

## **Worship Transforming Communities**

The first service broadcast anywhere in the world came from St Martin-in-the-Fields, on the Feast of the Epiphany 1924. Dick Sheppard, the Vicar, had said to John Reith, Director General of the BBC, that it should come from St Paul's Cathedral or Westminster Abbey but neither Dean was willing. Someone had recently made a speech in the Church Assembly to say that it would be wrong to broadcast worship: "You wouldn't know where people were listening. It might be in a public house, with their hats on." After the broadcast Dick Sheppard treasured a letter from someone who had listened in a pub in Lewisham where, "the men sang the hymns they hadn't sung since childhood and discussed the sermon over their pints of beer," on the Feast of the Epiphany, the manifestation of Christ to the Gentile world. St Martin's has a history and is in a location that often raises very sharply questions of the relationship between church and world.

Worship Transforming Communities is a clever title. You can read it in at least two ways:

*Worship* transforming communities, that transforms communities – for example, one of the most shocking aspects of my time at St Martin's was the need for liturgy following major acts of terrorism, particularly but not only 9/11 and the London bombings of 7/7. Terrorism seeks to divide and make us suspicious of one another. So, on the Sunday after 9/11 it was vital to respond quickly with an act of worship broadcast on BBC R4 that involved the Abrahamic faiths together. A hospitable Christian church was able to bring together an Imam and a Rabbi for a service in which we were each able to contribute a reading from our scriptures, a thoughtful response to what had happened and what was needed in that moment, and a prayer. This was done in the context of Christian worship. At such worship creates and holds a space in which an often conflicting range of thoughts, feelings and longings for individuals and the community can be embraced and become part of a wider sense of healing and new possibilities.

Or,

Worship-transforming communities, in which the community transforms the worship that is offered. A church open to the world is transformed to some extent by the unexpected guest. At St Martin's the presence of homeless people over the long period of that church's life is a huge gift in keeping the church a bit raw and honest. When I was appointed I was told by someone who knew St Martin's well that it is the Christmas church, and there certainly is a lot of Christmas there with over 50,000 people coming to Christmas services and concerts between Advent and Epiphany. But its character is more a Good Friday church, of people gathered around the cross, of people knowing their own vulnerabilities, knowing death is not the last word. In this sense the wider community opened up the church to the stranger whom we

needed to be more complete. Visitors made a difference and transformed us and our worship.

In what follows I want to make use of this title in both ways, reflecting an ecclesiology in which church is open to the world and the world to the church. The interplay of kingdom, church and world is what makes church potent but it is complex, perhaps it always has been, but it is especially so here and now.

### **The Vision of God**

In one of the great accounts of Anglican moral theology in the 20th century, *The Vision of God*, Kenneth Kirk suggested that the words 'disinterestedness' or 'unselfishness' express the ideal of Christian character. Kirk says it is of the essence of Christian ethics that no form of self-centredness can truly be called disinterested and therefore the first practical question of Christian ethics is how can unselfishness be attained? His answer is the way of worship – worship is the key to the unselfishness required of all morally serious persons. Unselfishness is attained not through valiant attempts but through discovery and acknowledgement of something more valuable than the self. It is worship which lifts the soul out of its preoccupation with itself and its activities, and centres its aspirations entirely on God.

This is common experience. In Iris Murdoch's novel *The Bell*, Dora Greenfield visited the National Gallery rather unintentionally but as she had done a thousand times before. She felt calm as she walked among the familiar pictures.

She could look, as one can when one knows a great thing very well, confronting it with a dignity which it has itself conferred. She felt that the pictures belonged to her, and reflected ruefully that they were about the only thing that did. Vaguely, consoled by the presence of something welcoming and responding in the place, her footsteps took her to various shrines at which she had worshipped so often before ...

The pictures were something real outside herself, which spoke to her kindly and yet in sovereign tones, something superior and good whose presence destroyed the dreary trance-like solipsism of her earlier mood. When the world had seemed to be subjective it had seemed to be without interest or value. But there was something else in it after all. Filled with love for the pictures, their authority, their marvellous generosity, their splendour, Dora experienced a kind of revelation...

She felt the need to go down on her knees, as it were embracing a painting and shedding tears. It was an act of worship.<sup>1</sup>

For Kirk, it is not that the purpose of the Christian life is good conduct, but that the vision God is the end of life.

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<sup>1</sup> Iris Murdoch, *The Bell*, London: Penguin, 1962.

To look towards God, and from that “look” to acquire insight into both the follies of one's own heart and the needs of one's neighbours...this is something very remote from the quest for “religious experience” for its own sake<sup>2</sup>

In considering the transformative possibilities of worship for both individuals and communities, worship can be seen in the context of the unfolding of this divine initiative – an unfolding seen as salvation history. More than that, worship is a human response to this divine initiative. Worship is also a point of encounter with God, and therefore a context in which the divine initiative/human response dialogue takes place.

Worship is a space in which to enter this dialogue between divine initiative and human initiative, in which we might be renewed in spirit.

Let's explore what that might look like in a building such as Salisbury Cathedral.

### **A Laboratory of the Spirit - Salisbury Cathedral**

There are three great contemporary artistic commissions in the Cathedral of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Salisbury. William Pye's font and Gabriel Loire's Prisoners of Conscience window, frame the experience inside the great cathedral.

We enter the Christian life and the Church by the font, through baptism. The large space between the font and the east window is for prayer, contemplation and for worship, which is the purpose of life. Christianity is for worship; doing good is a consequence and test of it.

When Jesus came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.

*Lk 4.18-20*

The east window in Salisbury is dedicated to Prisoners of Conscience. Its dark Chartres blue is populated by people hard to see, even close to. In this the window speaks a profound truth: it is curious how difficult it is to see the prisoners of conscience in our world.

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<sup>2</sup> Kenneth Kirk *The Vision of God: The Christian Doctrine of the Summum Bonum*, London and New York: Longmans, Green and Co. 1931, p.445.



Salisbury Cathedral: William Pye's Font, 2008, and Gabriel Loire's Prisoners of Conscience window, 1981

There is a striking link for me. The idea of Amnesty International came to Peter Benenson when sitting in St Martin-in-the-Fields after reading an article in *The Times* about two Portuguese students arrested for toasting freedom. He was so angry he couldn't go straight to work and came into church to sit and think what to do. The idea of Amnesty came to him and he wrote about it in an article on these "Forgotten Prisoners" in *The Observer* on 28 May 1961. "You would say it was prayer", he once said to me. "All I can say is that the idea came from outside of me."

There is often ambiguity in the circumstances of prisoners of conscience and they are often unknown and unseen. From bottom left to top right it's as if a door has been opened giving a widening shaft of light to people in darkness. Immediately below the window in the Trinity Chapel at the east end of the cathedral we pray for the work of Amnesty International. We also pray for the needs of the wider church and world. For example, for 40 years the diocese of Salisbury has had a link with the Episcopal Church of the Sudan. In this worship space we are challenged by God who comes among us to let the oppressed go free.

The way in which the space is framed by the font and east window creates the expectation that worship here transforms us for the sake of God's kingdom breaking in to the world.

The third great contemporary artistic commission is Elizabeth Frink's 'Walking Madonna'.



Salisbury Cathedral: Elizabeth Frink, 'Walking Madonna', 1981

Mary "magnifies the Lord". She is walking away from her cathedral with its sacred space between the font and east window in which it is quite possible to 'have the experience and miss the meaning' that the love of God in Jesus Christ is good news for everyone. She is walking towards the city in the way that happens at the end of every service when the priest tells to the people to go out and get on with the work of God in the world God made and loves.

The divine initiative – human response dialogue has a sub-plot of the church-world conversation. It is in that interplay of Church and world for the sake of the kingdom that we challenge and encourage one another about what it means to love God and our neighbour as ourselves.

How this interplay works in practice raises serious questions about the boundaries between church as worshipping community and the public space in which we are set. We might be prompted to ask where the limits of our engagement or our tolerance lie, or equally about the permeability of those boundaries and our capacity as a church to receive from our encounters. Back to those two possibilities prompted by our title – does our worship open transforming possibilities for the world or is our worshipping life open to the possibility of being transformed by the experience of encounter with the world around us?

### **St Martin-in-the-Fields**

St Martin-in-the-Fields is a place where those questions of boundaries are explored daily, if not always consciously. St Martin's is gloriously paradoxical. It is dedicated to:

a saint who was a Roman soldier, it is the Admiralty's church and the parish church of the Ministry of Defence *as well as* being associated with the founding of the pacifist Peace Pledge Union by its former Vicar, Dick Sheppard, in 1934.

St Martin is one of the patron saints of France *and* the church sits in the Square named after Britain's greatest naval victory over the French.

It is the Royal Parish Church *and* the church of those who are homeless.

It is against that background that we began to ask questions of our buildings and our community and our capacity to engage with such paradox at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **Renewal of buildings and community**

The recent buildings renewal is relatively well known. It transformed a tired building about which the dominant story of the mid to late twentieth century was of a strongly ethical church that did not spend money on itself.

### **PowerPoint 3-10**

St Martin's has an astonishing record of social change: London's first free lending library; schools for girls as well as boys over 300 years ago... and in the twentieth century St Martin's has Europe's biggest and London's oldest day centre of homeless people, Amnesty International came to the mind of its founder there, the Anti-Apartheid vigils outside South Africa House were supported from there, a Chinese People's Day Centre was founded to care for the workers of Chinatown, Shelter was founded in the Crypt of St Martin's, The Big

Issue was launched there, and so on. The renewal project sought to marry ethics with aesthetics and show the beauty of holiness with its possibilities for transformation.

#### PowerPoint 11-14

The key changes in church were to do with clarifying and de-cluttering, re-focusing the church whilst creating a flexibility of use and improving access and the quality of light.

The flexibility is achieved between the stone altar and eighteenth century pews in an open performance space into which furniture can be moved, including moveable choir stalls typical of an Anglican parish church with a strong choral tradition.

The buildings renewal at St Martin's recovered the connection between ethics and aesthetics, the beauty of what is good, true and holy.

As an adjunct to the main project an Arts Advisory Panel was formed and a series of commissions have helped to complete the transformation of the building. Inside the church the most notable of these are the window and altar by Shirazeh Houshiary and Pip Horne.

#### PowerPoint 15-16

In the Dick Sheppard Chapel in the new Lower Crypt: statues from a Roman Catholic monastery in Masvingo, an altar with stone from near Amiens (St Martin and First World War), the tapestry by Gerhard Richter on what I hope is a permanent loan.

All of the anxieties about how a building project on this scale would distract from the main work of the church were misplaced in that the project clarified and strengthened the purposes for which St Martin's is well known. The building renewal also helped renew and strengthen the story out of which the church lives. We recognised that the renewal of our buildings went hand-in-hand with the renewal of the community and its openness to engagement with our context.

When we began the renewal project, we turned to the Hebrew scriptures and to the accounts in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah of the rebuilding of the temple in the 6th century BCE, as the people of Jerusalem returned from exile in Babylon. There the temple is seen as the heart of the new community – laying the foundations of the building is key to laying the foundations of the community.

#### PowerPoint 17-18

The first part of the book of Ezra tells the story of this rebuilding in some detail and establishes a link between building and community. One short passage from Ezra became a particular focus for prayer as it seemed to provide a pattern for the interaction of worship, place and community life.

*When the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the Lord, the priests in their vestments were stationed to praise the Lord with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, according to the directions of King David of Israel; and they sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the Lord, 'For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever toward Israel'.*

*And all the people responded with a great shout when they praised the Lord, because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid.*

*But many of the priests and Levites and heads of families, old people who had seen the first house on its foundations, wept with a loud voice when they saw this house, though many shouted aloud for joy, so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people's weeping, for the people shouted so loudly that the sound was heard far away. (Ezra 3.10-13)*

What this pointed to for us was:

- the role of worship at the heart of community life
- the response of the people to God's steadfast love
- the laying of the foundation – the common story at the heart of the community
- the people bring both their shouts of joy and their weeping – all aspects of community life are brought into this building
- the noise is heard from afar – the temple is a sign/symbol not just for the community internally but also speaks to the wider world of the values and faith of that community.

Part of the mythology is that St Martin's is 'the church of the ever open door'. Bishop David Stancliffe was helpful with advice both to me personally and by an educational session for those who wanted to come from the congregation. We talked a lot about whether the font should be on the central axis but in this church it did not seem right.

PowerPoint 19

The over-arching story of St Martin's is of the fourth century Roman soldier sharing his cloak with a beggar who returned to him as Christ: "For as much as you did it to one of the least of these you did it to me." In the present day St Martin's recognises, "this is the age of many stories"<sup>3</sup>. People arrive at St Martin's in a great variety of ways, not all of the conventional.

PowerPoint 20-21

Instead of the font on the central axis of the church, on the portico, in liminal space between church and world, there is a sculpture of the baby in stone. It was carved for the millennium by Mike Chapman and served instead of the Christmas crib placed by St Martin's in Trafalgar Square at the base of Nelson's column. The baby emerges from a piece of Portland stone 130 million years old, the same stone as most of London's buildings around

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<sup>3</sup> Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things*, London: Flamingo, 1997.

the church. This is John's Gospel: "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us." Purists dislike it cluttering the portico but its very 'getting in the way' makes a statement, both as you go into this Christian church and as you come out into God's world. In some ways it is a visible symbol of those questions of boundaries and the interplay of Church and world for the sake of the kingdom.

Now I'll sketch a few particular experiences of liturgy and life at St. Martin's and its place in the public square.

### **A Good Friday Church**

On Good Friday St Martin's has very different ways of marking the day. From a short, participative all age worship at 10am, usually attracting 60-80 people, including families with young children. From 12-3pm there was the The Three Hours service, the liturgical centre of St Martin's year with nowadays about 600 people coming for all or part of it . Often we ended on the portico, gathered around the cross by the baby in stone between church and world.

PowerPoint 22-23

For the last few years there have also been two performances in Trafalgar Square of the Wintershall Passion Play, thousands of people caught up in the vivid telling of the story of Christ's death and resurrection. It is not a St Martin's event but it is one St Martin's supported in very practical ways to make it possible. In the evening there is a concert, whether one of the Bach Passions or the Mozart Requiem. It attracts a different audience from services and it is always sold out to people who are keeping Good Friday but with a concert and as customers who paid for their ticket and who can more easily keep control of the relationship with what they had come to see and hear, part of the change that has happened to institutional Christianity in this country. It is bad for church attendance figures but it is not all loss. There are deep Christian cultural roots in our society with nearly 60% at the last Census identifying themselves as Christian.

### **The Lighting of the Christmas Tree and Blessing of the Crib in Trafalgar Square**

PowerPoint 25

Christmas is big in central London. Commercially it is very big. One of the more difficult St Martin's conversations was when the business could start selling its Christmas stock. The answer was usually October, after Harvest Festival but well before All Saints. Christmas decorations went up in stages from just before Advent Sunday. On the Thursday after Advent Sunday the Oslo Christmas tree in Trafalgar Square is lit. This took a set form. The choir of St Martin's lead the carol singing. The Lord Mayor of Westminster speaks of the historic relationship between Britain and Norway in the Second World War, the history of

the Oslo Christmas tree and declares this as the beginning of London's Christmas. The Mayor of Oslo talks about light in darkness and of hope for peace in a fragile world, and Boris Johnson would tell everyone to go out and shop.

PowerPoint 26-27

On the following Sunday, Advent 2, there is the Blessing of the Christmas Crib at the base of Nelson's column in Trafalgar Square. This was a wonderful event, involving Salvation Army Band, choir, clergy and some congregation stopping the traffic in a march down the east side of Trafalgar Square before swinging into the Square for a 30 minutes service usually attended by over 1,000 people. It is a lovely and much loved event, churchy in style: classic public square religion.

On the Saturday afternoon before the Blessing of the Crib in 2009, a camp protesting about climate change set up in Trafalgar Square, perhaps 200 people, mostly youngsters with tents. The Police said they thought we shouldn't go ahead. I decided to go and talk to them and at about 9pm sidled up to a young man pedalling to run the dynamo that lit the camp. "Don't stop pedalling", I said. "I'm the Vicar of St Martin's and I need some help", I said, pointing to the church. He asked me if I was Sarah and Phil's Dad and from then on we were friends. They didn't want to prevent the service and couldn't have been more helpful. On Sunday afternoon they cleared the central area of tents so that we could march in and occupy the centre of the Square. One of them agreed to do one of the readings, another read one of the prayers. I adapted the short sermon and said it felt much more like the chaos of Bethlehem during the census in which Mary and Joseph made their journey with no room in the inn. The only condition was that I announce the Campers would sell refreshments to the congregation at the end of the service. We were all very happy, at least on that first day of what lasted for a few weeks. Liturgy provided the occasion for us to meet and discover that we had things in common. We declined to open St Martin's up overnight so the Campers had access to toilets but were tolerant about them coming in during the day. Trafalgar Square is often the centre of protest and church has to find a way of relating to that, sometimes critically, in much the same way as a church like St Martin's has had developed 'critical solidarity' with the establishment parts of its parish.

### **Homelessness**

The presence of homeless people in the centre of the capital city is a fact of life. Homeless people make an interesting and valued contribution to St Martin's.

Their presence has kept the church open for everyone.

'Self-policing' and ensuring respect

Limits to acceptable behaviour – pointing to help

Some become part of the congregation .

For over 20 years on the late May Bank Holiday there is a Pilgrimage to Canterbury.

PowerPoint 27-29

75-80 set off – a mix of staff, volunteers, clients, congregation who travel light, walk side by side and sleep on hall floors or camp. By the end of the weekend about 150 arrive in Canterbury. The choir from St Martin's sing Evensong and the pilgrims arrive for a service in the Cathedral's Crypt Chapel and to lay flowers on the tomb of Dick Sheppard in the Cloisters.

It is extraordinary shared space. Individual stories are told and re-told and become part of the wider story. It is transformative in the way it breaks down barriers and inequalities.

In November there is a service of remembrance for those who died homeless., all of the agencies working with homeless people in Central London contributing an astonishing number of names of people known to them who have died in the last year.

### **Memorial Services**

PowerPoint 30

St Martin's doesn't do many funerals but a church in such a prominent location has a lot of memorial services. As with so many 'occasional offices', memorial services were often about trying to create the kind of transformative space in which a multiplicity of emotions and needs might be held – about creating a space where the limitations of our perceptions can be touched by the eternity and infinity of God; momentarily and fleetingly but in a profoundly tangible way.

The broadcaster Ned Sherrin wrote, "A memorial service is not only a chance to pay respects and to celebrate a person's life. It is often a happy way to put a period to a time of mourning. Funerals arrive too soon."

Negotiating the Christian content of memorial services was sometimes a challenge - keeping both the people involved and the church honest, and trying to ensure that what the church could offer pastorally was available to people in need.

In December 2000 the singer Kirsty MacColl died in a terrible boating accident aged 41 whilst diving with her teenage sons off the coast of Mexico. The family wanted to keep her funeral private and to do so they wanted to announce there would be a memorial service in a few weeks time which would be open to everyone. She didn't believe in God but every

parish priest has had to do a funeral where that was so. The arrangements were made with her managers, really lovely people, who wanted both to be honest about who was being remembered and what she believed, and also to do something pastorally helpful for her fans who were shocked at her death and grieving. They recognised that the only place to do this well in British society was church – that's true but it is also changing and we can't take it for granted. They wanted to respect church and knew that we too needed to be honest about who we are and what we were doing.

They decorated the church and everyone lit candles in the central aisle. There was an introduction, a Bidding, setting the context of the service in a Christian church. I read the Beatitudes, said the Lord's Prayer and we kept a period of silence. We sang Jerusalem, she found William Blake inspiring, and there was a blessing at the end. In between was affectionate music by Billy Bragg, The Pogues and friends; four wonderful addresses, including Phil Jupitas giving the crudest talk I have ever heard in a church but which was also one of the the most loving. The service was liturgically light – perhaps with more permeable boundaries than we might sometimes feel comfortable with but it was a satisfying memorial services - it was 'real', deep and Godly, with plenty of space for people to find their own place within it.

St Martin's mission statement is that *'St Martin-in-the-Fields exists to honour God by being an open and inclusive church that enables people to question and discover for themselves the significance of Jesus Christ.'*

### **The parish church**

A few weeks ago I was in a Wiltshire village of about 300 people celebrating the 700<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the parish church with a congregation of 120 aged from 3 months to "over 90". More came to the hog roast lunch afterwards. I doubt the church building has ever been better cared for. Some wonderful stories were told about the way the building is used week by week, for family celebrations, to hold private joys and sorrows. It reminded me of that marvellous passage in Dom Gregory Dix's 'The Shape of the Liturgy' about the way in which the Eucharist has been celebrated.

*Was ever another command so obeyed? For century after century, spreading slowly to every continent and country and among every race on earth, this action has been done, in every conceivable human circumstance, for every conceivable human need from infancy and before it to extreme old age and after it, from the pinnacles of earthly greatness to the refuge of fugitives in the caves and dens of the earth. People have found no better thing than this to do for kings at their crowning and for criminals going to the scaffold; for armies in triumph or for a bride and bridegroom in a little country church; for the wisdom of a Parliament or for a sick old woman afraid to die; for a schoolboy sitting an examination or for Columbus setting out to discover America; for the famine of whole provinces or for the soul of a dead lover ... while the*

*lions roared in the nearby amphitheatre; on the beach at Dunkirk; while the hiss of scythes in the thick June grass came faintly through the windows of the church ... one could fill many pages with the reasons why people have done this, and not tell a hundredth part of them. And best of all, week by week and month by month, on a hundred successive Sundays, faithfully, unfailingly, across all the parishes of Christendom, the pastors have done this just to make the 'plebs sancta dei' – the holy common people of God.<sup>4</sup>*

Except that the service was not a eucharist. There had been a very careful discussion preparing this celebration which concluded that some of the people who did come would have felt excluded by a eucharist and might not have come. Among those telling stories from the recent past was a Churchwarden. He said that there used to be a tramp who travelled regularly between Bristol and Bournemouth and back gain passing through the village about every three months. On a night when there was deep snow on the ground he called as usual at Church Farm. He brought sandwiches given him by someone else earlier in the day and they gave him tea. Instead of letting him sleep in the porch that night the Churchwarden walked with him to the church and unlocked it (they keep it open in the day but lock it at night.) The Churchwarden showed the man where he could bed down at the back of the church on carpet by the font and, he confessed to the congregation, "I switched on one bar of the electric fire."

Ed Foley said that liturgy is the work for the people. The regular, habitual celebration of the eucharist is the fulcrum in the transforming possibility of worship, with the sending out of the eucharistic community to be a means of God's transforming power and grace in the world. According to the present Vicar of St. Martin's, Sam Wells, "when habit and memory are still alive, the potential for renewal is still high." Kenneth Kirk would see that potential for renewal as evidence of the vision of God at the heart of our worship – our conduct testing and attesting to that vision.

We live, worship and practise our faith in a world touched by grace in ways beyond our conceiving, with a capacity to surprise and challenge us. A worshipping community authentically open to the transforming possibilities of grace is a place that welcomes as well as witnesses; a place that is able to receive as much as it gives.

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<sup>4</sup> Dom Gregory Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy*, London: Dacre Press, Adam and Charles Black, 1945