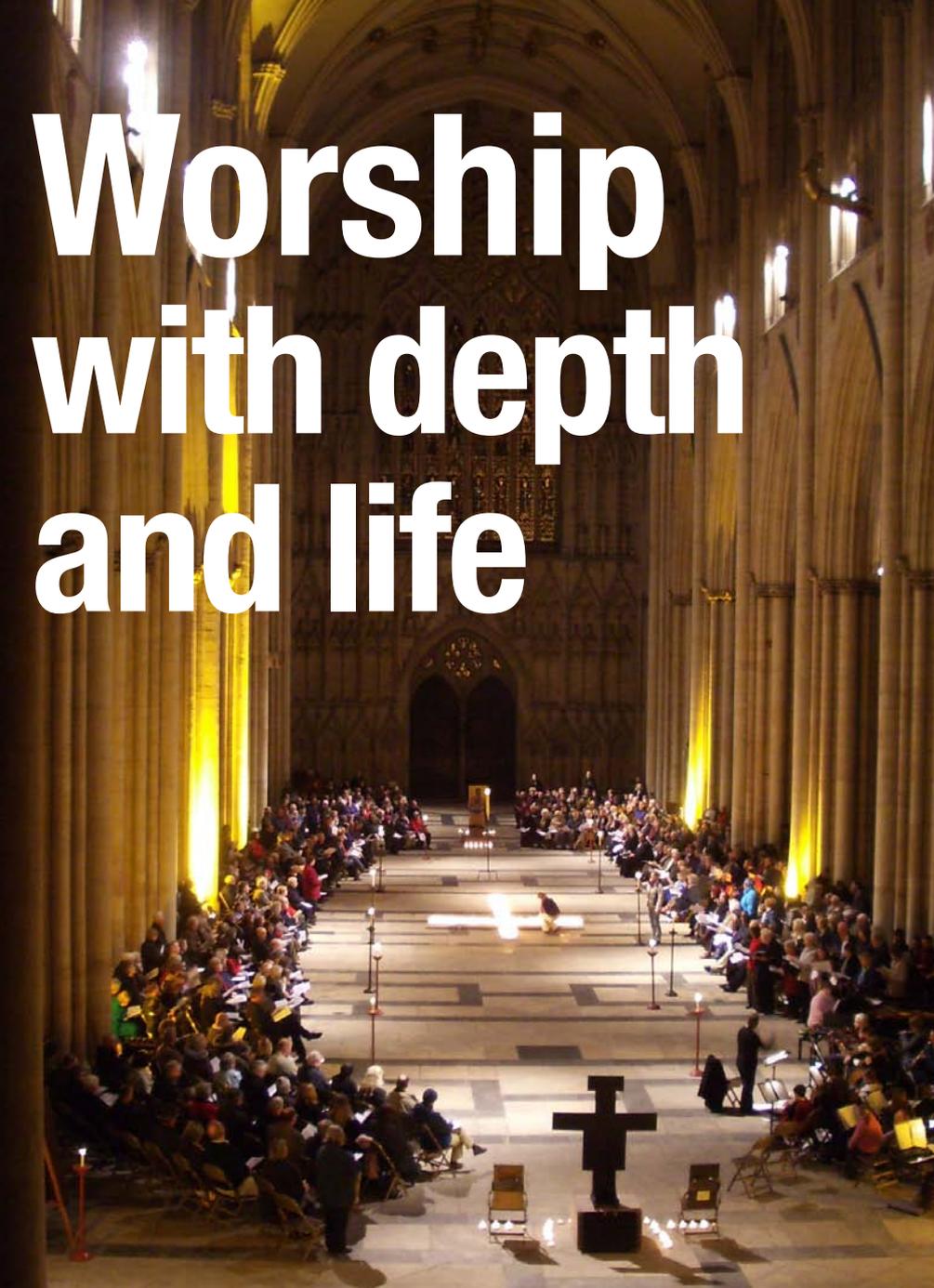


Worship with depth and life



I work in an English cathedral, and my job description is focussed on worship. Occasionally I feel the need to let people know that, much as I love the work I do, and the way this cathedral does things, I wouldn't necessarily do it in exactly this formal and ordered way in a parish church or other worshipping community. I might apply the same principles, but cathedrals have a special context, and people shouldn't see them as the only way to worship. I also sometimes want to tell people that my background is charismatic as well as liturgical, though the charismatic side is a bit subterranean in the ordered place I inhabit at the moment.

Actually, it was the liturgical side which used to be the problem! At one charismatic event where Dr Chris Cocksworth and I were to do a seminar called *The Spirit and Liturgy*, we were described as being 'very brave'. Yet for some years charismatic groups have been exploring the way in which structure, ceremony, artistic expression, colour and movement can enhance and express worship, and unlock the freedom and power of the Spirit. Many will testify to the use of dance and the visual as well as music in the 1960s and 1970s, and in more recent years charismatic conferences like *Worship Together* have welcomed a focus on liturgical celebration. In our own day streams such as *Resonance*, *Contemplative Fire* and *Deep Church* are expressing this desire to apply the well springs of our tradition to the work of the Spirit in worship. The northern launch of *ReSource* in my own cathedral was just such a charismatic and liturgical celebration.

The things the church has always prized have survived into the present for a reason

I believe above all that the riches of the Spirit's work are fully revealed in worship which is planned carefully, which has an ethos, structure, creativity, art and purpose. The things the Church has always prized have survived into the present for a reason, though they always need to be examined to see if they are still of relevance. Indeed some things might need to be revived: the musician Dave Fellingham talks about 'prophetic nostalgia', especially in relation to old songs and hymns which are rediscovered and used afresh. Far from stifling the Spirit I believe that planning, using

THE MANY FACES OF YORK MINSTER

Top at a Taizé service, *bottom* during a youth service
Photos by Jeremy Fletcher



'I believe above all that the riches of the Spirit's work are fully revealed in worship which is planned carefully, which has an ethos, structure, creativity, art and purpose', writes JEREMY FLETCHER

structure and searching for resources can release the Spirit in real power. And using patterns and rhythms in worship, particularly in engaging with the weekly and annual cycles of gathered worship, can expose us to untold mysteries which God has for His Church.

Authorisation is as good a guarantee as we can find against heresy

I am fully aware that a slavish use of an authorised set of words or an unthinking adherence to what are felt to be 'the rules' can deaden worship more quickly than anything else. But used well, as a servant of the worshipping assembly, liturgical structures, symbols and words can be hugely effective. Using authorised services can be regarded as a chore. I prefer to think that in our denomination we are a part of the universal Church, and therefore not a single self-regulating congregation but in fellowship with sisters and brothers across the world. It is important that what we do and say gives as true a picture as we can of the God we worship, and to that end the best minds in the church have given themselves to ensuring that what we pray is believable, and that what we believe is prayable. Authorisation is as good a guarantee as we can find against inadvertent heresy.

In addition to this it is always worth looking for the small print: in Common Worship, for example, there is very little which is restricted, and all sorts of choices can be made. Our doctrine is perhaps supremely encapsulated in the eucharistic prayer: there are eight to choose from. The same is true of structure: A Service of the Word is a superb framework for a non eucharistic service, but is actually just a set of headings which can be used in a number of combinations and with a wide choice of required material. Our participation in the wider life of the Church is symbolised by using material which our church has found to be acceptable, but then shaping that material in ways which work in our context. That seems to me to be an appropriate work of the Spirit

In times past, after a busy week, I would occasionally find myself leading a service which I had not had time to plan, or be required to preach a sermon I had not had time to prepare. I used to think that that was a good opportunity to be 'open to the Spirit'. It may well be that God forgave my lack of preparation, but it soon became clear to me that

those who were really open to the Spirit in worship had spent many hours getting ready. Openness to the Spirit happens as much in preparation as in delivery. Choice of hymns and songs, choice of liturgical shape and text after prayer is as spiritual a task as waiting God in moments of quiet in worship and listening for God's voice in a time of ministry.

In very practical terms I have also found that a clear structure and careful leadership of worship gives people the security to make steps of faith they might not otherwise take if they are unsure what is going to happen next. Of course we should be prepared for the unpredictable Spirit of God to blow where the Spirit wills, but our people need to be confident that the leader of worship has a hand on the tiller, and that the ship (in the form of the service) is robust.

No conflict between a printed order of service and looking for spaces within it

I have found no conflict in printing an order of service and then looking for spaces within it, or including what John Leach calls 'planned spontaneous happenings'. Knowing that, broadly speaking, they know that is to happen next gives congregations permission to be open in prayer and worship.

One of the things which has always worried me about certain charismatic styles of worship is the use of the Bible in worship. When the early Church met it was to listen to the Apostles' teaching, which soon became an encounter with the written word of God. Of course, most of our songs are Biblical, and we pride ourselves on preaching in the apostolic tradition, but there is often little reading of Scripture in our gatherings, and the choice of Scripture is restricted to whatever the preacher is led towards that week. That can lead to an uneven diet!

The Bible read for its own sake draws people into the life of God

The Church's year grew up to ensure that all worshippers were faced with the great themes of our believing: the Incarnation of Christ, the Word made flesh; the revelation of God in creation and the life of Christ; Christ's saving death, resurrection and ascension; the gift of the Spirit to the Church; and the Second Coming of Christ at the end of time: you will recognise Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Holy Week,



Photo by Kellie Hill

Easter, Pentecost and Advent here.

Like all traditions this can be suffocating, but it is equally bad not to expose worshippers to these great themes: the calendar can be a release, not a straitjacket. And the Bible read for its own sake (rather than just as the illustration of the sermon) draws people into the life of God: these are indeed the words of life. It may be that the Lectionary (the pattern of Bible reading used by the Church) doesn't speak into the specific life of your congregation that particular week, but again there is permission to dispense with it some of the time if that is needed. There is freedom even among the rules!

I see the structure as a display case and set prayers as jewels to be displayed

I have come to feel that carefully planned worship is the most powerful expression of the life of the Church. It taps us into the riches of the Spirit's work down the centuries, and makes us a real focus of the universal Church. It is at its most effective when the best of the past meets the contemporary world, and at its worst when a congregation feels it has to conform to something it does not recognise. That is the difference between tradition (that which is handed on, the living faith of the dead) and traditionalism (the dead faith of the living). It is a great sadness to me that people see liturgy not as a structure which enables freedom, but as a set of words to be 'got through'. I see the structure as a display case and set prayers as jewels to be displayed. Along the way all sorts of things can happen.

I pray that local congregations and communities will be able to mine the resources we have, plan worship which relates to their context, and develop patterns which liberate their church's worship. They may be different to the cathedral world I currently inhabit, but the principles are the same: to give God glory for all God is worth, and to believe that in worship God meets us and changes us for ever. 

about the writer

The Revd Jeremy Fletcher is the Precentor of York Minster, has been a Bishop's Chaplain and parish priest, and was involved in the production of Common Worship as a member of the Liturgical Commission and on General Synod.