

# *The Ritual Reason Why*

## *Towards an Evangelical Theology of Ritual within Pastoral Care*

PAUL WILLIAMS

### ABSTRACT

Ritual is essential to being human in community. In community life, ritual acts in founding, initiating, integrating and ordering. Theological and behavioural objections are explored and engaged as ritual is seen as forming a whole way of life for a whole person—embodied, thinking, praying, acted on by, and in action with, God. The tensions faced by Cranmer in relation to ritual are highlighted as the Christian community is called to display, proclaim and actualise the gospel. Rootedness in Scripture and commitment to mission are essential hallmarks of ritual that is Christian.

**L**ike it or not, we are all ritualists. I hope that this is not a quixotic statement in an 'Anglican Evangelical journal', but rather a springboard in an attempt to explore the necessity and, hopefully, the positive nature of ritual for the individual and community. I have little doubt that some Evangelicals will tend to connect ritual with hocus-pocus, superstition and magic. Accusations of 'empty ritualism' and that it does 'more to confound and darken, than declare and set forth Christ's benefits unto us'<sup>1</sup> are perhaps no longer found on our lips but they may still hold sway in our minds. This attitude gives rise to the belief that ritual, in itself, is seen to be of no significance and even harmful when separated from a 'true and living faith'. I believe that there is a real danger in this point of view, for we may run the risk of throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

### What is ritual?

One would think that it would be a simple matter to define 'ritual'.<sup>2</sup> In the study of religion, however, few terms have caused so much confusion. 'Ritual' can be seen to operate in the three separate, though inter-related, disciplines of anthropology, psychology and theology. Edmund Leach, a distinguished anthropologist, maintained that ritual should be applied to all 'culturally defined sets of behaviour'.<sup>3</sup> For Leach this type of behaviour should be regarded as a form of 'communication' or 'code of information'. In

- 1 T. Cranmer, 'Of Ceremonies, why some be abolished, and some retained', *The Book of Common Prayer*.
- 2 A comprehensive bibliography of ritual has been compiled by R. Grimes, *Religious Studies Review*, vol.10, (1984), pp 134ff.
- 3 E. Leach, 'Ritual' in *International Encyclopedia of Social Science*, ed. D. Sills, vol. 13, Macmillan, New York 1968.

the parlance of psychology, a non-rational or formalised symbolic behaviour of any kind is designated as 'ritual'. Ritualised behaviour is distinct from any pragmatic, clearly ends-directed action that is rationally linked to empirical goals. In the school of theology 'ritual' has been defined as:

those conscious and voluntary, repetitious and stylized symbolic bodily actions and words that are centred on cosmic structures and/or sacred presences.<sup>4</sup>

The importance of the 'conscious' and 'voluntary' aspects of the above definition needs to be emphasised for they will then rule out personal habits or neurotic compulsions; as does the stress on the transcendent. Furthermore, in the field of liturgical scholarship, it has been the custom to distinguish between 'rite' and 'ceremonies' – the rite is the form of service, whilst the ceremony is the means of its performance. I can acknowledge the theoretical necessity of such a position, yet I suggest, in the practical outpourings of worship, this distinction is inevitably blurred. Therefore, I shall use the inclusive sense of ritual to mean both 'rite' and 'ceremony'.<sup>5</sup>

### Why ritual?

A good number of anthropologists would maintain that one cannot understand, let alone study, a society divorced from its ritual actions. The important events in a community, such as the coronation of a monarch and those significant events in the lives of most families, such as birthdays, weddings and funerals are imbedded and imbued by ritual action. Ritual not only manifests those values and beliefs that the community corporately hold but also maintains and reinforces its identity and common life. Ritual is a performative action, i.e. it does what it means. It would be a mistake to think that ritual is merely drama. For example, the marriage service is not just an expression of the ideal of Christian marriage; it makes the couple husband and wife and so 'they begin a new life together in the community'.<sup>6</sup> Again, the ritual of ordination makes a person a deacon, priest or bishop in the church.

Ritual can assist communities in four ways.<sup>7</sup> First, rituals found new communities. The dedication of a church, the commissioning of a congregation in a 'church plant' are obvious examples. Secondly, rituals initiate potential members into a community. Baptism and confirmation are rituals of incorporation whilst excommunication is a ritual of exclusion. Therefore, the boundaries of a community are maintained by ritual. Thirdly, rituals integrate, so that individual differences are transcended and mutuality is

---

4 E. Zuesse, 'Ritual' in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. M. Eliade, vol. 12, Macmillan, New York 1987.

5 This point is also made by R. Grainger in *The Language of the Rite*, Darton Longman & Todd, London 1974, p 24. This is perhaps the 'text book' on the subject – I wish to acknowledge my debt to this work.

6 *The Alternative Service Book* 1980, p 288.

7 See B. More & N. Habel, *When Religion Goes to School*, Adelaide 1982, pp 204-210, for a classification of rites and functions.

maintained. The eucharist, amongst its other purposes, is a sign of fellowship that strengthens the body of Christ to overcome its divisions – ‘Though we are many, we are one body because we all partake in one bread’ (1 Cor. 10:17). Lastly, rituals order the community so that authority is properly conferred and responsibly exercised. Rituals, like the institution and induction of a minister to a parish, play an important function. Anthropologically, ritual is vital to the life of a community and as we have seen above, the Christian community is no exception to this rule. However, in some quarters there seems to be a conscious or subconscious fear and/or objection to ritual.

### **A theological objection**

It is axiomatic of all the semitic religions that God is different from human-kind not by degree, but by nature. In fact, it is fair to say, that the idea of incarnation – or the incarnation in the Christian tradition – can only make sense by the acknowledgement of the transcendent nature of God. There is a gulf set between the Creator and his creation. At the heart of the evangelical tradition is Luther’s notion that this transcendent God can only be reached through the experience of ‘salvation through despair’ – God can only be held when we have let go and let God. Therefore, nothing in the sphere of human existence can or should be used to access the divine. True religion is located in the desire for God and it is a desire that no ritual or ceremonial could or should abate. To do so would, inevitably, run the risk of blasphemy.

This is a powerful theological objection to ritual! Yet I believe that the seeds of an answer can be found in the very objection itself. For ritual can only exist by the acknowledgement of the fact, and the experience, that God is ‘totally other’! Because of the separation between God and the world, people instinctively present, in attraction to God, that which only through ‘grace’ can be made perfect. As Evelyn Underhill perceptively remarks:

Here we obtain a clue to the real significance of these rituals and ceremonials common to almost every creed, which express the deep human conviction that none of the serial events and experiences of human life are rightly met, unless they are brought into relation with the Transcendent; that all have more than a natural meaning and must be sanctified by references to the unseen powers.<sup>8</sup>

The situation of humanity before God is therefore not clouded by ritual but rather made manifest and lived out in ritual. Ritual actualises the world’s relationship with God as theoretically understood in the doctrines of creation and redemption.

### **Behavioural objection**

The most common and perhaps the most profound objection to ritual, and dare I say, closest, for a number of reasons (some not altogether rational) to the evangelical heart, is the abhorrence at the means of grace becoming an opportunity for sin. Ritual can so easily degenerate into magic, superstition

8 E. Underhill, *Worship*, Collins, London 1936, p 21.

and idolatry. The occasion to make God in human image rather than allowing God to make us in his, is a real possibility. The abuses of the Middle Ages cast a long shadow over today's understanding of ritual. It was because of the Reformers' praiseworthy attempt to maintain the intelligibility of the church services that the emphasis of the intellect became a dominant theme. Immersed in the milieu distrusting of ritual and ceremonial, the unswerving anchor of the Word, spoken and written, gained its ascendancy. 'God is nothing but his law and promises; to imagine any other thing of God than that is damnable idolatry', wrote Tyndale.<sup>9</sup>

The primacy of Scripture over ritual can be demonstrated by examining John Calvin's view of sacraments. The sacraments for Calvin do not mediate the presence of God but rather proclaim God's message of redemption to men and women. Again, with emphasis on the intellect, the sacraments must be accompanied by the commentary of the Word. 'The word when preached', says Calvin, 'makes us understand what the visible sign means'.<sup>10</sup> With this interpretation of a sacrament, we see a dichotomy between beheld symbol and explained doctrinal statement. The former must give way to the latter and in so doing, evacuates the whole concept of symbol. Therefore, ritual is regarded as a work and thus belongs to the old dispensation which has been eclipsed by the coming of the kingdom. Christians should direct their minds to the time when worship will be free from worldly trappings and be 'pure and undefined', free from 'the pomp of ceremonies', which are 'abrogated by (Christ's) coming as shadows vanish in the clear light of the sun'.<sup>11</sup>

The danger here is that one can attempt to avoid the idolatry of 'externals' only to fall head-long into the idolatry of the 'mind'. As Roger Grainger succinctly puts it:

Thus the mind, while not actually divine itself, at least 'speaks the same language' as divinity. The organ of response, which is the locus of an experienced freedom and acceptance, is allowed to stand for the whole organism. The divine-human encounter becomes located not in the relationship between the world and God, but actually inside men.<sup>12</sup>

Hard on the heels of this realisation comes the accusation of dualism. For the logic of this argument runs, that as people are made-up of two natures, an 'earthly' and a 'spiritual', it is the 'spiritual' side of the individual which has the potential to be redeemed, whilst the 'earthly' side has not. Secondly, with an emphasis on the response of the individual to the grace of God one can easily bring about an overtly individualistic model of the church. It could be argued that this line of reasoning owes more to Plato than the Scriptures.

Clearly, the New Testament demonstrates that with our baptism in Christ, often acted out ritualistically (Rom. 6:3-4), we have been brought into a relationship with God, and unity with each other in the body of Christ. The

---

9 W. Tyndale, *The Obedience of a Christian Man*, Parker Society, Cambridge 1528, p 174.

10 J. Calvin, *The Institutes of Christian Religion*, 4.14.14.

11 Calvin, *The Institutes*, 4.4 and 25.

12 Grainger, *The Language of the Rite*, pp 38f.

unity of the church is everywhere an essential part of the biblical witness to New Testament worship. However, in the reformation traditions the oneness of the body of Christ, about which St. Paul speaks so eloquently in 1 Cor. 12 and Rom. 12, was increasingly overlooked in favour of individualism. The importance of producing an individual relationship with God resulted in a model of the church as proclamation, rather than as life together. Individuals heard the call to repentance and faith in the context of worship but the church itself was not an intrinsic part of that message. As James F. White declares:

Thus one of the great apostasies of evangelical worship today is the unscriptural notion of the church that still lingers, that the church is merely an instrument in gaining citizens for the future kingdom rather than involved as an essential part of life in the kingdom itself. Evangelicals need to recover the value that the New Testament itself attributes to life in the body of Christ here and now. The church as an optional collection of individuals is simply not faithful to the biblical witness.<sup>13</sup>

So, like any other community, the church will produce ritual in order to define itself and its purpose. To do otherwise would be to deny the biblical witness and commit anthropological suicide. Further, St Paul reminds us that we are redeemed in body, mind and spirit (1 Cor. 6:19; Col. 2:9,10; 1 Thess.5:23). Therefore, it is in a 'holistic' state that we enjoy the new life that Christ brings. Equally, the thankful response of the creature to the Creator should be holistic and must entail body, mind and spirit. To do otherwise is to deny our true standing with God, with ourselves and with each other.

### **A whole way of life to a whole person**

Ritual does not just communicate ideas. It is, in fact, rather poor at communicating on an intellectual level. Imagination is the stage upon which good ritual acts. Ritual communicates a whole way of life to a whole person. Ritual therefore, can be seen to be operating within the sphere of pastoral care. Alastair V. Campbell defines the nature of pastoral care as:

..that aspect of the ministry of the Church which is concerned with the well-being of individuals and of communities.<sup>14</sup>

Ritual offers actual, rather than theoretical, experience to those who properly participate. So, for example, the rite of reconciliation offers forgiveness to those who receive it and live by it. Ritual offers participation not only in the common life of the community, but also in the life-cycle of birth and death. This accounts for the prominence throughout the world of the so called 'rites of passage'<sup>15</sup> which sustain people at critical points of their lives, such as birth, adolescence, marriage, sickness and death.

13 J. F. White, 'The Missing Jewel of the Evangelical Church', *The Reformed Journal* 36, (1986), p 13.

14 A. V. Campbell in A. V. Campbell, ed., 'Pastoral Care, Nature of' *A Dictionary of Pastoral Care*, SPCK, London 1987, pp 188-190.

15 For a discussion of these rites, see M. Eliade, *Rites of Initiation*, Harper & Row, New York 1958; A. van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London 1960.

Ritual can also harmonise and synchronise people with the natural and cosmic pattern that surrounds and sustains them. So, for example, our daily pattern of worship and prayer, meals and sleep, are aligned with the succession of day and night. Interestingly, it has been pointed out 'that the whole liturgical calendar in the Old Testament corresponds with the order of creation as revealed in the annual cycles of the seasons'.<sup>16</sup>

Even though ritual patterns a way of life, it does so with respect, without overshadowing the person or diminishing their integrity. It creates a moment and place for voluntary involvement. Its demands are minimal, it merely requires the presence of people. The character and depth of involvement depends upon the participants. Ritual caters for all sorts and conditions of people at all stages of maturity and levels of ability. Leslie Virgo records:

It is a picture of a group of men in varying stages of senility in the ward of a psychiatric hospital. One man is in the act of receiving his communion. A spirit of relationship, given and received flows out of the picture. Again and again in these acts of communion in the wards people who were sunk in apathy came alive in responsive meeting. People who usually remained enclosed in a silent world would join in the familiar prayers and give and receive communion. If, in this way we can see how worship can bring the solitary into families, what is its place and value in pastoral care?<sup>17</sup>

As pastors we know this to be true. Ritual is apt for initiating and involving people in the mysteries of life and of the Christian faith which surpass human grasp. From the 'hands together, eyes closed' of school to 'the anointing with oil in the name of the Lord' (James 5:14) ritual can express the inexpressible. Further, ritual can and should define those professional boundaries, which for the well-being and good of all, must exist.

### Ritual and the body

Rituals not only communicate a whole way of life, but they do so to a complete person. Primarily they do this by involving the body in gesture and action. They communicate physically; this is their unique mode of expression. This can also be said of religious rites which, at an even deeper level, communicate spiritual realities physically. The physical life of an individual is drawn into the presence of the divine. Does this then have a profound ethical implication? Can this be what lies at the heart of St. Paul's appellation that the body is the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:15-20)? What is more, the ritual element in our worship not only conveys the spiritual to us via physical means, as in the water of baptism, but it also helps us to respond physically. Ritual not only shows us our state before God, not only tells us how to react to God's grace, but actually shows us the path of reconciliation

---

16 J. W. Kleinig, 'Witting or Unwitting Ritualists', *Lutheran Theological Journal* vol. 22, (1988), p 17 - whom I follow at many points in this discussion.

17 L. Virgo, 'Worship and Pastoral Care' in L. Virgo, ed., *First Aid in Pastoral Care*, T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh 1987, p 254.

by providing us with models of confession and absolution, prayer and praise. Just as the high-jumper pictures in his mind the run-up, perfect jump and landing before his attempt, so ritual can picture to the believing community what it is like to live a perfected life, through grace, in Christ. Astonishingly, if the ritual aspect of our worship is working properly, it should focus our attention completely on what is given, rather than how it is given. It is only after the event, when we have received, that the mode and method is appreciated. C. S. Lewis once said:

When our participation in a rite becomes perfect, we think no more of ritual, but are engrossed by that about which the rite is performed; but afterwards we recognise that ritual was the sole method by which this concentration can be achieved.<sup>18</sup>

### Ritual and the mind

Ritual not only combines words with bodily gesture and activity, but it also communicates cognitively. However, it does this more through symbol than concepts. Ritual may not be able to give us knowledge about something new, but it can give us a new insight into that which has already been given.

The celebration of the eucharist opens up for us the meaning of Christ's death. It does not necessarily give us new information to add to our existing stock of facts, but it reshapes our way of thinking by imposing a particular frame of reference needed to make sense of something. Let me give two examples. First, the passover meal, enacted annually, is more than a dramatic presentation of the exodus of Israel from Egypt. Its 'anamnesis' caused the Israelites to reconsider their relationship with God in historical rather than mythological terms. The liberation of Israel, by the direct intervention of God, caused them to consider their covenant relationship so unique that they began to interact with God differently from their pagan neighbours. Secondly, the fact that Christians had always baptised in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit was an important factor in the christological controversies of the early church.<sup>19</sup> We must realise that the notion of *lex orandi, lex credendi* is as powerful now as it has been in the past. Ritual proclaims what we believe, reinforces what we believe and affects what we believe.

### Ritual and the spirit

Since ritual affects us physically and intellectually, it can also move us emotionally. It does not merely express what we feel but also enables us to feel something other than that which we had previously felt. It can make us rejoice at a wedding, even when we do not feel happy in ourselves and have

---

18 C. S. Lewis *A Preface to Paradise Lost*, OUP, London 1942, p 61.

19 See J. Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1971, p 199.

no subjective reason for rejoicing, just as it can make us mourn a funeral, when we feel no personal sense of loss. Again C. S. Lewis remarks:

Ritual... is a pattern imposed on the mere flux of our feelings by reason and will, which renders pleasures less fugitive and griefs more endurable, which hands over to the power of wise custom the task (to which the individual and his moods are so inadequate) of being festive or sober, gay or reverent, when we chose to be, and not at the bidding of chance.<sup>20</sup>

The rituals associated with funerals are numerous and often strange but they are all designed to assist mourning. A funeral rite, well conducted, can be the first step along the path of the bereavement process for those affected by the death.

Ritual therefore is an essential tool in pastoral care. As Eugene C. Kennedy puts it:

Healthy religious ritual contributes to psychological balance when it helps to redeem man as he struggles to find himself in relationship to God and others. At its best ritual is deeply sensitive to the human strivings of growth and human tendencies to weakness and makes room for both in its patterns. Ritual becomes a source of affirmation for a man who gives himself wholeheartedly to the resurrected life; it reaffirms him when his hope is frayed or when his humanity is all too evident to him. Ritual that springs from pastoral orientation to fallible man makes him aware of the forgiveness that is available, the forgiveness that he can experience more fully when it is adequately symbolised to him. Religious ritual, in other words, promotes psychological balance when it matches man's efforts to fulfil his own deepest aspirations for growth, for redemption, and for fuller relationships to others.<sup>21</sup>

Yet equally, and Kennedy articulates the point well, ritual can abuse through a 'deceptive kind of peace that is real passivity',<sup>22</sup> it can 'express neurotic conflict rather than healthy religious feelings',<sup>23</sup> and/or by 'the distorted needs of the celebrant'<sup>24</sup>. All this being said, good ritual is a positive element in the growth of an individual so long as the church recognises that a person 'is mind and body, intellect and emotions, all operating in relationship to one another in a quite extraordinary and integrated fashion'.<sup>25</sup> Therefore ritual must reflect the human personality, it must grow or it will frustrate, it must bear the distractibility of the individual and, finally, it should be serendipitous in order that something new may be discovered and the participant's boredom is assuaged.

---

20 Lewis, *A Preface*, p 22.

21 E. C. Kennedy 'The Contribution of Religious Ritual to Psychological Balance', *Concilium* 2, (1971), pp 53f.

22 Kennedy, 'The Contribution', p 54.

23 Kennedy, 'The Contribution', p 54.

24 Kennedy, 'The Contribution', p 55.

25 Kennedy, 'The Contribution', pp 55f.

**God's action**

Clearly pastoral care needs to be grounded in the church's worship and ritual if it is to avoid becoming no more than secular therapy. In this last section I wish to look at the importance of ritual as a means of God's action upon the human soul. We can so easily fall into the trap of imagining that human beings are the main agents in the execution of Christian worship and ritual. This would be to fall woefully short of the mark. In ritual, God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit reach out to reveal, heal and enliven those who believe in him.

The church is formed and reformed by its ritual and worship. Christ himself 'ordained' the sacraments of baptism and the eucharist by which he causes his salvific work to continue until his coming again. Consider, for a moment, what happens at the eucharist. Jesus, through the shedding of his blood, brings us into the presence of the Father. We hear the Word of God proclaimed and, through his Spirit, made active in our lives. The merciful Father accepts our prayers and attends to our needs. In the name of Christ, peaceful fellowship is proclaimed. We are kept in eternal life through the body and blood of Christ. Then finally, we are sent out in mission, by the power of the Spirit, to live and work to the glory of God in his world. All this is exercised ritually through word and action.

The Thirty-Nine Articles define the church in ritual terms. They maintain that it 'is a congregation of faithful men, in which the pure Word of God is preached, and the Sacraments be duly ministered....'<sup>26</sup> The Word and Sacrament are God's channels by which the Holy Spirit works in us and through us – holy things for the holy people of God. In the crucible of the church, the co-mixture of Word and Sacrament will inevitably explode into ritual.

There is no doubt that Cranmer was critical of the abusive nature of many of ceremonies that surrounded him. His main aim, like that of Luther and Calvin, was to bring order and decency to the church. He therefore instituted a 'litmus test' for ritual. He insisted on the primacy of the means of grace which Christ himself had ordained 'in the Gospel' – baptism and the Lord's Supper were necessary and not open to argument. Others, such as confirmation, penance, orders, matrimony and extreme unction were the result of corrupt following of the apostles or 'states of life allowed in the Scriptures'.<sup>27</sup> First and foremost, the Word of God was Cranmer's bench-mark for what was decent and necessary in the church's ritual.

Secondly, Cranmer took the *via media* between those who 'think it to be a great matter of conscience to depart from a piece of the least of their Ceremonies, they be so addicted to their old customs; and again on the other side, some be so new-fangled, that they would innovate all things, and so despise the old...'<sup>28</sup> in maintaining the importance of 'Order, or quiet discipline in the Church...'.<sup>29</sup>

---

26 Article 19.

27 Article 25.

28 Cranmer, 'Of Ceremonies...', *The Book of Common Prayer*.

29 Cranmer, 'Of Ceremonies...', *The Book of Common Prayer*.

None of this careful reasoning would make any sense unless Cranmer knew that ritual was vital and necessary in worship. For it evokes the work of Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit in the salvation and healing of individuals and communities.

### **Displaying God's work**

I have always been fascinated by the strange behaviour of Jesus in curing the blind man in John 9:6-38. In this story we see a ritualised action, in the context of pastoral care, resulting in faith and worship. Why did Jesus make clay with his own spittle and put it upon the eyes of that man? Obviously, the clay poultice was not for the sake of Jesus – he could have commanded, and the man would have received his sight. But Jesus chose physical resources, using ritualised actions, to display God's work. Why, and for what purpose? We know that the physicians of the ancient world used spittle as a balm.<sup>30</sup> Perhaps the clay resonates with the account of creation in Gen. 2:7, so that it gives an enlarged perspective on the new creation? Or, is it that Jesus first seals the eyes which he is about to open, adding blindness to blindness, so that through a 'baptism' in the waters of Siloam the man receives light, from the Light of the World. The healing of body, mind and spirit are all operative in this 'ritualised action' of Jesus. There are, no doubt, other interpretations of this ritualised event – but that is the beauty of ritual. At the conclusion of this story, after numerous interrogations by the authorities, the simple dialogue between the blind man and Jesus is breathtaking:

Jesus heard that they (the Pharisees) had cast him out, and having found him he said, 'Do you believe in the Son of man?' He answered, 'And who is he, sir, that I may believe in him?' Jesus said to him, 'You have seen him, and it is he who speaks to you.' He said, 'Lord, I believe'; and he worshipped him. (John 9:35-38)

Christian ritual is there to proclaim and actualise the good news as a way of life to people, both near and far, in order that they may participate in the divine life. No ritual, however splendid in church, personally satisfying, or socially necessary, is Christian unless it is directed by the Word of God and extends his kingdom.

**The Revd Paul Williams is Personal Chaplain to the Bishop of Rochester.**

---

30 See C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel according to St John*, SPCK, London 1967, pp 292f.