

Anglican-Lutheran Society

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Celebrating Liturgy in a Post-Modern Society : Challenges and Opportunities

This morning if you had listened to the 'Today' programme on BBC Radio 4, which is the heavy news channel in this country, you would have found that on Saturdays they include a slightly more topical but distance perspective on some major issues. And they picked up the resonance in the middle of the nineteenth century when this country found itself caught up in the middle of an insignificant and ultimately futile war in The Crimea. So there was the question of the 'then' and 'now'. They called in the experts, who used the present tense all the time. "The Crimean War is the moment when Britain *does this* and so on. Listening to it you might almost have thought that all kinds of boundaries were being blurred between now and then, between the Crimea today and the issues today and the issues then. Now in one sense you might say that it's a popular journalistic technique. It's also, I can tell you, very popular among my students. Many of them don't seem to believe that there is a past tense! But I think it also reflects a couple of things: they don't relate to the past, it's very hard to understand how the then and the now are in some kind of continuum or discontinuity, and this collapsing of time – and potentially space – is in many ways typical of our age, because there is a blurring going on. It is, among many other things, a manifestation of post-modernity.

So what am I going to try to do today? I want to have a look at Post-Modernity and its liturgical challenge. I stress that I'm doing this from a liturgist's perspective so I'm not going to be getting too involved in the whole philosophical debate around Post-Modernity. I want to look at the challenges that some of its ideas, for example the collapse of grand narratives, raise for us in celebrating the sacraments week in, week out. Then I want to take two different responses to it drawn from my own research and also from the research of one of my post-graduate students. So there's a little bit of ethnography from him and there's a broader more theoretical view from me. Then from that I want to pick up a theological framework to point the way forward and then throw out a couple of questions for your discussion groups. This is not going to be a practical session of 'do's' and 'don'ts', and it's not going to be a rehearsal of Messy Church or Emerging Church. It's going to be looking at it from a theological perspective and asking, 'Where is this going?'

But, first of all, we need to know what we're dealing with, and the answer is 'Don't ask!' It's a very slippery concept. In a sense that's quite appropriate and rather beautiful because it's trying to convey the un conveyable. It's about saying that we're dealing with a fundamental instability in the categories, be it architectural, be it artistic, be it food even, be it in terms of theological thought, literary thought, political analytical thought. It's about saying that there's something fundamentally unstable about the way things are now. So my aim is to engage with this in a narrative way rather than a philosophical way, and to pick up not through the philosophers (though there is a slight nod and if you watch carefully you'll catch Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault along the way) but by looking at the liturgical commentators. And my starting question, just to take us in, is 'If we are in a post-modern situation what does it look like, what does it feel like, what are its characteristics?'

So, very quickly, what is a Post-Modern Society? One key characteristic is pluralism across every single front. It's not simply pluralism in terms of culture and ethnic traditions, though you'll probably find that those are the ones at the forefront in the news, it's pluralism in the ways in which we, within our ethnic traditions, are culturally engaged. It's a pluralism that isn't

just between these different standpoints, it actually penetrates them. So, a pluralistic society with multi-cultures, many ethnic traditions, many religious viewpoints – and again I stress that's not between blocks of churches or religions (all our churches, all our religious perspectives, actually are now penetrated by plurality) – all of that living side by side, but not without tensions and at the same time with a very rich cross-fertilization. Take the idea of food, and the notion of 'fusion', and you have a metaphor for the whole of our society, we're mixing like fury but it carries with it a potential for conflict.

That's also reflected in mobility, and here I don't just refer to physical mobility but also to conceptual mobility. It's true people do not stay in the same place, and that's always been true. This church (the Gustaf Adolf Lutheran Church, Liverpool) wouldn't be here today if there had not been people on the move in the second half of the nineteenth century, and it ended up serving a community (of Scandinavian and Nordic merchants and industrialists) which was strangely stable yet away from home. So mobility has always been part and parcel of life and especially in cities like this, but it has increased at a massive rate. Very often today there's an expectation that you won't remain in the same area for your whole life. People are mobile in jobs. When I talk to students about what they want to do they will speak in terms of thinking of something perhaps for ten years, and what they're thinking about is what we used to think of as careers for life, like teaching! So there isn't an expectation that this is going to go on and on. Mobile in terms of ideas and opinions and roles – do you really expect to hold the same opinions in five years' time that you are holding now? I don't! My question is, 'What's going to be stable?' So there's a constant flowing in and out.

And that flows into what we tend to think of as a 'Pick and Mix' Society. People expect a broad range of choices. Until Liverpool One (a new shopping centre) was built the great day out around here was to the Trafford Centre in Manchester which is basically decked up like a Roman version of a Greek Temple, which means it's gaudy and a little bit kitsch. But it's a place where you don't just shop. It's a place where you're shopping for an identity, and the whole business about buying and selling is not simply a utilitarian thing, you buy, you sell, you construct an identity based on all of these things which express who you are. So I'm picking, and I'm mixing, and what I might pick and mix today I'm not going to pick and mix tomorrow.

So the result is that we're living in a place where the patterns of life are constantly shifting, including the meaning that we put into our lives. When I talk to my students, with the exception of the core evangelicals of the Christian Union who have a very clear sense of what is stable in their identity, people are moving, shifting – there's an instability. And that can lead to a sense of uncertainty, though it can also lead to an exuberant searching after a wide range of experiences. Working as I do with young people, I sometimes think they are fibrillating on the experience front and I want to say, 'Drink deep, please!' So there's a celebration of diversity which can also lead to conflict, and to a sense that the temporary predominates over the permanent.

That's what I would argue is the Post-Modern condition. Part of this is that reality becomes blurred and time becomes blurred as we create, in a process which is generally called 'bricolage', a sense of who we are and what we're doing through things drawn from diverse and shifting and changing scopes and which one day we jettison and replace – a constantly shifting identity with incessant movement almost to the point of instability.

I said that we had to have the philosophers in so you've got Jean-François Lyotard and that sense that in our society, because everything is shifting, because there is this constant movement, but also fed by these ideas, there's a mistrust of the big stories, the 'metanarratives', a sense that you can create an over-arching account of things. That is precisely what, for centuries, we have been searching to do, to find the big theory that holds everything together. People in our age mistrust them. Certainly my students do, and they look at me with

amazement when I suggest the Creeds might have some relevance for today. And that means that if we don't have a sense that we can construct an argument that's going to take the whole picture, meaning or truth is comprised of small packets which can be put together, assembled and taken apart again, so that we never actually finally arrive at a sense of meaning. So meaning is always deferred, and that takes us into our friend Jacques Derrida, and then finally – and I'm not decrying some of this philosophical position - Michel Foucault who explores the ways in which there's an inter-relationship between the way in which we articulate truth, the kind of narratives we use, and the power that operates within institutions. Truth is actually, in a sense, a power-ridden concept related to institutional survival.

So if we're in this situation, what does it mean to celebrate liturgy? What are the challenges of Post-Modernity to Liturgy? I suppose the first is that, for the most part, we expect that basically we do the same thing week in and week out. We have a rhythm which is an annual rhythm with our liturgical year, we expect that we can sort of breathe deeply and that there's a process of repetition week to week, year to year. If everything is temporary and unstable that becomes challenged. I think students are surprised that we Christians go on celebrating the same things over and over again – except Christmas, of course!

But there are deeper problems, because our whole process of worship is about celebrating, communicating, remembering, entering into what, in classic terms, is one of these grand narratives – basically the Gospel. Whatever it is that's at the heart of it, the mystery of Christ, his life and death, his resurrection and his glorification, we've got a grand narrative which it's increasingly difficult in this context to actually grasp. And our expectation is that this grand narrative, the Christ event as expressed in the Gospels, isn't just something we give intellectual assent to but it becomes formative for the whole of life. We are not, in other words, proposing a human identity which is based on 'bricolage', on a little bit of this and a little bit of that. We are suggesting that there is stability, a core out of which everything else grows, and which gives meaning to everything else. And I suggest that it's that which is really the key element which is challenged by Post-Modernity.

But there's also a sense that in the Post-Modern world there is a kind of perpetual present. That brings us back to this morning's 'Today' programme and the sense that the British Army might still be in the 1860s Crimea waiting for Florence Nightingale to found her hospitals. There is that sense that everything is being constructed now. Whereas, the ritual forms, the very articulation of the Gospel as it's expressed, for example, in the Confessions, are received from previous generations, they are the *traditio*, they've been handed over to us. So we don't just root ourselves *now*, in a personal response simply to the Gospel as it were in a vacuum, we do so within that which we've received from the past. So there is not just a perpetual present, there is a past and there is a future. All this takes place within an eschatological horizon. Owning this in the face of Post-Modernity is, I suggest to you, one of the greatest challenges.

In a Post-Modern world meaning is never sutured, never finally put together. And yet we say the message is Christ. Ritual patterns which we've received from the past can have meaning in the present and therefore do not need simply to be deconstructed. And so the question is, in the light of the core Christian message can the Post-Modern emphasis upon fragmentation and on the meaning-constructing individual – a person coming to an understanding of self from all the bits – be regarded with complete neutrality? Put simply, is fragmentation a *moral* issue? How consistent is this fragmented vision of humanity and identity with the Gospel? And I'll give the game away and tell you that I'm going to suggest that it isn't.

So, concrete examples.

I take as a starting point a recent book by the Anglican liturgist Bryan D. Spinks called 'The Worship Mall : Contemporary Responses to Contemporary Culture' (2010, SPCK, London) in

which he links two ideas. First, the sense that Post-Modernity is a consumer society so that picking and mixing is at the heart of it as we construct our identity from what we consume. Second, he examines the vast array of different trends in contemporary worship. He suggests that religion is in competition with the leisure and entertainment industries, and consumerism is both leisure and entertainment. The mall is open on Sundays and competes with the Church, and people have to make a choice. Consumerism offers desire and satisfaction. Faith offers satisfaction through desire for the other. There's the big difference. You go to a shopping mall and you will be satisfied – but you'll go back again.

The very fact that there are different trends in contemporary worship, he says, suggests that worship styles too represent a mall, offered by different churches to suit your personal style or taste, all enticing in different ways, and in competition with each other. So, one of the problems that he picks up, a major response, a major penetration of Post-Modernity into the Church is that we consume religion and, more to the point, we consume worship. Liturgy has become yet another item on a shelf to be picked, to be chosen, to be drawn into our own personal 'bricolage' of personal identity. There's the awful truth. The very thing that is about being counter-cultural easily becomes culture itself. Well, don't be too shocked because we've actually been doing it for 2000 years!

Here are some of the different kinds of worship outlets we can find today. If Liverpool One had shops on religious worship they'd look rather like this. 'Blended, Fusion or Synthesis Worship'; 'Alternative, Emerging and Liquid Worship'; 'Worship as Entertainment'; 'Praise and Worship Songs in the Charismatic Churches'; 'What is Celtic about Contemporary Celtic Worship?'; 'Second-Guessing Vatican II Liturgies'.

I'm going to pick on two of these: 'Second-Guessing Vatican II Liturgies' and 'Alternative, Emerging and Liquid Worship'.

So let's start with Vatican II liturgies. Anyone who's got an eye on Roman Catholic liturgy at the moment knows that there are almighty fights going on in some places. In 2007 Benedict XVI promulgated '*Summorum Pontificum*' which completed a process that had been slowly going on under John Paul II which was to make available the rites, Mass, Baptism, Funerals etc, as they had been before the Second Vatican Council. Basically, it says that the rites as they stood in 1962 can now be used by any priest who wants to without the permission of his bishop, and in fact if in his parish a small number of parishioners specifically request it he has to do it. But the point is that '*Summorum Pontificum*' did not just introduce the permission of the 1962 Missal it also said that everything could be done. You can baptise your children this way, you can have your funeral done in this way, and it's only in a Post-Modern world that this would have become an issue because it becomes another choice. I am who I am because I celebrate using the Missal published after Vatican II. Take one specific example – adult initiation. If you look at the post-Vatican II rite which is often called the RCIA and has had enormous influence across the Christian Church, it's a staged ritual and it's constructed around a space that's open and where anything can happen. It doesn't usually because Christians generally are frightened of open spaces where anything can happen! But the RCIA is a brilliant thing for creating a box within which dangerous things can go on. It creates this space of nothingness or liminality which is called the Catechumenate and I defy any community to show me that they've actually got one when they say they have because usually it's Week One, Week Two, Week Three and so on and we get them out the other end, whereas the whole thing is about radically creating a space within which certain things could happen. It embodies an ecclesiology constructed around the twin dominant themes of the Vatican II doctrine on The Church, *the People of God* which has incarnating that whole concept of the baptismal priesthood, the three-fold priesthood which is Calvin's great gift to the Roman Catholic Church, and *the Body of Christ*, this sense of a dynamic organic way forward, incorporation into a Church understood organically in its relationship to Christ. What the old one does, if you pick and choose, is this: a single staged rite dating from

the 1614 *Ordo Baptismi Adultorum* (though in 1962 someone got wind that something was up and they thought they'd pre-empt it, and they split the old rite up, but nobody's ever used that rite!). In the old rite there are no uncertainties. You really tell the Devil who the Devil is! There is a great sense of clarity that maps the certainty right across the building in which it takes place, with the roles of the minister, the candidates and the godparents clearly defined.

So there's a choice then in this supermarket. What kind of Roman Catholic am I, or do I want to be? I can choose. I am going to suggest to you that it's all very Post-Modern, even though those who would embrace the pre-Vatican II rites are probably those who are making a negative stance against Post-Modernity, paradoxically they are actually behaving in a very Post-Modern manner. I won't say anything about any parallels that might exist in the Church of England (or the Lutheran Church)!

Now, briefly, a different response. If you like, what I've just described is the negative response. What about going completely the other way? I had a student, Malcolm Chamberlain, who looked at two Fresh Expressions, though they weren't really called Fresh Expressions then. One was called Sanctus 1, in Manchester, and the other called Dream, here in Liverpool, and both are still going.

If you look at Sanctus 1 it describes itself on its website as 'an inclusive and creative Christian Community exploring spirituality in the heart of Manchester's Northern Quarter.' That's the part of Manchester which is really picking up and becoming a lively area. In Sanctus 1 they don't meet inside a church, they meet in an art café. This is fairly typical of this kind of community. It's a safe space where they gather on Sundays and also have a weekly meditation session part-way through the week. They've got a Sanctus 2 as well which is for children. [See www.sanctus1.co.uk/what-is-sanctus-1]

As part of his fieldwork Malcolm, who is a priest of the Anglican Diocese of Liverpool, observed a service which was on the theme of anger which they held in Manchester Cathedral. He described it as 'a tightly controlled service demanding more passive than active participation of the worshipping congregation'. Let me tell you what they did. I'm not going to comment. There was a candle lighting, followed by a video extract from 'Fawlty Towers' showing a trivial occurrence of anger. Then there were readings including a definition of anger and a poetic piece followed by discussion in pairs about petty things that make you angry. A dramatic reading of Jesus cleansing the Temple was accompanied by projected images of associated artwork, both ancient and modern. Then there was a sketch about love of enemy and self, a Bible reading about Job's anger at God, and the visual 'Rage against the Messiah' giving permission to be angry about God, followed by an invitation to write down what makes you feel angry. Three personal stories were told about anger against God – the death of a grandparent who was not a 'Christian' and anger at the Church's teaching that they would be going to Hell; a friend who had suffered abuse; the loss of a job in unjust circumstances. Then the congregation was invited to throw their written angers at a picture of Jesus (the ritual act in the worship) and finally the story of Gethsemane and Jesus wrestling with God's will.

Malcolm evaluated the experience like this: '... there were no opportunities, save that of the ritual act, for worshippers to move and engage with prayer stations and the like on a personal level. Furthermore, the one ritual act felt too public, given the emotive act of throwing things at a picture of Jesus and the personal nature of the subject matter. This was evidenced by the fact that only three people chose to participate in the ritual, and they were watched by the rest of the congregation as they did so. Though the form and the content were very different from a conventional church service, the sense of only being involved on a passive level was much the same.'

It was supposed to be a Post-Modern experience of worship where individuals could participate according to their own sense of 'bricolage', but in reality it was so like any other church service. Again and again, when Christians think they're doing the Post-Modern thing actually they slip very easily into old fashioned structures. And that's what Malcolm found in most of their services, that although it was supposed to be open and creative it was all fitted into a very pre-determined pattern. They all began in the same way, 'We meet in the name of the Father, and the Son ...' and they all ended in the same way, 'We depart in the name of the Father, and the Son ...' And, strangely, the Eucharist was usually according to the rites of the Church of England. What's more interesting is that the founder of the church, who is an Anglican priest called Ben Edson, had a clear rationale for what was going on. He picked up from Victor Turner's 'The Ritual Process' the idea of liminality, and Victor Turner, who developed Anton van Gennep's ideas, saw that in becoming a member of a community you had three stages. You were separated from your old community, eventually were integrated into the new, and in between there was this free space of becoming, one of whose characteristics is a strange sense of community between those who are in it together. And Ben Edson said that his whole aim in doing this was to create that sense of community, that liminality.

What was it really like? Malcolm critiqued it like this: 'Despite there being a strong case for claiming some kind of *communitas*, observation suggests that Sanctus I is not *communitas* in the classic sense that Victor Turner uses the term. Whilst conceding that the initial small community that formed Sanctus I may well have been *communitas* and operating in a liminal state, the Sanctus I that I experienced was far too structured and organised to be *communitas*. This structure ... was not necessarily top down and was largely owned by the whole community with plenty of opportunity for participation and for ongoing formation and adaptation, but it was structure all the same, rather than anti-structure.' (Malcolm Chamberlain, *Finding their own Way: a Critical Engagement with two emerging church communities five years on, exploring questions of community values, structure, power and form*. MPhil thesis, Liverpool Hope University, 2011)

All of this is not without its use. I think that the two examples, the Tridentine denial of Post-Modernity and yet strangely enough embracing it in doing so, and the emerging church attempts to engage in a Post-Modern thing and yet slipping again and again and again back into church structures, are telling, and I do think we have something to learn from them, and particularly from Sanctus I and this idea of liminality. Because we are Post-Modern in one sense, there is an important insight. My meaning is still deferred. I do not know who I am ultimately. I will only know that in Christ at the Eschaton. We are all in a process of becoming. We do not enter into church as complete human beings, and in a sense when we are carried out we are still not there. Who we are – our identity – is hidden in Him.

So how do we articulate the tension between fidelity to the liturgical tradition and at the same time say that this worshipping community is not closed off, but is a 'becoming' space?

Here are my suggestions. First, embrace liminality. There is some wisdom in the notions of the Post-Modernists. We have to accept that all of us, at an individual level, are passing in and out of phases of being and not fully being. You've experienced bereavement, you know what it is to feel as though you've entered into somewhere you've never been before, where you are not what you were and you are not what you will be.

Second, the whole Cosmos is in a liminal stage. Look at Romans 8 if you want. It is not in its final condition. We won't understand it, we won't see it, we won't completely grasp it until Christ is all in all. That's where we're moving towards. The whole Cosmos is becoming, and to celebrate the liturgy is to celebrate in a Cosmos with natural elements of that Cosmos, bread, wine, water, in a state of becoming. Even the very matter that we use in Holy Communion is in that sense becoming.

Third, the Church is becoming because, contrary to what many churches might like to believe, they are not the last word. The last word is Jesus.

The challenge to the Church, of course, is that the moment you do that you move across all our favourite discourses of success, be they numeric, be they financial, be they the kind of competition that is all too evident within and between denominations and church communities. If we are going to embrace the fact that we are becoming and not there, maybe some of our easy discourses need to be challenged. But we can also subvert some of those questions about power and institutions. What does it mean for institutions, rather than saying it is, to say it is becoming? What does that do to the way that power might operate?

Fourth, we also need to say something about fragmentation and *communitas*. The dilemma of this constructed Post-Modern person is that it is surely a manifestation of original sin. In a sense the fragmentation that Post-Modernism manifests is Babel. How do I, in the midst of this, construct my meaning, my identity, in this fragmented manner? Even formal liturgy can contribute to that because it can become a very personal and individualistic thing too. Liturgy can be experienced as an event of personal piety. Also, the constant 'we' of the liturgy, rather than the 'I', in the middle of a world where 'I' is elevated and becomes a symbol of fragmentation, the 'we' says something to that.

Fifth, the openness of the eschatological perspective needs to be accompanied by an ecclesiological vision that is rooted in time but is also eschatologically oriented, as well as engaging with the need to locate the individual within a broader context. We are going somewhere, and we are going together. We who celebrate the liturgy are flesh and blood, rooted in time, not abstract. We are on our way towards becoming the eschatological reality of the Body of Christ, which has at its end defragmentation.

In conclusion, what does this mean in practice? Well, that I leave with you. The liturgy, I suggest, should be the place where Post-Modern tensions are acknowledged and worked through – individual and community, the tyranny of the present, the relationship with the past which is often ambiguous, the uncertainty of the future, the reception of tradition, and a sense of this eschatologically-oriented deferral. Focusing on the past, or rendering absolute the present, are both blind alleys. But I suggest to you that in a Post-Modern world the liturgy can be the antidote when we gather to worship. A liturgy that is open to an eschatological horizon can embrace the liminalities of the present and at the same time reconcile the present to the past.