

What can liturgists learn from the arts?

David Brown

Let me begin by saying how honoured I feel at having been asked to address such a distinguished gathering of specialists, all of whom will inevitably know far more about liturgy than I do. In making such an admission, I am in no sense engaging in some sort of false modesty. The statement merely acknowledges a common fault-line that spreads right across practitioners of all other areas of theology: the inevitable consequence of the marginalisation of liturgy that unfortunately still characterises most British theology departments. The reasons for this are not hard to find. In part, it stems from theology's pursuit of academic respectability, and the consequent desire to be seen as functioning just like any other arts subject: impartial and without regard for potential users, in this case the Church. Yet such vaulted Enlightenment ambitions have always been in any case misguided. None of the arts is in fact immune from ideology. Thus twentieth century disputes about what should constitute the canon of English literature inevitably had considerable impact on how the subject was taught, just as the study of history was likewise affected by extraneous factors such as the rise of Scottish nationalism.¹ Fifty years ago there was only one solitary Professor of Scottish History in the whole country. Now all the Scottish universities have not only professors but also quite commonly even whole departments devoted to the subject.

But the entire blame cannot be laid at the door of such external factors. Christian attitudes have themselves also played a part. The Bible has itself been harnessed to the promotion of an individual piety that in effect demoted the significance of the corporate, and not only among Protestants. So, despite centuries of daily monastic recitation of the psalms, little attention was given to their more corporate and artistic aspects, for example in the pilgrimage psalms of ascent or their many allusions to music and dance.² Again, the decision usually to give Kings priority over Chronicles in any choice of readings meant that the work of an individual (Solomon) was seen as decisive in inaugurating the Temple rather than what was suggested by the author of

¹ The twentieth century ended with the canon of English literature still a highly contentious issue; see, for example, H. Bloom, *The Western Canon* (London: Macmillan, 1994). Transformation in the study of Scottish history can be seen first in the creation of the four volumed *Edinburgh History of Scotland*, now being redone at twice the length.

² For the Psalms of Ascent, Ps. 120-34; for reference to instruments and dance, e.g. Ps. 20.6-7; 87.7; 118.27; 149.2-3; 150.4.

Chronicles: it was not Solomon's introduction of the ark that marked the coming of the divine presence but worship itself, with band and singers.³ Then again, it is important to note that the Protestant Reformation was by no means alone in insisting that it was individual's comprehension of the words that really mattered rather than the music. The same issue has in fact been fought out also within Roman Catholicism, first in the sixteenth century and then again in the nineteenth, with the two movements associated with Solesmes and Regensburg.⁴ Again, the value of sacred architecture was inevitably called into question for so long as the common idea held sway: that early Christian worship represented a decisive move away from stress on sacred place as worship's appropriate concomitant to acceptance of the legitimacy for worship of any neutral or 'secular' space such as home or assembly hall. Although that contention is now under challenge, we are still far short of a complete reversal. Margaret Barker's ideas of continuing Temple influence on the nascent community have not won general approval.⁵ Yet there seems little doubt that some rethink is necessary. Not only is the earliest surviving adapted house at Dura Europos full of symbolism in its painted walls, it is in any case quite wrong to treat the move to the home as though it was into the territory of the purely secular. As the structure of any surviving Roman house soon indicates, the home was no less sacred than the temple in the ancient world. Right at its heart lay the household shrine ready for daily offerings and the celebration of key family events.⁶ Finally, turn to the visual arts, and note the poverty of their historical defence as contrasted with Orthodoxy. While St John Damascene talked of God painting himself in the incarnation, Pope Gregory the Great gave a purely utilitarian justification that is no longer relevant in our own day – they are the Bible's words for the illiterate.⁷

In short, I would suggest that liturgy's marginalisation is not just a function of modern rationalism, it is also something to do with its own history, in imitating too closely the pre-occupation with words found in other branches of theology. Yet with

³ As indicated in the culminating verse of 2 Chron. 4-5.

⁴ The former for the revival of Gregorian chant, the latter (the Cecilian Movement) for mass settings on the model of Palestrina. Discussed briefly in my *God and Mystery in Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 198-200.

⁵ E.g. *The Great High Priest: Temple Roots of Christian Liturgy* (London: T & T Clark, 2003); *Temple Themes in Christian Worship* (London: T & T Clark, 2008).

⁶ As with the giving of the sign of male adulthood, the *toga virilis*. For the argument in more detail see my *God and Enchantment of Place* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 170-6.

⁷ As with Maximus the Confessor, his defence of icons revolved round the idea that God had in effect violated his own prohibition of images by portraying himself in the incarnation, and so thereby legitimated icons.

its acceptance of the downgrading of art and architecture, music and dance, its own relation to words has come not only to seem rather bare but, more pertinent to its marginalisation, capable of being the subject of independent study elsewhere – in scripture, in the history of the tradition and so on.

One way of reversing such marginalisation, then, might be to look for some pointers in the opposite direction: how we might think of the arts, so far from being the enemy of good liturgy, actually functioning as their most important interpreter. And that is what I propose to suggest in this lecture. However, whatever initial sympathy there may be for my claim may quickly turn to hostility when I disclose the name of the most obvious advocate of such a position in modern times: Richard Wagner. Yet, whether we think of him as having some residual sympathy for Christianity or not, what is clear is that among the purposes intended by him for his opera *Parsifal* was to show to the world what a great liturgical act should look like. It was, to use his own term, to be a *Bühnenweihfestspiel*, sometimes translated prosaically as ‘a festival work to consecrate a stage,’ but almost certainly meant as something much more, as his essay on *Religion and Art* makes clear, ‘a sacred festival drama’ or ‘liturgy as drama,’ in which all the resources of music and stage combine in a spectacle that would draw the audience into identification with the religious themes that were being depicted.⁸ For such a combination Wagner used the term *Gesamtkunstwerk*, that is, a work that unifies the different contributions of the various arts.⁹ So what I would like to explore here is how Christian liturgy can do precisely that, not just where all the resources of some great cathedral are there to be called upon but even in the most ordinary of parish churches. What follows, then, is in three sections, one exploring liturgy as drama, the second what use can be made of the visual resources of art and architecture, and then with a final comment on the aural in the words and music.

⁸ W. A. Ellis ed., *Religion and Art* (Lincoln, Nebr.: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), 211-52.

⁹ Some of the short extracts from Wagner’s *Parsifal* on Youtube can be used to illustrate the work’s liturgical character e.g. the Grail Scene or the Good Friday music. Intriguingly, Furtwängler’s famous recording of the latter has a Chagall crucifixion window substituted for the actors in the Youtube version. Available here in Videos [1](#), [2](#) and [3](#).

Drama:

Liturgists are of course already familiar with analogies drawn from drama, not least because of the origin of the term in the Greek practice of *leitourgia*, the people's tasks delegated to a wealthy individual in the community who paid for some corporate enterprise such as the building of a trireme for the navy or, more pertinent here, the costs of training and staging the customary set of plays presented at the Dionysia, the competitive dramatic festival held each year at Athens which resulted in some of the finest tragedies the world has ever known. Of course if we think of the comedies of Aristophanes, the realist movement of the late nineteenth century in Chekhov and Ibsen or the kitchen-sink plays of the nineteen sixties, the comparison becomes scarcely apposite. But for most of human history the high themes and formal style that derived ultimately from the Greek model were pursued by later playwrights and as such would seem to accord well with the aims of Christian liturgy.¹⁰ Not only that, similar precedents can be found in other ancient cultures. So, for example, the only drama known from ancient Egypt was about the death and resurrection of the god Osiris, while, equally, contemporary Hinduism preserves ancient dramatic forms that pursue predominantly religious themes and were intended to draw audiences into acceptance of the myths portrayed.¹¹ The more questioning character of the works of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides is sometimes thought to argue for a less exclusively religious purpose, but this is, I think, to mistake the character of much ancient religion. Even if attention is confined to the Hebrew scriptures, such conflicting positions, as on the issue of suffering, are seen to be the order of the day. Indeed, Walter Brueggemann has recently argued that it is to distort the true import of the Old Testament if such oppositions are elided from view. Instead, he believes, they should be held in creative tension.¹² Nor should it be forgotten that Shakespeare's use of the natural rhythms of ordinary speech in blank verse and his relative lack of

¹⁰ There are good examples of the liturgical character of ancient Greek tragedy on Youtube, in particular from two 1980s productions of Aeschylus's *Agamemnon* and of Sophocles *Oedipus at Colonus*. Available here as Videos [4](#) and [5](#).

¹¹ Apart from dramatisation of Hinduism most important epic, the *Mahabharata*, much Hindu drama includes dance as in Kathakali dance-drama: for a discussion, see my discussion in *God and Grace of Body* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 71-82.

¹² See e.g. his *Theology of the Old Testament* (Fortress Press, 2005), or, more recently, *An Unsettling God: The Heart of the Hebrew Bible* (Fortress, 2009).

interest in religious themes is quite untypical of European drama as a whole, even of much that was written later than his own time. Thus Calderón in Spain, Goethe in Germany or Racine in France are quite different. Think, for instance, of the elaborate rules to which Racine subjected himself for his rather formal declamatory style of drama, with a very strict metre and rhyme, and the way in which this is used to reinforce lofty religious themes.

But, it may be objected, surely eucharistic liturgy is quite different. Just as seeing a performance of Hamlet every week would soon pass into mere tedium, so to treat a weekly or even daily celebration of the Eucharist as drama must inevitably quickly begin to pall. Here it becomes essential to reflect on what precisely might be meant by dramatic structure, acting and stage-management in such a context. Take structure first. Certainly, in one sense there is repetition in the Ordinary of the Mass. But not only do the Propers for the Season radically affect the mood, so too can the music used for the Ordinary or even the way in which it is said. Again, depending on what special material is used and how the liturgy is performed, one may have a single act drama, or two acts in the liturgy of word and sacrament, or even three in the renewal of forgiveness (from confession to Gloria), the learning of discipleship (in the readings, creed and prayers) and the empowering of presence (from the Peace onwards).

Given them the analogy in principle, how far should we take it? Since the stage is concerned with communication and engagement, my view is that there is indeed much to learn, provided, that is, that no particular model is allowed to dominate to the exclusion of all other insights. Suppose we begin by thinking of one particular approach to acting that dominated much of the twentieth century and produced outstanding performances from, among others, Marlon Brando, James Dean, Dustin Hoffman and Robert De Niro, that based on Stanislavsky's theory of Method Acting, the view that the actor should totally inhabit the personality he is portraying.¹³ That might seem to accord well with current emphases on the priest as acting *in persona Christi*. But apart from the congregation perhaps being all too aware of the difference between priest and ideal, it generates two further problems: first, the symbolic conflict in two foci, the priestly *in persona Christi* and the invisible but mediated presence of Christ through the elements; and, secondly, an inevitable backward gaze to the Last

¹³ For some of the key ideas, C. Stanislavski, *An Actor Prepares* (London: Methuen, 1980).

Supper and to the notion of Christ presiding at a meal, and so once more two conflicting foci in two ‘presidents.’ Perhaps there is a way out of such difficulties, but I cannot help feeling that part of the problem lies in too strong a focus on the notion of meal in the first place. Of course, we feed on Christ but in a service that is now far removed from the structure of a meal, and rightly so because such feeding is not its own justification but as in the Last Supper a means to something else, the incorporation of our lives into Christ’s own life of self-dedication. In other words, offertory rather than meal turns to lie at the heart of this particular drama. So the present pope is in my view quite right in wanting at least part of the liturgy to more clearly express this point, in priest and congregation not facing each other but uniting in a common movement beyond their immediate context.

That said, you might now have identified me as an extreme conservative, and of course in some ways I am. But perhaps if I turn next to quite a different approach to acting, one that stresses improvisation, I may emerge in somewhat different colours.¹⁴ Theories of improvisation rather than stressing a mindset resolved in advance suggest openness to the script and its unresolved potentials. On first reflection that might seem primarily the task of the director, and so of rubrics in liturgy, but the options turn out to be somewhat more complicated than this initial thought implies. Directors have certainly the power to change hugely the nature and implications of a play. Through the use of minimal and unusual staging, Peter Brook, for example, succeeded in transforming *Midsummer Night’s Dream* into a drama about the transcendent.¹⁵ Again, even a simple thing like changes in metronome readings can radically alter the impact of a particular score, as for example with Furtwängler’s treatment of Beethoven as against that of Sir Roger Norrington. Or, to revert to Wagner, I once saw *Parsifal’s* religious content completely subverted under Michael Tanner’s direction as Amortfas’s wound moved from his side to his crotch!

But even so directors hardly determine everything, and the same is no less true of liturgical rubrics, if only for the obvious reason that rubrics cannot possibly cover every eventuality. So, for example, in a said liturgy the phrase ‘with the whole company of company of heaven’ said with special emphasis is quite likely to induce in the congregation a sense of the departed joining in the celebration, even though that

¹⁴ For an exploration of some of the main ideas, A. Frost & R. Yarrow, *Improvisation in Drama* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990).

¹⁵ Also discussed in his influential *The Empty Space* (Penguin, 1972); a work that also has important things to say about liturgy as drama e.g. on sacrifice (67) and on the difference from repetition (155).

was not the Latin phrase's original meaning or any part of Cranmer's intention.¹⁶ There is still a doctrine abroad that God's grace will work through the words, however they are said. While there is some truth in this Protestant version of *ex opere operato* (that grace is guaranteed to operate even in the most adverse of circumstances), it cannot guarantee the particular, that specific meanings or lessons will be derived. So, while adopting a monotone may well demonstrate a high doctrine of divine action, the position altogether fails to engage with the realities of the human ear, and so what preserves our attention and what not. The priest-actor's enunciation may well play a larger role than the surface meaning of the words, and so pull in a quite different direction, as in the example just given.

But so too can context, in effect overruling the apparent meaning of the words. Consider the acclamation, 'Christ will come again.' The fact that it is said at the heart of the consecration prayer may well have more impact than its natural meaning. That is, so far from the focus being seen as eschatological, the context may drive many to conclude that the allusion is really to Christ's renewed presence in the Eucharist. At all events, I once did a survey of Durham theology students on precisely this point, and found that no less than two thirds interpreted the formula in precisely this way.

In making such observations, my intention is not to suggest the need for more regulation. Rather, it is to indicate how much latitude the Eucharistic performers in fact have. Sadly, some priests seem to equate 'performing' with emphasising every word, the net result of which is of course that nothing at all then stands out. So the final result is no less bad than the monotone to which I referred a moment ago. Equally, however, inhibitors to a good performance may lie not in the actors themselves but in the material before them, and by that I do not mean the work of liturgists. Rather, my intention is to raise the issue of biblical translation. Modern translators usually focus so exclusively on accuracy that the product sometimes runs quite counter to ease of aural intelligibility, unless, for example, additional information about the persons involved is supplied, change of speakers noted or verses that interrupt the flow of argument omitted. Now all of this can of course sometimes be done by means of an introduction, but on other occasions that may not be possible or would prove in any case too cumbersome. Again, if a Christmas anthem that refers to a rose is combined with readings from modern translations of

¹⁶ Cranmer's 'company' refers to the angel cohorts or divisions.

Scripture, why not cut the Gordian knot and simply substitute the Authorised Version's 'rose' for the modern 'crocus'?¹⁷ In other words, might not good performance imply a less slavish following of the precise text as it exists before the reader's eyes? The evangelists undoubtedly made such adaptations; so why should we not take similar liberties?¹⁸

Visual:

The twentieth century witnessed remarkable growth in Protestant interest in the visual side of liturgy, and not just within Anglicanism. Candles are now found in use in many a Calvinist church, and even acceptance of the value of pilgrimage, alongside of course many newly invented pieces of symbolism. Even so, there is still a long way to go. Alleged indifference to one's surroundings remains a common claim - and not just among Protestants - with the particular architecture of the building and its art, most obviously its stained glass, then seen as at most an irrelevance. Yet such attitudes have their cost, for although there are no sociological studies of which I am aware to confirm the fact, informal consultations over the years have convinced me that dissonance between a service's content and its surrounding ambience does have important consequences, not least in unsettling the congregation and sometimes even making the words themselves strangely jar. Such a contention may sound like a surreptitious way of pleading against liturgical change: that only the type of worship once seen as appropriate for a particular type of building should continue. But that is emphatically not my point. It is that whatever is now done should still attempt to flow with the mood of the building; quite a different thing.

Consider that most flamboyant of architectural styles, baroque, still the form most commonly taken by churches in Poland. All now have west-facing altars, while many

¹⁷ As in Isaiah 35.1 and elsewhere. Howells, Joubert, Steel and many other composers have Christmas music that utilises the image of a rose. The example is used in *God and Mystery in Words*, 214-15.

¹⁸ As, for example, in Matthew's treatment of Old Testament prophecy, or again in his explanation of the term *Emmanuel* in the process of quoting the original which lacks any such explanation (Matt. 1.23; Isaiah 7.14.).

in order to encourage communal singing have also introduced projectors and screens. Neither innovation in my view need of itself find baroque an insuperable impediment. Everything depends on how the changes are made. With altars that jar, it is not the fact of them being forward-facing that is the problem but the failure to pick up the lines and pattern of the original high altar: so, that they should be marble rather than wood, the chairs have curving legs and satin seats, and so on. Again, screens certainly look odd if in the conventional stark white, but such a screen can easily be made to fit the baroque mood if given a softer background and perhaps even ornamental bands round its edges.

If the root meaning of a particular architectural style is the problem, then some lateral thinking can help produce the desired result: for example, replacing the rationalist emphasis in classical architecture with stress on a balanced, integrated life. Both are after all versions of a more underlying theme, in order. Indeed, how wide the possibilities are is well indicated by reflection on the nearest modern equivalents to more ancient styles. Take baroque once more. I suggest that the nearest contemporary parallel is in the mega churches of the United States. Like the older form, their design too is that of a theatre auditorium, and there is the same interest in spectacle, surprise, illusion and miracle. Even colourful costume for choir and minister are quite common. Some of course keep to suits, but even that, it should be stressed, is symbolic dress and not simply arbitrary wear, for in such a choice the implicit intention is usually to hint at the ability of the gospel in bring material prosperity. So it is no accident that the type of suit adopted is commonly described as ‘a business suit.’ Even the adoption of ‘casual’ clothes cannot escape such implicit meanings. In the United States low-slung jeans still evoke black ghettos, while every other variant of the apparently anonymous jeans communicates one value or another. So, intriguingly, to revert to Poland for one last time, there images of young priests in jeans have been used to help sell particular brands.¹⁹

But, while my contention about the contribution of the wider visual scene to the impact of the drama as whole might be readily conceded, specific art works are often thought to be much less significant. It is here that Gregory the Great’s adage kicks in: paintings and sculpture are merely illustrative, and so add nothing to what is more effectively conveyed by other means, in particular the words of the liturgy or of

¹⁹ [See Slide 1 in the Attachment.](#)

Scripture. Certainly the idea is such a common one that specific art works are almost always seen as at most merely marginal to the liturgical. Yet all this is premised on a complete misunderstanding of how visual art works. So let me spend a little time developing an alternative account, taking baptism rather than the eucharist this time as my focus. Even the most conventional piece of art is seldom just about illustrating a gospel theme. It is equally about drawing the viewer into reflection upon that theme. That is why great art usually repays repeated returns for yet another view. Fresh features can emerge, or new trains of thought be initiated on each viewing. The best way to establish such a point would be of course by personal experiment. But inevitably the limited time allocated to a lecture does not allow such latitude. So let me just indicate what might happen, by taking first a famous painting of Christ's Baptism, that by Piero della Francesca of c. 1460, now in the National Gallery in London, and then another rather less well known from the following century by Giovanni Bellini.

The Piero picture is replete with symbolism.²⁰ Christ himself stands on dry ground, the River Jordan having been driven back, just as was the case when an earlier Joshua or Jesus led the Israelites across into the Promised Land.²¹ Healing plants abound on the banks, while the three angels on the left are not there simply to reinforce the usual trinitarian reference, but also to help allude to the other two liturgical celebrations of Christ's Epiphany or 'manifestation' as God. In this case the way one angel rests his arm on his neighbour's shoulder recalls medieval betrothal ceremonies, and thus indirectly the wedding at Cana, while in the background three figures (the wise men) can be seen journeying across the picture frame. Then the nut tree under which Christ stands alludes not only to the cross (hard on the outside but with soft fruit within) but also in the past helped to engage the more local audience, since the painting was originally commissioned for Spoleto in the Valle del Nuce or 'Nut Valley.' In short, a whole theology of baptism is available there for the discerning viewer.

Turn now to the beginning of the following century and Giovanni Bellini's version in a chapel of the church of Santa Corona at Vicenza.²² Here there are the same trinitarian verticals as with Piero (though Piero's Father has long ceased to be

²⁰ For an illustration and discussion of some of these details, M. A. Lavin, *Piero della Francesca* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1992), 62-6. [Available as Slide 2.](#)

²¹ Jesus is of course the Greek equivalent of Joshua.

²² For illustration and some discussion, R. Goffen, *Giovanni Bellini* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 163-71. [Also available here as Slide 3.](#)

part of the London composition), and also once more three angels, though this time their poses are somewhat different. One standing points to Christ, another is about to genuflect, while the third already kneels, thus suggesting different degrees of potential engagement. However, the detail that interests me most is the balance of colours in the painting. Christ's red and blue garments are now worn by two of the angels. These are in the same colour range as the Father's garments (presumably, a Trinitarian reference), but what is even more intriguing is a parrot at the bottom right, where the colours are once more repeated. Is the parrot here substituting for the dove who obviously could not be given such colours? Perhaps rather surprisingly, it seems so.

Now of course few British parish churches are lucky enough to have art of this quality. Nonetheless, I would suggest that by integrating the congregation experience of baptism with such stained glass or other art as is available a richer experience would be had by all. Currently congregations give at most a cursory look, mentally recording just yet another illustration of Christ's baptism or of children coming to him. But the richness in fact lies in the detail, and so in variants such as how Christ stands in relation to John, how the water is represented, or the other two persons of the Trinity and so on. Take that last issue. It is easy to assume that, unless there is a hand, the Father does not appear, but this ignores alternative traditions that use the look of spectators to hint at the Father's voice, as for example in Poussin's *Seven Sacraments* series.²³

There is one aspect of the baptismal tradition that paintings, however, cannot quite capture, and that is the notion of living or running water, and it is here that more modern art forms can come to our aid. It is an aspect that Bill Viola has made much of in his video installations.²⁴ Their cyclical quality, that is, their tendency to return to point of origin, might be thought to call into question the directional, forward-looking character of Christian hope. But such a presentation also has its advantages, in leaving it open how the individual's story might be completed. The child or adult may or may not continue to develop in accordance with that initial promise of resurrection life. It is also possible to draw on baptismal images from film and drama. So, for example, there is a fascinating conclusion to the Russian director, Andrei Tarkovsky's film *Solaris* that draws on the theme of baptism, with the central character finding the

²³ As in the version in the National Art Gallery in Edinburgh. [Available here as Slide 4.](#)

²⁴ *The Messenger* (1986) and *Study for Emergence* (2002) are both available on Youtube. Available here as Videos [6](#) and [7](#).

water that has been his enemy in the story now pouring on father's head *inside* the family home, and thus anticipating their mutual reconciliation on its doorstep.²⁵ Or, to give an example from more popular drama, a recent instance occurred in the long-running TV series about the American presidency called *The West Room*. The death of the president's son in a car accident results in a bitter exchange with God in Washington Cathedral, but this is then followed by a rainstorm in which the president is not merely soaked but discovers his own graced renewal.²⁶

These examples may seem to have taken us far from any liturgical context, but that is not necessarily so. Many churches have sought in recent years to give greater prominence to the font, and, where running water is not possible, such video installations might constitute an alternative possibility.²⁷ How far the presence of running water can meaningfully replicate its full original significance in the time of Jesus is, however, a moot point. We are after all hardly likely to be able easily to recover the biblical idea of a fountain of running water as the source of Eden's rivers as the Septuagint of Genesis 2.6 suggests, or even the strength of contrast implicit in Jesus' offer of living water to the woman at the well in Samaria, with himself as fountain.²⁸ To most people today the contrast in the quality of the water between well and fountain will not be so readily apparent, though Stephen Broadbent has made a valiant effort in his sculpture in the grounds of Chester Cathedral. Salisbury Cathedral's new font by William Pye (2008) is certainly more easily understood, though that is not to say that Broadbent's sculpture does not repay the necessary effort.²⁹

Such problems of interpretation do raise in an acute way the issue of how far liturgy should draw exclusively on the history of the tradition, and how far it might be legitimate also to make concessions to symbolic resonances in the culture of our own time. There is an interesting difference here between the modern baptismal liturgies of the Church of England and those of the Episcopal Church north of the border. In the prayer over the water *Common Worship* begins with a wider reference in 'the gift of

²⁵ [Available here as Video 8.](#)

²⁶ [Available here as Video 9.](#)

²⁷ It seems to me a great pity that, while the art work was in Durham Cathedral, no baptism was celebrated with Bill Viola's installation as a backdrop.

²⁸ In the same verse, the Authorised Version (following the Hebrew) prefers to talk merely of a 'mist.' However, it is hard not to believe that John has the image of a fountain in mind at 4.1-15 since not only does the image contrast nicely with the well, it would also then be picked up once more at the crucifixion (19.34).

²⁹ Available here as Slides [5](#), [6](#) and [7](#) (Broadbent Sculpture) and Slides [8](#), [9](#) and [10](#) (Pye Font)

water to sustain, refresh and cleanse all life,' but thereafter the references are not only exclusively biblical but also strongly theological, in particular heavily Pauline; so perhaps not immediately accessible to any except the regular churchgoer. By contrast this is how the same prayer runs in the contemporary Scottish liturgy:

Holy God, well-spring of life, in your love and justice, you use the gift of water to declare your saving power. In the beginning your Spirit moved over the face of the waters. By the gentle dew, the steady rain, you nourish and give increase to all that grows; you make the desert a watered garden. You command the wildness of the waves; when the storm rages you calm our fear; in the stillness you lead us to a deeper faith. In the life-giving rivers and the rainbow Israel discerned your mercy. You divided the Red Sea to let them pass from slavery in Egypt to freedom in the Promised Land. In the waters of Jordan penitents found forgiveness in the baptism of John. There, Jesus your beloved child was anointed with the Holy Spirit, that he might bring us to the glorious liberty of the children of God. Send upon this water and upon N. your holy, life-giving Spirit.³⁰

In fact, each of the allusions does in fact have a biblical precedent, but the point is that the text is not overloaded. While allowing the churchgoer to meditate on these deeper allusions, at the same time it draws the less informed into the significance of the event at a level that already has meaning for them: surely important in a service where, if less so than was once the case, many still come forward who remain at the margins of faith.

The Aural: The Literary and the Musical

In making these comments on verbal imagery, I have already in effect moved to consideration of the final group of arts I said I would consider (the aural), and so the potential impact of words and music. Imagery is in fact a vital tool of both liturgist and hymn-writer, and essential given their desire to draw congregations out of their common experience and into a different reality where ordinary language inevitably

³⁰ Not that this is entirely modern. There are precedents in the Sarum liturgy.

falls short. That is why I find so much contemporary discussion of metaphor in such contexts so profoundly depressing, for, despite extensive use, attitudes seem premised on quite the wrong understanding of how such language operates.

To introduce the issue, let me fall back on a conversation I recently had with an elderly lady who has attended Anglo-Catholic churches all her life. I happened to remark that I rather like Pope Benedict's decision to recommend the reintroduction of 'I am not worthy that thou shouldst come under thy roof, but speak the word only and my soul shall be healed' because of the richness of the metaphor of Christ tabernacling in us compared with its rather anodyne modern equivalent. The objection I expected was that the original context would now only come to mind for a few, and so the statement was puzzling rather than helpful. But what I got instead was the complaint that in the original story Christ had not in fact entered the centurion's house: in other words, a very literal application of the metaphor.³¹ And that is what I suggest is wrong with much current thinking on the subject.

Recall John Donne's comparison of conversion to rape in his poem 'Batter me three-personed God', or even the gentle George Herbert use of the violence of the wine press to describe the effect of the crucifixion on us, and one quickly realises how much great literature depends on imagery that shocks as much as it persuades. Indeed, did not over-familiarity with the text blinds us to the obvious, the same might equally be said of much of Christ's own use of imagery: God compared to an over-indulgent father's love for a spoilt child or as like a fussy old woman looking for a lost coin amidst the household dust.³² Yet reflect on what happens so often today with hymn book revision committees determined on sanitising whatever might be thought to give offence – including everything from military imagery to talk of God as father.

Yet what exactly is wrong with singing a hymn like 'Onward Christian soldiers'? The imagery is after all thoroughly scriptural, and as with the Bible itself was never intended to endorse all forms of war.³³ It is almost as though congregations are not trusted to make the requisite kinds of discrimination. Given the example with which I began this section, that worry may well be justified. But, if so, the proper response is not surely such cynical retreat but rather better education of laity and clergy alike in how imagery works. Certainly the reluctance of modern hymn writers to be

³¹ Matthew 8.5-13.

³² Luke 15.8-32.

³³ Most obviously in Ephesians 6.1-17.

adventurous is perhaps one of the most noted features of our age. Graham Kendrick's image of hands that flung stars into space/to cruel nails surrendered' is a fine one, but it startles us by its very rarity.³⁴ So it comes as no surprise that Sydney Carter's *Lord of the Dance* is in fact based on an ancient Gnostic hymn, or that no parallels come to mind for the vibrant imagery found in the earliest Christian hymn to survive complete, as recorded by Clement of Alexandria. Here is how it begins: 'Bridle of untamed foals, wing of unerring birds, unwavering helm of ships, shepherd of royal lambs, gather your artless children to sing in a holy way.' And with metaphor heaped upon metaphor is how it continues, including even talk of tender mouths suckled at the nipple of the Logos.³⁵

Certainly, the imagery is too rich for many of us to stomach today. But that, I suggest, has more to do with the difference between the ancient world and our own, particularly in the former's closeness to animals and nature. Think, for instance, of some of the imagery in Scripture and the similar difficulties of comprehension that it can present, as in the Song of Songs description of a beautiful woman as: 'Thy teeth are like a flock of sheep that are even shorn ... Thy neck is like the tower of David builded for an armoury, whereon there hang a thousand bucklers. All shields of mighty men ... Thy two breasts are like two young roes that are twins, which feed among the lilies ... and so.'³⁶ Admittedly, some sort of sense can eventually be extracted, but the effort is out of proportion to the relative ease of understanding that hymn or liturgy require. So I am certainly not defending all imagery from the past. Nor do I want to suggest that such imagery should be retained when it leads into doctrinal or moral error. So it was right that some familiar lines from Frances Alexander's Christmas favourite *Once in Royal David's City* have now gone, though I would add that 'No crying he makes' in *Away in a Manger* actually constitutes a more serious error. But that hardly applies to any and every metaphor, since the underlying rationale of a metaphor lies precisely in this – as I have already underlined - that its most literal aspects are not true. God does not rape; the Christian is not a soldier. It is only that in some respect a comparison can be drawn.

I have laboured what to many of you must seem a rather obvious point, because

³⁴ From his hymn *This is our God, the servant King*.

³⁵ I assume other putative earlier examples either to be incomplete (as with Philipians 2) or else their date disputed as in the hymns found in the *Odes of Solomon*. For the full version of Clement's hymn, M. Kiley ed., *Prayer from Alexander to Constantine* (London: Routledge, 1997), 296-303.

³⁶ Song of Songs 4.2 & 4-5.

without its acceptance the literary quality of what we experience in church will inevitably become impoverished, as images such as father or king get elided and no new powerful ones take their place. The hymn *God of concrete, God of steel* is often used to illustrate the folly of new innovating imagery. But its difficulties lay, I think, not in the image as such but in trying to set the words to a traditional tune where other wiser options were available.³⁷ So my plea is for more imaginative use of imagery by liturgists, not less, and so for more initiatives such as David Frost's Prodigal Son prayer or the American stellar consecration prayer. Such innovating freedom among liturgists and hymn-writers will prevent congregations feeling safely cushioned against conflict. Instead, they can become emboldened by such imagery to explore at leisure the full riches of the Christian faith and thus the divine mystery at its heart.

Gesamtkunstwerk

So, in conclusion, to answer the question with which I began: a *Gesamtkunst* can indeed legitimately be seen as the aim of liturgist and parish priest alike: the application of high language and engaging metaphor along with appropriate music in a drama that draws believers to a deeper appropriation of their faith that, so far from setting mind and body, ear and eye, in tension with each other, integrates them all in a way that allows even the architectural setting and its accompanying art also its own appropriate contribution. A high ideal, and worthy of every liturgist. Thank you.

³⁷ For example, on the American Salvation Army website *Saytunes*, the Earl Street Shakes have recently recorded a much more promising version, based on the electronic music of Kraftwerk. [Available here as Video 10.](#)