

## “Everyone is welcome”

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So says the sign outside many a church across the land. Based on my own experience as a visitor to many worshipping communities over the years, I often beg to differ. “Everyone” often means “people like us.” And “welcome” often means “what can you contribute?”

Several good books, workshops, and courses have been offered, which help parishes look at themselves in terms of being truly welcoming, and usually those resources address worship, at least at some level. But I have not come across many that talk about *who* those people are who come to worship for the first time and *why* they are there.

What would a welcoming sort of worship look like, for example, to someone who has just experienced the death of their only child and is looking for somewhere to begin to make sense of all that? What are the elements of worship that would speak to someone who has just woken up to the fact that every meaningful relationship in their life has failed to provide the intimacy they crave? What of the gambling addict whose behaviour has alienated just about everyone they love? To say nothing about the young person on their own in the big city for the first time in their lives without the loving support of the family they were so eager to leave behind? And let's not forget the young couple who are overjoyed at the birth of their first child, and the isolated elderly person whose circle of friends is continually diminishing. Not to mention the eager empty-nesters who want to find a place where they can use their experience and energy to make a difference in the world around them.

Is the great liturgy of the church able to be welcoming and speak to “all sorts and conditions of men (*sic*)” as the *Book of Common Prayer* styles it? I would argue that it certainly can, but only if we take care to practice the liturgy in a way that takes into account the real lives of those who gather around the table. There are at least four elements of the Eucharistic liturgy that have the potential to reach out to the longings, dreams, and aspirations of all those who participate in it: the holy, the mundane, the God of love, and genuine community.

### *A sense of the holy.*

This may seem obvious by the fact that we are talking about Christian worship. But sometimes in our efforts to be “relevant” or “cool” or “down-to-earth,” we strip the liturgy of all of its mystery, awe, grandeur, and ability to take people beyond themselves. Worship is not about us—it is about the God who gives us life, who sent Jesus to live and die and live again among us so that, through our baptism, we might share in his resurrection. We have only to look at the popularity of epics like *The Lord of the Rings* or *The Chronicles of Narnia* to realize that modern people are not averse to experiences that invite them beyond the everyday and beckon them to enter realms where pageantry, contemplation, and, dare I say, the supernatural impact profoundly on human (or hobbit) life. Grand affairs like royal weddings, state funerals, and the Olympic opening ceremonies are watched by millions of

people around the world: full of symbol, spectacle, sensual imagery, and powerful music, just like stunning liturgy.

We impart a sense of the holy when we use colour, light, silence, and movement to highlight the words and actions of the Eucharistic feast Sunday by Sunday. The music we choose, in particular, has the power to move people beyond themselves into a place where they meet the Holy One in joyful praise, thankful adoration, blissful comfort, and inspiring hope. Yet so often we settle for nostalgia, Christian elevator music, or childish ditties instead of soul-stirring words, music, and instrumental accompaniment fitting to the setting and the message.

*The mundane matters.*

This priority acts as a balance to the previous point. I have often thought that the most important parts of the liturgy are the gathering and the dismissal. People bring their baggage with them to worship. Some will say that church is the place where you leave everything outside and enter into the presence of God. But surely the God of the Incarnation desires that we bring our whole selves to worship, “warts and all.”

Those who lead worship need to be aware of the pastoral issues facing the gathered community, both as community and as individuals. When a well-loved, longstanding member of the community has died in the previous week and the community gathers on Sunday with a heavy heart, it is sometimes appropriate to acknowledge this at the beginning of worship rather than let it remain an unspoken presence in the room. This honours the reality of the situation while acknowledging that the Eucharist has the power to lift us beyond the present reality and set our loss in the context of the victory of the Cross. The liturgy is the “work of the people.” As such, it is important that those leading worship reflect the reality of all those present at worship in age, gender, ethnicity, and physical and intellectual ability. The words of the Prayers of the People need to reflect the real concerns of those gathered for worship. The preaching in particular needs to help people connect their daily lives with the life of the Holy One as reflected in the story of the Holy Community.

So, too, the dismissal should be done in a way that makes it clear that it is not the exit from our lovely cocoon but our entry into the world, reinvigorated with new wine and nourished with the bread of life so that we can make a difference in the world. Is the dismissal rite the sending out of all the community to do the work of Christ in the world, or is it just a way for the choir to get to the back of the church? Our people live in the real world. So should our liturgy.

*A God who loves.*

Is it clear from the way we conduct ourselves in liturgy that the God we are worshipping is a God of love? From those who greet and hand out service bulletins, to the presider, to the preacher, to those who distribute communion, to the readers and choir members—is it obvious from their behaviour that these people know, and are known by, the God who loves? Gestures, facial expressions, body language, and especially words matter in worship. This does not mean we have to ignore that the God of love is also a God

who challenges, chastises, and desires commitment and makes demands on us.

For those enquiring about the Christian life or those who seek some relief from the stresses of the modern world, their initial impression of God will depend in large part on their initial impression of the people of God gathered in worship. We strive for dignity and a sense of awe and mystery in Anglican worship. But this does not mean that we have to be stuffy, sour-faced, and rigid too! Nor does it mean that we have to overwhelm newcomers and seekers in our desire to inject some “new blood” into the worshipping community.

*Genuine community.*

In my urban church, one of the reasons some newcomers give for checking out worship on Sunday mornings is that they have recently moved into the neighbourhood (or the country) and are lonely. They recognize church as a place that, at its best, offers genuine community where people can be accepted for who they are and they don't have to impress anyone. There was a time, not so long ago, when Anglican worship appeared to be 32 or 109 or 247 individuals who happened to gather together at the same time in the same place for private prayer. No one looked at anyone during worship: everyone dressed the same, used the same posture, mumbled the same well-worn phrases, listlessly sang familiar tunes, and listened to the choir “perform.” The sense of worship as a corporate act has thankfully been regained to a certain extent, but it still requires a lot of effort to ensure that everyone feels included and a vital part of the liturgy. The capability of printing out the liturgy in full each week, which does not require “insider” knowledge of a prayer book to navigate, has aided in this feeling of belonging.

Everyone needs to know they are welcome to add petitions to the Prayers of the People, for example, either out loud during the liturgy or to write them in a book which will be used by those leading intercessory prayer. Time and care can be taken to help people learn new musical settings and hymns/songs so that they can fully participate in the liturgy, and seating can be arranged so that people feel they are part of a participating gathered community rather than spectators.

The goal of good liturgy then, is, among other things: to make worship an experience of the holy where the everyday lives of all God's people are taken seriously and offered up to God in thanksgiving and praise; to bask and share in the love of God for all creation and to provide ways for people to claim the blessing God offers them in their whole lives; and to provide an experience of genuine community gathered around God's table so that all of us recognize Jesus in the breaking of the bread and yearn to follow in the journey to wholeness in Christ.