

## Worship in an Age of Utility

Notes for CCA Teaching Session June 27<sup>th</sup>  
Vanessa Elston curatesw8@gmail.com

This is the second in a series of three sessions where we are drilling down into the nature of the age we are in and bringing Christian tradition and ways we have read scripture into dialogue with it. Hopefully in a way that bites, connects and has some resonance.

Thinking today about our understandings of worship and the context this takes place in, the spirit of our age, and then how this understanding might inform direct action. This session, like the last one, is providing a wider framework for eco-spirituality, particularly how we think creatively about direct action in terms of public acts of worship and liturgy. Some of us began to experience the power of this in the April and October Rebellion and the Lent Vigil outside the Houses of Parliament.

Climate crisis is a spiritual crisis.  
Speaks to the deepest orientation of our lives and energies.

To be human is to engage in some form of worship. In a secular age people may think they no longer worship, that we are no longer '*homo adorans*', but worship isn't just what happens in religious buildings. Worship is how we give expression to what matters most in our lives, what we consider sacred, what we live for and seek as the highest priority of our lives. Worship is our whole life orientation. What we worship defines our identity, determines our relationships, directs where we spend our time, energy and money. Times of crisis indicate a deep crisis in our worship, in our life orientation.

We live in times in which the church needs to re-imagine its worship as a radical act, as a place where our deepest desires and imaginations are re-shaped. Our culture is all the time shaping us in powerful ways, worship in this context becomes an act of resistance, a place where we are un-conformed and our desires re-orientated and re-formed.

Etymology of key words:

**'Worship'**: Old English *weorthscipe* *weorth* = worth + *scipe* = to pay  
Where we ascribe worth or value, what really matters, what is really important.

**'Doxology'**: *Doxa* - glory *Logia* - speaking  
Glory in OT Hebrew - *kavod* sense of weight and heaviness, importance  
Glory in NT Greek - *doxa* judgement, opinion, good reputation, honour, fame  
Associated with light, brightness but also weight  
Glory is our ultimate end: 'Christ in you, the hope of glory' Colossians 1:27; 'we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God' Romans 5:2;  
'For the momentary lightness of our affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory'  
2 Corinthians 4:17  
Westminster Catechism (1646): 'Man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him for ever'

**'Liturgy'**: *leitourgia* from *leitos ergo*. Public service.

Work for the people (not of the people) A public work done in service of the people.

Understand worship as service in life not primarily attending a service. The issue is what or who we are serving. Worship rituals are communal events to re-centre and re-focus our energies, our orientation back to God, for the active worship/service of our daily lives. In this sense an act of worship can be understood as reconnecting us with what really matters, the deep values and motivations that inform our actions and behaviour.

### **What do I mean by our Age of Utility?**

Drilling down into what has shaped our current society - the 'unholy trinity':

**Utilitarianism** (see below) coupled with **materialism manifesting as consumerism** (reality is reduced to matter, physical possessions and comfort more important than spiritual values) and **individualism** (the primacy of the individual over the group).

**Utilitarianism**: Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) highest principle of morality: maximising pleasure and happiness and minimizing pain of most people. John Stuart Mill (1806 - 1873) asserted that respecting individual rights and liberty leads to greatest human happiness, moral ideals beyond utility, sense of higher and lower kinds of pleasures.

American constitution is a prime example of this way of thinking: '*We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights: life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness*'. [Note that not all people were included in this manifesto of rights, the reality was and is some people's liberty and rights at the expense of others].

Our economic system is based on utility - the satisfaction received from consuming a good or service, an economics based on supposed 'free rational choice', assuming consumers will seek to maximise their utility. The economic utility of a good or service influences demand and price.

Utility in the general sense means something useful, profitable and functional, it goes with efficiency and productivity. A person or object's utility is their fitness for some specific purpose, ability to satisfy a particular need. The danger is that everything becomes instrumentalised, only seen as a means to an end, particularly with the expansion of the market into every area of life. The spirit of utility is totally pervasive, the air we breathe, the water we swim in. It is how we think about so much of our work, life and relationships, deeply infiltrated into church, how we justify what we do. The dark side of utilitarianism is how we are prepared to sacrifice life in pursuit of these ends. Idolatry. Demonic. Deeply distorting.

Utility in practice undermines the worth of all forms of life outside of what they can produce or achieve. We give lip service to the value of life in our culture but the way we act and organise our society and economy shows that utility is often the principle factor at work. Look at the way we treat our elderly and disabled. Look at the forces of utility coming to dominate education, and the resulting mental health of our children and young people. Look at how certain lives become dispensable in global terms, mainly black and brown lives in the global south, the happiness of certain parts of the global population at the expense of

others. In our own lives, longer lasting forms of happiness and well-being, are often sacrificed in the spirit of utility.

Deep problem with the unholy trinity: happiness tied to consumption of material goods by the individual, who has 'freedom of choice' in utilities of market. Economy requires continually growing levels of consumption. All our desires warped to this end.

What has been fatally under-valued is the interconnected nature of reality, the value of relationships, as making up a vital aspect of our non-material reality and happiness, of our familial and communal bonds, as well as those bonds which bind us to the earth and our sense of place within creation. Last week we looked at how God has designed life as an ecology of relationship in which abundance flows. To be placed in Christ is to be placed into the abundance of relationship that is the Trinity, the overflowing, never ending love of God, in which all things find their true integrity and identity, within this deep connection and communion, an ecology of joy, delight and abundance. To live outside this ecology of abundance is to live in scarcity and fear, the mindset of death.

To say that reality is relational is to say that true happiness and fulfilment can only be realised when we live in a certain way of relating, when we live in a way that is deeply responsive to all the connections that make up the web of life, of creation, our habitat and home. We understand all our actions as impacting this network and the overriding value of maintaining a right balance in these relationships, of the need to witness to the deep illusion of autonomy and self-sufficiency, the terrible consequences of isolation and loneliness. Our dignity, liberty and happiness is only found in inter-dependence and communication with all forms of created life.

### ***Radical nature of our worship***

- Worship is *an act of relating* to God and each other that *breaks down deep set patterns of isolation, autonomy and self-sufficiency*.
- In worship we recognise the *intrinsic value* of all forms of life outside of their utility.
- *A non instrumental spirituality* - something is good because it is good, (Genesis 1) not because of what it achieves or produces.
- *Eucharistic worship* has *thanksgiving* at its heart, re-learning the essential posture of *gratitude for gifts* of creation and salvation
- Restoring of *right relationship*, as our worship *re-orientates all things to God*. Look at Psalms, continually bringing in all of creation and how it relates to God, how the 'earth is filled with the glory of the Lord'.
- In worship we *participate in the dynamic, non-static* nature of reality, worship *opens us to God's movement* towards us in Christ and Holy Spirit, not rigid or defended, but responsive and open to God's future. Sin is what resists this movement.
- *Joy* as the opposite spirit of utility. I delight in you, not for what use you are to me, but for who you are in yourself. 'Joy indicates the finding of abundance beyond what is strictly necessary or of direct, functional utility. Joy is excessive; it is being-filled and being-overflowing.' Alistair McFadyen, *Bound to Sin: Abuse, Holocaust and the Christian Doctrine of Sin*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) p.213
- Worship that contains *both lament and joy*, the reality of cross and resurrection. Not a superficial 'happy-clappy' form of worship but one that has gone through the

cross, that cries out in pain and lament at the brokenness of relationship in a world out of joint. The Psalms reflect this dual aspect of worship.

- *Sabbath* spirituality - the *celebration of the glory of creation* outside of utility 'The celebration of the Sabbath leads to an intensified capacity for perceiving the loveliness of everything...because existence itself is glorious. Questions about the possibility of 'producing' something, or about utility, are forgotten in the face of the beauty of all created things, which have their meaning simply in their very selves.' Jurgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: An ecological doctrine of creation* (London: SCM Press, 1985) p. 286
- *Priestly nature* of worship - priesthood of all believers, where church acts as reminder to rest of humanity of its essential priesthood, as those with gift of consciousness, called to offer ourselves and creation back to God with thanksgiving (eucharist). Christians now in minority in post-Christendom West, time to understand our role as 'priestly minority', one in which church no longer in position of power, but in position of solidarity with people and planet, posture of humility. Mediating, interceding role, threshold of unseen holy, blessing what is good and joining in partnership with people and movements outside the church seeking to re-orientate society back towards healthy relationship.
- Liturgy - public *worship as service*, direct action as a form of liturgy. 'A faithful minority performs the liturgy (in its widest sense) for the benefit of a majority who does not share this faith. This performance 'on behalf of' is salvational, even without the knowledge or sympathy of those who benefit from it.' Stefan Pass, *Pilgrims and Priests: Christian Mission in a Post-Christian Society* (London: SCM Press, 2019) p. 215.

### **Romans 12:1-2**

Therefore, I urge you bothers (and sisters) by the compassion/mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, well-pleasing to God, your word/reason (*logiken*) of service (*latreuo*: to serve). And do not be conformed to this world (*aioni* - age) but be transformed by the renewing of your mind so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good, well pleasing and perfect (*teleion* - having reached its end, is complete from *telos* - end goal or purpose).

- Worship as service - our lives now directed towards enabling a greater good and network of relationship rather than serving our narrow self-interest
- Worship as sacrifice - costly, all of our being, behaviour and action
- Worship as embodied - involves our bodies
- Worship as devoted - we re-discover holy and sacramental nature of life
- Worship as transformation and renewal of our minds - our values, our life orientation, from conforming to mindset of this age of utility to the values of mutual relationship in the kingdom of God
- Worship as essential to knowing the good, the well pleasing and the perfect
- Worship as directing us towards our ultimate end in God's glory

### **Matthew 6:24**

No one can serve (*douleuein* - to be a slave) two masters (*kuriois* - lord from *kuros* - authority); for either he will hate the one and love (*agapesei*) the other, or he will be devoted (*anthexetai* - hold firmly to) to one and despise (*kataphronesei* - to think little) the other. You cannot serve (*douleuein*) God and mammon (*mamona* - Arabic word for wealth, riches)

Matthew 6:12 Language of masters and slavery, of love and devotion. To read these verses with understanding of what enslaves us in idolatry and what sets us free in right worship and relationship. How Jesus models a different kind of 'Lordship' and freedom in service.

**Question for small groups:**

How does this thinking about worship and liturgy inform how we might think about and design direct actions as acts of worship and liturgy in the public square?