

obligation to keep me happy. He is my drug of choice, but if he gets boring, I'll move on.”<sup>1</sup>

These comments are not to be construed as an attack on contemporary worship *per se*. Just last night I attended an amazing service of contemporary worship in a meeting house on a Maori marae led by a Kenyan group visiting New Zealand to mark the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Gospel in New Zealand. I was overawed by the sense of God's presence as we moved from praise to confession to 'surrender'. I was deeply moved, not just by the singing, but also by the praying. Throughout the hour or so God was the focus: every song and every prayer was directly addressed to him, and Scripture abounded. The congregation, made up of young and old, Maori and *Pakaha* (white), was caught up into heaven itself - the spiritual intimacy of the occasion was almost tangible. But there was no platform, no spot lights, just one guitar, a piano and a drum.

So to sum up: my concern is that as worship styles inevitably change, we need to take a hard look at the theology which underlies our worship – and our worship space.

## Understanding the elderly – a theological reflection

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I have noted in funeral ministry over the years an increase in printed orders of service with a picture of the deceased on the front cover. It raises the question 'What picture of you would you want on the front cover for your funeral order of service – and why?' Should it be young and flattering – or the last picture of you that was taken – or something in between? Can any picture sum up who the essential 'you' is? It's an interesting way of reflecting on who we 'are' in our own eyes, the eyes of others and the eyes of God.

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<sup>1</sup> *Deep Church Rising: Recovering the Roots of Christian Orthodoxy* (SPCK, London 2014) 98.

The world we live in makes being and getting old a difficult business to negotiate. We experience a world where there are ever-increasing expectations about medicine and health. Life-threatening conditions can be regulated and life can seem to be extended – but you can't make people better from growing old. Is old age an unnatural interruption to well-being like flu or chicken pox, or an essential part of what it is to be human? We live in a world that has particular attitudes to the body. What if in growing old, you have a less acceptable body where bits are falling off or need replacing, receding or expanding? And what for Christians is a resurrection body like – is it about 30, tanned and perfectly formed, or something quite different?

In a world in which 'doing' is celebrated, how does life seem if the doing becomes restricted? I remember as a parish priest visiting older members of the church who would plaintively tell me that 'I can't do what I used to do for the church' and with it went the implied assumption that they were no longer of use to the church or somehow diminished in the sight of God and others. This is never helped by living in a world where there is expectation that everything will get better and better – now. Until recently, A-level passes, like average life expectancy, were expected to rise and rise. Health is understood to be a property of life, a human right, an end in itself – but for how long? Maybe in church we have not been helped by one unfortunate piece of translation in the Authorised Version of the Bible that has lingered in our imagination: in John's gospel, we are famously promised life – but what sort of life? The AV told us that it was 'everlasting' – something, that is, of unlimited quantity being its first category. The word that is used, however, better translates as 'eternal' – something of unlimited quality, which might or might not refer to an amount of time.

Given how life may be shaped in our society and in the church, what resources might be at our disposal to reflect biblically and theologically on this? Let me offer two particular texts and one relevant biblical concept.

### **Created in the Image of God**

To start at the beginning, in the first creation account, God says: "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness". I think that for too long we have understood that too forensically and tried to find an 'it' with which it can be identified and to drill down into our humanity to locate it.

We can be helped by an awareness of the context in which the book of Genesis took shape and its final form – in the period of the exile in the sixth century before Christ. In that world, emperors set up images of themselves across the empire to remind their subjects that they still ruled over them even if they were not present in person (a phenomenon that is not unknown in the modern world!). Images were made of people of power, and of note and of stature.

In Genesis this is democratised – the entire humankind has the capacity to bear the ‘image’ of God. It is no longer statues that best represent God or the gods, but living breathing humanity. The image is not so much a ‘part’ of an individual, but that which allows something to happen between God and humankind in which each person can stand before God in order that life can receive meaning. It is this which allows humanity to be in relationship with God and with one another.

This view of what it means to be in the image of God not only makes sense of the origin of the text, but more importantly leads to a way of affirming the worth and value of each human-being, whatever their appearance, age, qualities, or gifts. Each person, of whatever age, is made in the image of God and bears the image of God and as such is to be deeply treasured and valued. Does our care of the elderly in the life of our churches reflect and honour this, and is it shaped by this foundational understanding of the inherent worth of each person?

### **Seeing as God Sees**

The second text is a gospel account from Luke 7.36–50. Jesus visits the house of Simon the Pharisee for a meal. In the midst of supper, the meal is interrupted and a woman enters the house, a woman with a known poor reputation and not the sort of woman who would be invited to a respectable supper party. To the consternation of the assembled guests and especially of the host, she bathes Jesus’ feet with her tears and anoints them with oil. The punchline of the story comes as Jesus says to Simon, ‘Do you see this woman?’ (v.44). The implied answer to the question is ‘No, Simon, you don’t – but I do’. Jesus ‘sees’ this woman – a woman so overcome with gratitude that she doesn’t notice the taboos of society she’s breaking; a woman for whom forgiveness is so key that she doesn’t notice what society thinks of her. How Jesus ‘sees’ her is how the rest of the assembled company is invited to see her

– and how we are invited to see her. And the rest of society (and we) will be judged on how we see her.

Paying attention to people is at the heart of the mission of the church – seeing people as they are and as they have been formed and shaped. The frail bent man who shuffles up to Communion was a toddler who charmed his parents. When preparing to lead funerals, I loved hearing the life story of people who I had only known as unwell or vulnerable. I remember one woman who, in all the time I knew her, had seen her body ravaged by diabetes, yet was remembered by her lifelong friend as the one with whom in their twenties they had ridden a motorbike round local country lanes.

I am not a regular reader of the Sunday Times *Style* magazine, and when I flick through it have not usually the first idea what is being talked about, but I happened to light on this article from which I want to quote a lengthy piece: “A few months ago I was with my father who had been in hospital for several weeks and was more in need than he had ever been in his life. The consultant arrived for the ward round, accompanied by junior doctors. He was running late and he looked tired, but as he approached, he focussed his entire attention on my father. He sat on the side of the bed and shook his hand and then held it between both his own and called him Dr Gerrard. He behaved as if he had all the time in the world and asked him questions, waiting patiently for the answers that were not going to come before turning to me. I wanted to weep with gratitude: it was not just that he was treating my father with respect and kindness, it was also that he was actually seeing him, looking beyond his great age and frailty to the person beneath and beyond the autonomous agent of a long and well-lived life.”

People flourish when we ‘see’ them and truly see them as they are. Each individual person is regarded with scrupulous divine attention. After all, our personal identity is infinitely precious and an enduring gift of God who has formed us and refashioned us out of all the relationships that he has granted us. The Christian community therefore must seek to reflect that gaze in its reverence for each person, and each encouraged and loved into returning that gaze. It means therefore that how we treat the older person in the life of the church will be a good example of how we engage in the mission of the church, because how we treat and regard and ‘see’

older people will be indicative of how we treat everyone who comes into the orbit of the church.

### **The Experience of Exile**

My third biblical resource is not a particular passage, but a biblical theme – of exile, and specifically the exile that followed the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians. This was a period of the history of the people of God when familiar landmarks were swept away – the seemingly secure world of rule by a king, worship in a temple and possession of a God-given land. How could faith be sustained in a strange land? First, it was nourished by the prophetic voice: the people of God needed to face the reality of what had happened (and why) when there was a temptation to denial. Then they needed to hear words of hope when tempted to despair. This they began to do by telling their story. It was in this period of exile that much of Old Testament history as we now have it was written down in its current and lasting form. It was in the telling of the story that they reasserted their identity – an identity that could not be taken from them, whatever else was lost.

Our care for the elderly in the life of the church must be rooted in the fact that each person has a unique and special story to tell in which they find meaning and which affirms their dignity and worth. As one commentator observes, “medicine may help a patient cope with pain, but if the patient has no narrative, it cannot supply meaning for it.” The Holocaust survivor, Victor Frankel, wrote: “Man is not destroyed by suffering; he is destroyed by suffering without meaning”.

There is an important paradox to hold here. Each individual story is their story, without others determining the shape or meaning of it. However, each story is held within a bigger story – a story of slavery, promise, expectation, dashed hopes, disappointments and a glimpse of new beginnings; a story of opportunity cruelly ended by pain and dis-ablement under the control of others; a story of death and resurrection, of hope, life and transformation; a story of one day, of new creation, of making new. This is truly his story and our story – within which our individual story is held and treasured and finds its fulfilment.

These three biblical perspectives do not give us a programme for what to do in our local churches, but they may provide the theological rationale and imperative for how we act, what we do

and, most important, how we are with the many older people who belong to or join in the activities of our churches.

One of the most powerful and helpful books that I have read in the last few months is John Swinton's study, *Dementia – Living in the Memories of God*. While its focus is on those who suffer from different forms of this terrible condition, the conclusion that he reaches applies to all of our ministry with the elderly and effectively with all people: "Human beings are both wanted and loved irrespective of their physical or physiological condition. It is not any capacity within them that gives them value. Nor is it the value that those around them bestow upon them (a value that could be rescinded at any moment). Human beings' value and their identity are held and assured by the God who created them, who inspired them with God's 'nephesh', who sustains them in the power of the Holy Spirit, and who continues to offer the gift of life and relationship to all of humanity." May this be so in each one of the churches in whose life we share and worship and minister.

## **Integrity and Exegesis: Paul, Romans 1 and Homosexuality<sup>2</sup>**

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No exegete comes without some kind of lens through which to look at the text. However, integrity requires that we deal as faithfully as we can with the text. Our goal is truthfulness. Tom Wright says some interesting things on this when dealing with the interpretation of Rom 9-11: 'If it turns out that Paul says things I don't want to hear, I shall live with it. If it turns out that I say things which Paul doesn't want to hear, perhaps he will one day put me straight. If it turns out that Paul says things the twenty-first century doesn't want to hear, it's better that we get that out in the open rather than sneakily falsifying the historical evidence

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<sup>2</sup> This article is based on a paper given at the Faith & Thought Symposium on homosexuality in October 2014. All four papers given at the symposium (covering the scientific, biblical, social and pastoral aspects of this topic) have been published in the Spring 2015 edition of the *Faith & Thought Journal*.