

Is Creativity Always a Virtue?

Easter weekend 2020 was strange for clergy and laity alike. Who would have thought, only a few short weeks ago, that across the world, we would not be gathering together in our Church buildings to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ?

A friend who grew up in a strict Christian home told me she had been taught as a young child that the rapture of Christians was imminent; we must hurry, hurry, to save all we can! She had recurring nightmares that somehow she was late, and had missed out her opportunity to go to heaven. She dreamed of wandering – bewildered -- among homes and streets and church buildings, all empty. Empty parish churches would be confirmation of her worst childhood fears.

When the pandemic struck the Western world, bishops and clergy were scrambling to reassure, to provide on-line services, to quietly fret what the financial offerings might be like without the plates being passed. It's not just Christians preoccupied with the Second Coming who can work themselves into a frenzy of haste. But are we seeking the Lord?

A few weeks before Easter, I happened to call a colleague, a decent guy with an appetite for new liturgies. He asked what my plans for Easter worship were, for my parish. At that time, I had no plans. He replied in words to this effect: "I thought you were the sort of creative guy who would be busy making liturgy at a time like this." Am I failing as a parish pastor because I'm not "making liturgy?" Am I not a "creative guy?"

No, I'm not. I seek to be faithful. Obedient. I love parish ministry with all its foibles and flashes of glory. But a *creative* guy? No, not me. Somehow I missed the memo that our Sunday worship has to be "creative" to be glorious. I venture to suggest that for many generations, whatever positive attributes were used for Anglican worship, "creative" was not a common adjective.

The current COVID-19 pandemic means we are blessed with the opportunity to reassess what we are, in being "Church." What does it mean to belong, when we cannot gather? What is worship really about, anyway? To recall in our spirits the wonder and glory of God, certainly – to appreciate the reality who is God, so often thinly disguised by our little rebellions. I have no doubt that authentic Christian worship must be Christocentric, for I can make no sense of worship for Christians which is not firmly rooted in the death and subsequent resurrection of Jesus Christ, and all that implies. This means our worship has to be sharply sensitive to the needs of the gathered community -- for we cannot be authentically oriented to Jesus our Head without regard for his Body, the local and catholic Church.

For Canadian Anglicans, first there was the *Book of Common Prayer*, then alternatives leading to the *Book of Alternative Services*, then to Supplementary Eucharistic Prayers, "Occasional Celebrations," "Gathering Rites for the Paschal Cycle," and other trial-use liturgies.¹ There is much to consider. At my most generous, I believe there are significant points to celebrate. Yet I fear we are losing "common" prayer – that is, not cheap prayer, but prayer *in common* -- not just in local parishes, but increasingly divergent trajectories among different dioceses & provinces.

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¹ Cf. <https://www.anglican.ca/about/liturgicaltexts/> [accessed April 18, 2020].

I suspect there is something to mourn.

Creative liturgies depend on particular charisms by their authors. Years ago, I recall a Canadian bishop remarking that “a good theologian may not be a good liturgist, but a bad theologian cannot be.”² Could it be that multiplying liturgies encourages radical self-expression?

I would prefer the pace of multiplying options to slow -- not out of some conservatism, or admiration for the “good old days.” I hope we have a chance to reassess our fidelity to the gospel, among all the demands of ministry in a post-modern world. Reassess? A pandemic seems to be a perfect time to do it.

²Burton, Anthony, “Worship in Spirit and in Truth,” *Anglican Essentials*, George Egerton, editor; Toronto, Canada: Anglican Book Centre, 1995, p. 149.