

Prayer Book Society Lunch 2011

When the woman at the well in John 4 finds herself perilously close to an encounter with God as Jesus progressively reveals himself to her, she responds in the way that every good Christian has a tendency to do. She begins to play that Sunday lunchtime sport in the deconstruction of various types of worship. For some, the sport takes the form of a slow roasting of the morning's sermon, picking it apart for signs of error or of the preacher's ineptitude. For others, it takes the form of a musical review of the style or performance standard of the morning's offerings. For others, it becomes a rhapsody on the joys or woes of liturgy or the lack thereof. For the woman at the well the sport is in an argument concerning the best location for worship. But in each case the effect, if not the purpose, is essentially the same and it is precisely what the woman at the well seems to intend. It is to prevent the reality of God from coming too close, his demands upon our life being taken too seriously, his call to us (for the woman his call to deal with her relationship history) from being heard to clearly.

Jesus rather spoils the woman's fun. With surgical precision, he cuts through her religious mumbo jumbo and says "But the hour is coming, and now is," (which is John's way of signalling that the Kingdom of God is both yet to come and also fully present in the person of Jesus and, by his Spirit, in the church) "when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth." In other words, there are only two criteria for worship, and in a more general sense for the whole of life. Does our worship, do our lives, shine out with the spirit and truth of God?

I want for a moment, then, to think about worship and truth. In particular, I want to think about the ways in which the Prayer Book can help form us in the truth. I am not suggesting that the use of the Prayer Book is either a necessary or sufficient condition for the type of worship for which God longs. But I do think that, for those who love it and find it helpful, the Prayer Book can help to form a Christian mind and that that is one of its great strengths.

There is perhaps no better place to begin a reflection on the formation of a Christian mind than that other great passage on worship in, and for, all of life, the beginning of Romans 12. "Do not be conformed to this world," writes St Paul, "but be transformed by the renewing of your mind." The question for today is how we allow our minds to be transformed, and how Prayer Book based worship can assist in that task.

At the beginning of Romans 12, sandwiched between eleven great chapters of mind-stretching theology and five chapters of challenging exhortation, Paul pauses to contrast two types of mind.

The first type of mind to which Paul refers is that which, in the first part of Chapter 12 verse 2, he describes as 'conformed to this world'. Crucially, the sense here is that this process of mind formation is the default setting, it is the one that by nature we choose. J B Philips captures it perfectly when he paraphrases: "don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mould".

The implication seems to be that, if we pay no attention, then our minds, and those of our children and young people, will be 'conformed to this world.'

And we know how that happens. Most people accept ideas as true, or reject them as false, not because they have considered them in any depth, but because they are the product of what sociologists call 'plausibility structures': fundamental, untested beliefs that determine the plausibility of other beliefs without examination. These plausibility structures are constantly reinforced by, and help create the values present in, the television shows that we watch, the songs that we listen to, the things that we read. Sometimes those beliefs have at one point been the product of academic argument; sometimes they have not. They almost always they survive in the popular culture long after academic argument has rejected them.

By contrast to the 'conformed' mind, Paul challenges the Romans to have a mind of different kind: to be 'transformed by the renewal of' their minds. The grammatical form of both 'be conformed' and 'be transformed' is interesting. Each is a passive imperative, and the implication in each is that we can choose to be conformed, though it is the world that will be 'squeezing us into its mould', or that we can choose a 'transformed mind', though, by implication, it is God that will be doing the transforming. Again J B Phillips captures it perfectly: we are not to let the world 'squeeze us into its own mould', but are 'to let God re-mould [our] minds from within'. The transformed mind is to be chosen over the conformed mind.

So the question arises as to how we choose a transformed mind, and how we encourage those around us to do the same? Ultimately, of course, the production of a renewed mind is the work of the Spirit in the Christian believer, but there are, I think, at least two things that we can do in inviting the Spirit to work.

First, just as the ways in which the plausibility structures of the world are constantly presented to us in a whole variety of different media and different contexts, I think we need to make sure that fundamental Christian beliefs are celebrated in our homes, in our churches, and in our church schools in a powerful variety of different ways. If our children are likely to lose themselves in wonder, love and awe at a rock concert, or we to get lost in the world of a novel or movie, then we ought make sure that we are just as likely to be caught up in the action at a worship service. That means Christian meetings and times of praise that stretch imaginations, that stir emotions and that inspire hearts. If it is rock music that our children into, they should be drenched in the rock music of the gospel. If it is classical music that we love, then the best of it should be used to celebrate the God of all Creation. Our hearts should be stirred by tales of courage and grace: the devil should not have all the best stories. We should be invited as whole persons into the repeated praise, the repeated telling out, of the glory of God. When David danced, half naked, in ecstatic joy before God, it was all of him that was involved in celebrating God's glory, and a Christian mind is formed when all the many ways in which ideas are communicated, celebrated and reinforced are in play both at home

and at church. Minds are not renewed by lectures alone, but by all the truths they absorb about God in a whole variety of ways.

This, I should say, is where for me the services of the Prayer Book have great strength. They are drenched in Christian truth and they are memorable in their phrasing. In worship, the words of the Prayer Book can be a ground base for me, they can be the platform from which I can respond personally to God in prayer and praise. The familiar words can provide the tune to which my own thoughts become a counter-point, screening out the noise of all the other things that are longing to crowd in on my mind. I am grateful that the words of the Prayer Book have seeped into the plausibility structures with which I respond to the world, that their eloquent telling out, their repetition of, salvation history, is a part of the background music of my life, that like a memorable tune, they form a constant reference point.

But it is not only through engaging worship that Christian mind is formed, a Christian mind is also formed through disciplined study, and through serious engagement with the word of God. The end of Chapter 11 of Romans often reminds me of the early Triple J t-shirts of the exploding head: t-shirts with a pair of shoulders and above them a mess of exploding colour. It is as if Paul has been contemplating so hard the extraordinary and dynamic work of God that his brains explode into a profusion of praise: "O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!" Christian minds are transformed when they are stretched by encounter with the infinite mind of God.

I wonder how often that happens in our worship services and in our bible studies? Too often, I fear, both our children and we ourselves settle for a neat and contained God, all sown up in a few doctrines that we repeat endlessly at one another until we can parrot them back. So much of our preaching and bible study involves, as one of my children puts it, 'reading the bible slowly', and we leave our burning questions at the door. The Prayer Book is a wonderful platform for worship, but it is not enough, we need teaching and serious engagement with the truth of God in ways that leave us lost in wonder, love and awe.

So to worship in truth is to explore in worship and praise the limitless depths of the wisdom of God and the Prayer Book is a great place to start with that. But of course, Jesus does not only require that we worship in truth. The devil can cite the truth and remain unchanged. Jesus requires, too, that we worship in 'spirit', or as Paul puts it in Romans 12, that we 'present our bodies as a living sacrifice'. In other words, our worship, and our lives, should be oriented, not merely to the repetition of Christian truths, but to an encounter with the living God, whom we certainly should expect to meet in our midst when two or three are gathered together. As we encounter the living God in worship, as we invite his Spirit to challenge, to rebuke, to comfort and to encourage us, we should expect to be changed. As one English mystic put it, "If Christians knew what was really happening when they go to church, they would not wear hats, they would wear crash helmets!" We should expect to be transformed in and through the renewing of our minds. The Prayer Book is a great place to start for that, but it is not enough. We can read the Prayer

Book and remain unchanged. The question is whether we come to worship longing for to meet with God and willing to submit to his rule.

I should say, incidentally, that if we do, it is not only we who will be transformed, but slowly, haltingly, the world around us will also be. A Christian worldview will seem most plausible to those in our community - not least our young people - when the people who claim to model it, when we as Christians have the ring of authenticity: when we live holy, compassionate and attractive lives. When Paul talks about presenting our bodies as a living sacrifice he claims, in an often-used translation, that doing so is our 'spiritual worship'. The word often translated 'spiritual' here, is better translated as logical. The notion is that 'therefore', as Paul says in verse 1, on the basis of all that God has done for us, it is only reasonable that we should offer our lives as a 'living sacrifice' to God. When a sacrifice was offered it was wholly God's, and even any eating of the remains of the sacrifice that was done, was done as God's guests. In light of the love that God has lavished on us, a response of total commitment is both safe (he has our highest interests on his heart), and logical. The people in our churches and in the streets of Sydney should be able to read the gospel from the way in which they are treated by Christians, and the way in which we treat one another. That is the plausibility structure that will ultimately be most conducive to Christian belief and commitment. And it grows from worship, and from lives, drenched in the spirit and truth of God.

The challenge of the Prayer Book, and of the remarkable truths that it affirms, is not to preserve it use at all costs, wonderful though it is as a resource for mind transformation, it is to live what it affirms as people whose minds have been renewed in spirit and in truth. If we do, then not only our worship, but our city and our world, will slowly begin to see the effects. If we do, then we are genuinely true to the great tradition of service to God for which the Prayer Book has been such an inspiration. If we do, then, like the woman at the well, we will surrender our pretenses and both find, and help others to find, "the saviour of the world".