

Worship as Mission: Ancient Faith with Future Hope

How can Cathedrals serve as Power Houses for the Parishes?

A presentation by Canon Anna Norman – Walker

“We must flatly say that one of the greatest contemporary barriers to meaningful spiritual formation into Christlikeness is overconfidence in the efficacy of regular church services. They are vital, they are not enough. It is that simple”.

So writes contemporary Christian Philosopher Professor Dallas Willard.

I have been involved in the Missional conversation for some years now from working with young people in the 1990's many of whom had been brought up to attend church as children and were beginning to decide for themselves what sort of 'church' was going to work for them, independent of their parents, through to parish ministry in the Diocese of Exeter in Devon. Then serving as the Diocesan Missioner for four years in an area that had 615 church buildings, 525 of which were parishes and of which around 170 had less than 10 people worshipping on a Sunday.

One thing I came to recognise during my time in each of these contexts was that relying on the **regular routine of the same old Sunday service was vital** (as Dallas Willard states) but that they were not enough, if our ultimate aim is to be ever increasingly formed into the likeness of Christ.

During this time I also became conscious of a trend, particularly among younger adults towards becoming '*de-churched*'; that is, to stop *attending* church, but not because of a loss of faith in Christ, but because of a range of reasons – theological difficulties with a denominations view of things, lack of a sense of belonging in community, boredom, and no spaces to ask questions, to name but a few!

This, giving up on 'church' was often characterised with a stronger desire to 'do faith' through social action and to do fellowship with others who were like minded – and the pub – not the church building – had become the main place of fellowship.

When I talked to these people about *worship* I received a range of answers:

Some wanted to redefine worship as 'A way of life' – what 'I do' is worship....

Some lamented the fact that they had walked away but felt the reason that they left made it impossible for them to return – for reasons of personal or theological integrity.

One person tried to persuade me that a glass of beer and some shared crisps in the pub was as 'Eucharistic' as any Eucharist he had experienced in a church.... Although he was a Salvation Army member - so I am not sure he and I were on the same page there.....

I found myself in agreement with many of the arguments I heard from the ‘de-churched’, people who had a ‘Churchless Faith’

I could agree that ‘expressing our faith in Christ through active service’ was a vital expression of faith and demonstrates our love for God – ‘worship’, if you like.

I also could agree that there is something rich and profound about sharing fellowship with friends in intimate settings like the pub or the coffee shop... and that food shared in these moments can feel almost sacramental – and profoundly moving.

But it was the things that *cannot be* achieved in social action, or private friendships that concerned me:

1. Primarily our **connectedness with the inheritance of the saints in glory** –given to us not only in the historicity of their witness, but supremely in the liturgies and rituals of the church as we have received them. The experience of Gospel handed down to us from generation to generation.

2. Secondly the **impact that these liturgies and rituals have on us** – spiritually, theologically and relationally.

- **Spiritually** – what is happening here that touches and changes us?
- **Theologically** – In our understanding of the faith – of our understanding of what God is like and how God is at work in the world.
- **Relationally** – In the way we have come to understand and relate to others in and through the body of Christ.

Dallas Willard is right – Regular worship is *not* enough – but it is vital and perhaps the key to unlocking its vital potential for those who are mindful to walk away or stay away from worship, is to catch a vision for **worship that is missional and connects**.

Ancient faith infused with future hope – the title of this seminar. And from my own experience of working as a missionary in an English Cathedral – might they be powerhouses for our parish churches?

(At this point PowerPoint slides illustrated the following points)

1. So, what are we in for?

- Is there a relationship between worship and mission and if so, what is it?
- How can we offer worship that is missional in today’s culture?

2. So, what’s the problem? The British church is shrinking!

- In 1960, 24% of people went to church
- In 2000, only 12% of people went
- Since then, 1000 people a week have been leaving the Church of England
- Nearly half our present attendance is over 65
- So church attendance will halve again within just 20 years
- 2016 National survey 1.4% attend C of E worship *weekly*.

3. What might Cathedral's do to help?

- From an 18 century observer "Cathedrals are merely asylums for amiable gentlemen with indistinct convictions"
- From a 21 century observer "Heritage theme parks, exhibition halls and concert venues."
- Medieval Mystic Meister Eckhart: ***"A Cathedral is a creation imagined by the human spirit in order to affirm an inspiration and a faith."***

4. This is our Hope – Picture of Exeter Cathedral where I am based.

We are seeking in all things to - "affirm an inspiration and a faith."

And a part of what I want to talk to you about today is what we are experiencing as we try to offer 'missional worship' as part of our worship offer to the city and the Diocese.

5. 2013 – Nation Survey of the British Church – Anecdote to Evidence

Cathedrals are growing!

30 % growth between 2000 & 2012 and continue on at 3% per year.

What characterises growing Cathedrals – summed up in this phrase: **Cultivating 'Missional Intentionality'**

6. These things characterise Growing Cathedrals:

- Initiating new services & congregations
- Enriching the quality of worship
- Improving welcome & hospitality
- Engaging culture & the arts
- Promoting spiritual openness, inclusivity
 - & diversity in membership & outreach
- Increasing the civic profile
- Developing educational programmes
- Prioritising discipleship & Christian nurture

All these things sit under the banner of Missional Intentionality. Conclusion - Churches that **want to be** Missional **tend to be** missional !

7. Back to Missional Intentionality – what do we mean when we talk about Mission –?

When asked, Rowan Williams – ***Mission is finding out what God is doing and joining in.***

It is fairly simple to identify what God might be doing and joining in, in that – wherever there are **unjust structures** in society – Our **God of Justice** is at work challenging and changing them. We can join in by signing petitions, engage in politics or pressure groups and campaign for a more just world.

Where ever **creation is being cared** for and stewarded with faithfulness – **Our creator God is at work.** We can join in through our lifestyle choices – being as environmentally friendly as we can be.

Where ever the **Good news of God's love for the world is proclaimed** and people respond – **Our God who loved the world so much that he sent his son to save it** - God is at work. We can join in by telling our colleagues, friends and family about the hope that is within us through our faith in Christ.

How does this all connect with our worship and our attendance at church services?

In our worship we turn our hearts, minds and our wills to the God who is **in essence missional...** and we do it in community with others –

- *'The Lord be with you – and also with you.'*
 - *'The peace of the Lord be always with you – and also with you'.*
- It is when we worship that we align our otherwise often unaligned selves, to God and to one another.**

That is *why* worship matters and that is why worship which returns again and again to the rituals and words inherited from the saints in glory also matter.

BUT we do need to **find fresh ways of expressing ourselves** because our culture is becoming less and less familiar with these rituals, words and their meaning.

The German theologian Helmut Theilke said, **'The Gospel is always being forwarded to a new address because the recipient is repeatedly changing his place of residence'**

And so the key question to ask ourselves in these days is:

What does the new address look like, to which we are called to proclaim the Gospel afresh?

- **Multi - sensory** - Church was sit up, shut up, sing up and cough up. No where else are people subject to this anymore. Range of stimulus – mentally multi-tasking all the time! Rolling magazine, chat show style, apps, google search, screens – normal to see a group of Yp in pub – looking at their screens . Pokestop ! Concentration/ information absorbsion....
- **Suspicious** – Experts are not to be trusted, new truth is always being discovered (*why would we trust a generation who put gay people in prison?*) *Authenticity is the most trusted attribute....*
- **Spiritual – But not necessarily Religious** (*religion is a toxic word for many*) *Belong, believe, become / behave – experience comes before decision.*
- **Experiential** – I will know is something is real if my experience tells me of its reality.
- **Networked** – Social media – twitter / Facebook.....dating sites – Bumble / Tinder.
- **Global** – 24 hour news App, immediate. Reporting changed forever – power to the people – Je suis Charlie – in the emotion of the moment – 'lived experience of Global news'
- **Vulnerable** – We know the truth that nothing is certain, everything is changing and we are small....

It is into THIS context that we are called to proclaim the Good news of Christ afresh to each generation

How do we offer worship that:

- **enables** encounter with God. (*God inhabits the praises of his people*)
- **encourages** prayer. (*I am 'networked' to God*)
- **inspires** discipleship. (*I want to follow ...*)
- **stimulates** response (*I want to live and work to his praise and glory*)

And how do we do this in such a way that doesn't just default to 'Entertainment' that has integrity?

And what are the **values** of missional worship we need to ensure are central to the worship that we offer?

Some of the questions we ask when planning missional worship at Exeter Cathedral:

- Who might be there and how can we help?
- Songs / hymns / music / liturgy?
- Words / themes / Seasons?
- How to look up? *Transcendence*
- How to look in ? *Immanence*
- How to look around? *Community*
- How to Look out? *Mission*

For us at Exeter Cathedral we have been exploring this through two particular expressions of worship:

a) Holy Ground (Oct 2011 – 40 people : July 2016 – 180)

- Not a church but a congregation of Exeter Cathedral (although the 10am doesn't recognise it as such!).
- Monthly not weekly.
- Emphasis on creating a space for people to:
- Explore/ experience Christian worship in ways that resonate with our present culture and feel 'spacious'.
- Engage in topics which relate to faith - Academics, Artists, Campaigners, NGO's and charities etc....A 'two way' conversation.
- Provide a spacious place where people feel welcomed and listened too (by God) and can listen to themselves and others in a way that is generous and non-coercive.

At any typical Holy Ground service:

- Arrive – Nave
- Large Screen or perhaps smaller monitors around.
- 7pm Chime – music / media/ welcome.
- Gospel reading, penitential rite& absolution, meditation / song...Uni choir.
- Reflection or responses.... Seated or mobile.
- 5 – 15 mins.
- Theme for the night – season or the subject.
- Gather for Eucharist. Creative preface/ alternative liturgy.
- Open table.

- Peace and coffee....
- No collection.
- Regroup 15 mins – café to have now (size)
- Speaker with Q&A, Artist poet, music, NGO, Justice.....
- Contemplation space – sometimes guided.

George Lings (Church Army Research Unit) visited us in 2013 as part of his research and in his report he writes:

Behind Holy Ground lies the emerging convictions of Anna and the team: What is there between a chasm that might be characterised as the staid diet of hymns Ancient and Modern at one end and, with, what seems to them, at the other end, as the froth of kind of repeated choruses that demand an unflaggingly passionate and highly emotional spirituality?

Equally what is there that remains orthodox yet can be exploratory; what takes seriously the insights of adult education and enables learning through interaction as well as presentation?

Where can one find an approach that faces directly the doubts and tough issues poised by today's pluralist society, its ethical dilemmas and absence of absolutes, not to mention the evident and inexplicable suffering in the world?

As the world is so busy and competitive and not looking like changing from being like that, where apart from periodic retreats or meditation practices (Christian and otherwise), can contemplatives find shared rhythms of quieter prayer?

They think that the gifts of liturgy include providing a sturdy shaped framework that gives safe space for silence, stations and time to ponder. Its vocabulary is formed by the love of fewer better words, ones that endure and roost in the memory.

These words become familiar language through which one passes to encounter with God' .

'Ancient faith, future hope' draws on being in a cathedral. People have worshipped the Christian God here at least from Saxon times; the faith in Christ itself is yet more ancient.

Holy Ground is rooted in the Christian value of catholicity; it deliberately connects to Bible, Saints and tradition. Its first section of most evenings is Eucharistic. The catholicity is expressed too in seeing itself as but part of the whole – one congregation within the Cathedral, linked to an ancient past yet today inclusive of several groups in society.

Yet there is also future hope, for believers in the kingdom of God think that the present is being shaped by the future, not just influenced by the past. Embracing a future, it has no qualms about using contemporary technology or artistic skills; being concerned for the future, an element of its life is concern for social justice. It seeks to

envision and move people on, rather than to renew which perhaps faces backwards in restoration

He observes:

- **'Guided contemplation'** draws on the values of inherited wisdom; the term has echoes of monasticism, spiritual direction and retreats. Equally it is not, shall I call it the style of New Wine.
- The **'Café style engagement'** honours the minds and respects the opinions of all who are there; it is a forum for conversation and exploration, not a school with a curriculum and teachers.
- **'Reflective installations'** takes this freedom and trust further. There is preparation and prayer in what is offered for people to explore, but it is accompanied by trust in both them and the Holy Spirit to take and transcend what is offered. The reflection is outside the control of the installer.

Here is a message from someone who connected: Louise writes:

Hello Anna, This is Louise here (we met recently in the long queue at the chip shop!). I just wanted to thank you and your colleagues for such a beautiful service this evening. It was so delicately crafted and thus allowed me to respond to the compassionate and gentle message.

I left a particular church expression about a decade ago now (where does the time go?) and it has been a long and complicated journey! Thank you so much for providing a space where I can feel safe enough to respond to the 'spiritual' again. I cannot tell you how much that means to me and gives me hope that the part of me I thought lost may have a chance to recover and know peace again.

I wanted to write as I knew I'd never be able to articulate it and probably wouldn't be brave enough!

Many thanks again, Anna,

b) In September 2015 we started Sunday @7

- For those for whom Holy ground had become 'church for them'
- Weekly
- Sustainable
- Relational
- Chapter House
- Values.
- Hospitality
- Now numbers 40 people
- Hospital, rescue, curious.....

Email from David:

Hello Anna, Last weekend was our first opportunity to attend Sunday @ Seven and we wanted to thank you for a very helpful and meaningful evening. Not sure where the inspiration for Holy Ground and S@7 came from but after our painful exodus from evangelicalism these are a lifesaver for us so a sincere thank you for all the thought and planning that goes into them!