

We asked twelve preachers to share the insights they have gathered through their experiences of writing and delivering sermons regularly. Each month we will post a new contribution on the Starters for Sunday website. We hope that this resource will assist you to ‘fan into flame the gift of God that is in you...’ 2 Timothy 1:6

We are grateful to **Rev. Kathy Galloway, Head of Christian Aid Scotland** for this month’s contribution.

Worship And Preaching

The Drama of Worship

It is my understanding that the central task of Christians bearing witness, whether that is in testimony, preaching, political action, public service, or in daily life, must always be kerygmatic, that is, it must proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ.

I mostly (but not exclusively) follow the Revised Common Lectionary. I prefer to do so to ensure that the Bible is read in a comprehensive way, so that the lesser-known but often equally interesting parts are also heard; to focus attention on the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, in the context of the Jewish community of faith to which he belonged and the Christian community of faith which he founded; and to offer a purposeful and directed scheme of reading which identifies unifying themes in the Bible as a whole. Use of the lectionary also has the additional advantage, at least from a congregation’s point of view, of liberating preaching from the personal preferences or prejudices of the preacher. And in the context of the global community of Christian Aid for which I work and in whose name I am mostly invited to conduct worship or speak, I greatly value reading the Bible in common with Christians from many backgrounds and countries.

But I must confess that I do not find it helpful, or even really possible, to consider or prepare for preaching separate from the rest of the service, to which I give as much time in preparation as I do to the sermon. I can only think about preaching as an integral part of the drama of worship.

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‘Christian worship... It can accurately be described as a drama because it is a re-enactment, a re- presentation of the Christian story... ‘

Rev Kathy Galloway, Head of Christian Aid

Now, to speak of the drama of worship is not necessarily a familiar concept, perhaps especially for Reformed Christians. The order of service has traditionally been one in which the high point of worship is clearly assumed to be the preaching – a kind of ascent up the stony slopes of a mountain, painfully negotiating a way through the pitfalls and precipices of sin until we reach the peak experience of the sermon, and presumably, share in a vision of transfiguration. A final hymn and the benediction and we're out, leaping off the mountaintop, ready to dive at great speed straight down into the valleys of the world so far below, in a kind of mini- Fall; from the heights to the depths in five minutes flat.

We live in a culture which is increasingly less dependent on the spoken or written word. It utilizes visual media extensively. People are not trained to listen for long to a speaker, or to rely on oratory for stimulus. People do not nowadays commit a great deal of information to memory, nor learn things by rote or catechism. They merely need to know where data is stored and how to access it.

It's salutary to remind ourselves that people remember approximately 8% of what preachers say. They remember much more of how they say it. The medium is also the message! Every teacher knows that people learn least from what they hear, more from what they are shown, and most from what they take part in.

Christian worship, the *liturgia*, the work of the people, has, over the centuries, evolved the way it has because it is the way life is, it is true to experience. It can accurately be described as a drama because it is a re-enactment, a re- presentation of the Christian story, a telling in which we are not just listeners and spectators but actors. It is the great drama of salvation.



I. Gathering together in Christ's name

Every morning in Iona, or whenever members, the Iona Community to which I belong, tells its story of who it is in the opening responses of its daily worship.

The world belongs to God

The earth and all its people.

How good and how lovely it is

To live together in unity.

Love and faith come together

Justice and peace join hands

If the Lord's disciples keep silent

These stones would shout aloud

If you knew nothing about the Iona Community, you might be able to guess from its gathering responses that it is an ecumenical body with a commitment to justice, peace and mission. In order to recollect itself for that common task, it draws on the memory not just of the whole church, but of its own 75-year history. And it finds that its remembering confirms its identity, offers it a freer and fuller self, and acts as a resource for the present. We are grateful for our memories. We celebrate them.

We come to share our stories

We come to break the bread

We come to know our rising from the dead.

Christian faith is premised on memory, on the recalling to mind of what we already know in the body. The great drama of liturgy is, in a sense, reminiscence. In worship, we become what the past is doing now. And the whole Christian church, which is constituted on memory, gives thanks as it gathers.

When we gather to worship, the first thing we do is a naming. We are people who gather together under and in the name of Christ. We give ourselves the Christian name.

Or rather, we might say, we are present because, in an extraordinary variety of ways, **we have heard our name spoken**, and have recognised ourselves. That flash of recognition becomes a place of gospel that we go back to again and again. And it is not just a personal identity we receive. It becomes our **common story**. We gather with others who have shared that experience. So we recognise not only ourselves but each other.

You will be called by a new name. . .

I will show love to those who were called 'Unloved'

And to those who were called 'Not-My-People'

I will say, 'You are my people'

And they will answer 'You are our God.' (Is.62,2: Hos.2,23)

The words of the Hebrew prophets express poetically a reality which we cannot always explain prosaically; that somehow we show up grasping towards a different identity as those gathered together in Christ's name.





‘To proclaim the word made flesh when people gather together in Christ’s name, we have to bring it down to earth.’

Rev Kathy Galloway, Head of Christian Aid

The drama of worship, then, begins with a greeting given in Christ’s name, and an invitation; to remember the personal and corporate event of our naming, to remember its significance for **our** lives, and to reclaim and proclaim it once more as a lived experience with consequences not just in the past but for the present and the future.

It begins with gathering together in Christ’s name, and the invitation to worship, and moves into the first act, the prodigal son act, of turning and heading for home. It is the act of still being a long way off.

In the heart of the second act is God’s response to our distress: *‘But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms round him and kissed him.’* The Word is the word of life; it is the good news of God running out to meet us while we are still far off.

And the third act dramatises our response to God. The father tells us what to do. It is to celebrate with a feast. It is thanksgiving: *‘for he was dead, but now he is alive.’* It is intercession and ministry to others: *‘bring out the best robe quickly, put it on him, and a ring on his finger and shoes on his feet’* It is the gratitude of the profligate younger brother in us and the disciplining of the holier than thou elder brother in us. It is the reconciliation of brother to brother: *‘You are always here with me, and everything I have is yours. But we have to celebrate and be happy because he was lost and now he is found.’*

And finally, we are blessed, and sent back out into the world, into our lives, with a task to do and good news to proclaim.

If we are to re-present the drama of salvation we can no longer rely on a purely, cerebral, intellectual mode. Stretching the mind is not enough. To proclaim the word made flesh when people gather together in Christ’s name, we have to bring it down to earth. We have to remember the body!

*‘Gather us in, the lost and the lonely, the broken and breaking, the tired and the aching,
Who long for the nourishment found at your feast’*



‘The last word is always the word made flesh. So we are witnesses to the triumph of life over death, of love over fear.’

Rev Kathy Galloway, Head of Christian Aid

2. The Word made flesh; remembering the body

I need to know that God is real; I need to know that Christ can feel...

The wonderful story of Thomas the Doubter draws our attention to the body of Christ with a reality that is quite disconcerting. It is an absolutely clear message that bodies matter; that the mystery of the incarnation, the embodiment of Jesus Christ the word made flesh is neither accidental nor incidental. It is the whole point. We know and are known in the body, we are personal in the body, and it is as whole persons that we live and fall and die and are raised to new life.

But why, in the resurrection, still the wounds? Oh, but we are also our wounds.

The marks of our lives are an integral part of who we really are, as they are of Jesus. And it is in the reality of our lives that we are most personal, most precious. It is that reality that reminds us that the masses huddled in misery and squalor in refugee camps across the world are persons, and that the driven and fanatical soldiers of the Taliban are persons, and that the transvestites of Rio de Janeiro are persons and that it was for persons that Christ lived and died and was raised.

But remember, memory is first of all bodily. How could the risen body of Christ be anything other than marked with his wounds? We have to remember, for if we do not remember the wounds, we will not remember the love that was greater than the violence.

The body of Christ which Thomas feared yet longed to embrace, in all its woundedness, is our continuity with the past. But it is a risen body. It speaks more loudly than words of a redemption born of sheer grace, characterised by that repeated blessing, Peace be with you. Hope comes as the word made flesh once again, **in the present**, to Mary, to Peter, to Thomas.

Reality is this; I am no longer fit to be called your son; but the father said, Bring out a robe, quickly.

Reality is also this; this is my body, which is broken for you. Do this remembering me.

We often experience this breaking open of our life as persons and as church as a kind of death. But it's bread, broken to be shared. To witness to the word made flesh is to be always breaking open.

This is a costly reality. But Christians believe that the gospel of Jesus Christ names reality, and that in facing that reality and dying to our illusions our hope lies. Furthermore, we believe that the final reality is not death but resurrection. The last word is always the word made flesh. So we are witnesses to the triumph of life over death, of love over fear.

But if this is indeed the truth upon which we stake our existence, then there are certain demands placed upon us in our bearing witness in our worship and preaching.





‘We speak of the gospel as holy; that is, it heals the splits and divisions within us and between us, between the material and the spiritual, the personal and the political.’

Rev Kathy Galloway, Head of Christian Aid

We speak of the gospel as holy; that is, it heals the splits and divisions within us and between us, between the material and the spiritual, the personal and the political. Therefore our liturgy must also be **integrative**, must name both the tensions and the connections and offer them up to be transformed – not in abstract, but as they show up in the struggles of everyday life.

And we believe that the gospel is **participative**. In the great drama of salvation, we are not merely spectators. Our metaphors are participative ones – but we don’t always make it easy for people to put themselves into the story. We rarely even allow sufficient silence and space in worship to allow people to reflect and engage inwardly in what should be a participative process.

And we believe that the gospel is **inclusive**. But the reality we too often communicate through our arcane and inaccessible jargon and forms is that of insiders and outsiders. It is not a long step from here to ‘the other’ becoming ‘the problem’, and we ourselves becoming sectarian.

Because we believe that the gospel is **redemptive**. In the God who runs out to meet us is always the possibility of healing and transformation. In any good film, the redemptive possibility of truth, and the tensions which afflict people as they grope towards it, are vividly dramatised, and we, caught up in the drama, experience something of that redemption. In a culture in which visual media are so powerful, it may well be the case that more people experience the Word breaking in through Saturday night at the movies than on Sunday morning in church

To seek this **consistency** of medium and message in our worship demands the courage to change, to discern what of our tradition is still vivid and appropriate, and what needs to be expressed in new ways. Otherwise, the demanding common task of loving our neighbour will become increasingly fragmented, a source of anxiety and division rather than of hope and liberation.

If the words and symbols, the ceremonies and the texts of our worship point beyond themselves to a larger reality, then they have to be able to be tested by our questions, our doubts and fears, our almost unendurable anguish. We need permission to ask, did I stake my existence wrongly? Are my foundations rooted in sand? Where does the word become flesh?



‘Reality does not allow us to escape from history. In worship, we restore to memory and hope the broken body of Christ, in whose wounds are named all the violence of the world.’

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The things that that move us and terrify us underneath the faces we show to the world are not always the things we are comfortable with in church. What we do with our money; the embarrassing agonies of adolescence and the equally real agonies of facing a lonely old age; sexuality and the messy, endlessly fascinating business of relationships; difficulties at work or the confidence-shattering experience of redundancy; the weariness of single parenthood or the paralysing fear of failure, of dangerous streets and a dangerous world; all the pleasures and frailties of body and spirit; these are the places where we live on the knife-edge of faith.

If we cannot honestly bring them with us into worship, then our worship becomes sanitised, talking about everything except what is **really** important to us. Disconnected from our lives, it ceases to refresh, to matter. Ultimately, it dies. Finding the words and shapes to name and share our lives in worship and preaching is not easy. It is exposed. It means trying new things which often seem not beautiful or dignified. It may be painful, inadequate, odd, faltering. But then, so are our lives!

3. Celebrating the body

It is of the essence of Christianity that it is historical; it does not apply to some abstract or spiritual realm outside the temporal. Reality does not allow us to escape from history. In worship, we restore to memory **and** hope the broken body of Christ, in whose wounds are named all the violence of the world.

The theologian Kosuke Koyama writes;

Is hope related to the future? Yes. But even more, it is related to love. Hope is not a time-story. It is a love-story. The gospel dares to place love above time. All the healing stories of the gospels, and ultimately the confession of the faith that ‘on the third day he rose again from the dead’ point to this awesome truth. Hope is as impassioned by love as is every healing word and action of Jesus.

This different way of thinking about hope, while remaining absolutely grounded in the historical process, removes it from captivity to time. What gives hope is not time, but the power of love.

But what is love if it remains invisible, inaudible, intangible. ‘Those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen.’ The devastating poverty in which millions of children live is visible. Racism is visible. Machine guns are visible. Slums are visible. Starved bodies are visible. The gap between the rich and the poor is glaringly visible. Our response to these realities must be visible. (Koyama)

Before the feast of celebration can begin, there must be the taking care. Our prayers for those who do not have a robe or shoes for their feet are an entreaty to the God who runs out to meet us; they also lay upon us the imperative for action. George MacLeod used to say that it was blasphemous to pray for Margaret with bronchitis if we were not prepared to do something about the damp housing which caused it.



And so, finally, the homecoming, the foretaste of the great feast in the presence of God.

*When you cross the borders of the desert
and head for home
you do not want to turn back.
What you are heading for is a place of belonging
a place where you can lay your body down.
...living where your life belongs is coming home.....*

To be a community of the resurrection-to be **church**-is to be characterised by these three things:

a common story: we are people who have heard our name called by God, and have answered 'yes'

a common life: we are people whose life together is constantly broken open to be shared and enlarged

a common task: we are people who bear witness to the triumph of life over death.

These are the marks of Jesus. *'Look at the marks, Thomas-put your hands in my side.'* In worship, these marks need to be visible. We offer up our own lives in all their faithlessness to the grace of God, in the conviction that only in that grace is our healing possible. And at the heart of our worship is adoration, the amazed wonder that it is indeed so, the 'being-in-love'.



This resource is an initiative of the Church of Scotland, Mission and Discipleship Council, Resourcing Worship Team. Any queries or suggestions should be directed to the Resourcing Worship Team via email: mandd@cofscotland.org.uk

