote down her sins on a piece of paper and slipped it to the priest through the grille in the confessional. The priest opened it and read: half a stone of potatoes, half a dozen eggs, two pounds of sugar, four ounce of sultanas.... He folded it, pushed it back throw the grille and said gently, 'I think you've given me the wrong list.' There was an awed silence and then the lady replied, 'You're dead right, Father, ...and I've just sent my sins to the Co-op!'

At least Roman Catholics, with access to the confessional or Sacrament of Reconciliation, have the possibility of dealing with their guilt and errancy on a one to one basis. The confessional deals with personal misdemeanours. The general prayer of confession at mass is its corporate equivalent and both end with an assurance of forgiveness.

For many protestants, the first Sunday morning prayer conflates the personal and corporate, and when it comes to the assurance of forgiveness, it is not always evident. Who or what is to blame? Have we overdosed on Calvin? Far be it from me to make judgement on the leading fathers of the Reformed Faith, but I venture two brief comments.

The first is that in Calvin's published confessional prayer for the morning diet of worship, the Almighty has hardly been addressed when two statements are made which are theologically and genetically suspect.

We are poor sinners
conceived and born in guilt and corruption,
unable of ourselves to do any good.

(Calvin's Form of Church Prayer (Geneva))
Presbyterian Liturgies – Charles W. Baird p35-36
Baker Book House, Grand Rapids 1960

Imagine if I were to introduce myself to someone I did not know by saying, 'My name is John Bell and I am a terrible person. I was guilty even before a slap from the midwife made me yell.' That would hardly be the start of a nourishing exchange. And if I repeated this every time I met the same person, irrespective of what it did to him or her, it would certainly engrain within me a self-image which was wholly negative.

The other comment is that there seems in Calvin's confession to be no distinction between what might be the sins of the community and the misdemeanours of the individual. As I have already suggested, most Presbyterian prayers of confession – including those of my own devising - have been of the same all-inclusive variety.

It has been said of the psalms that 'I can mean We, and Us can mean me.' I concur with that, but there is also clearly within the psalter some texts which relate primarily to the individual, and others which represent the corporate guilt and penitence of the nation or community.

By way of an aside, the dear Calvin, just like the people in St Andrew's North, Kilmarnock, clearly seems unable, despite rehearsing his unrighteousness in the morning, to spend the rest of the day in innocence. For here is an extract from his evening prayer.

Although we have not passed this day
without greatly sinning against thee,
we beseech thee to hide our sins with thy mercy,
as thou hidest the things of the earth
with the darkness of the night.
Calvin's Daily Offices Op Cit p 64

This is lovely poetry, but perhaps not as memorable as this line in a payer which I noted down from a visiting preacher in Lansdowne Church Glasgow some thirty years ago:

And we pray thee, Lord,
to deliver us from the fond vicissitudes
from which, as yet,
we have not craved to be ransomed.

I have to say that I remember nothing of the sermon. I could not help but ponder what were his fond vicissitudes and compare them with mine.
If what I perceive by way of the sin-boundedness of corporate prayer resonates with you, it would be interesting to ponder whether apart from use and wont, a contributory factor may be the embarrassment that Protestantism has had with issues of personal spirituality.

It was never part of my training, and never something which any of my mentors ever raised. But there was an expectation that those of us who had never explored personal prayer or spirituality should expect people in our churches to engage in it with little or no advice.

There are things which we should deal with one to one with God. And there are things which are the shortcomings and sins of the body corporate, and there is surely a vocabulary and practice appropriate to each.

As with the song of the Church, I am not offering or suggesting instant remedies, but rather, I hope, heightening awareness that the words which we say – as with those we sing together - are

never neutral, nor, despite being offered to heaven, are they innocent of any effect they might have on earth.

They shape our theology. They either offer restrictive images of our Saviour or allow the whole life of Christ to be celebrated in the liturgy. And they affirm, correct or diminish our self-esteem.

When the most memorable line in our most rhetorically flawless sermons has been forgotten, the phrases we sing or pray together will continue to infect and affect us this side of time.

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