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# Benedict, William Laud and Michael Vasey: How Distinctive should Anglican Worship be?

**At a time when Anglican worship is marked increasingly by an emphasis on freedom of form, variety and spontaneity, what remains distinctive about it? What are the arguments for retaining limits on what might be permitted? Michael Perham explores these questions and shares important insights about the nature and role of liturgy in contemporary worship.<sup>1</sup>**

Michael Vasey was a good friend of mine and a colleague on the Liturgical Commission from 1986 until his death three years ago. We worked together on many projects and talked together about a great many things. Towards the end of his life he got quite cross with me more than once. Michael, as those of you who knew him will know, if he felt something at all, felt it passionately. Michael, once he had got an idea in his head, was unlikely ever to let it go. When the liturgical enterprise that has led to *Common Worship* reached its synodical stage, most of us began to compromise, to do deals and buy votes. It sounds an extraordinary way to do liturgy, but achieving the two thirds majority suddenly becomes very important to you. Michael hated that phase and often wanted to stick out for what had been agreed in the Liturgical Commission and not to compromise. It was then that he sometimes got cross.

On one occasion, exasperated beyond measure about some decision we had made (I think in relation to something fairly obscure like lectionary rules), Michael exploded that the trouble was that we (he meant members of the Liturgical Commission, especially those who worked or had worked in cathedrals) were 'laudianizing' the liturgy of the Church of England. I didn't dare ask him exactly what he meant, for he was not in the mood for constructive discourse! I have often reflected on it since. I think he meant that, like William Laud in the seventeenth century, we were seeking (probably by more subtle means than Archbishop Laud) a kind of new uniformity, strong on the beauty of holiness, on order, on cathedral style and on good taste. Now I think the accusation was wide of the mark, but it

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1 This article is a version of the Michael Vasey Memorial Lecture, given at St John's College Durham on 25 April 2001.

did make an impression on me, and reflections on it lie behind some of this lecture and account for part at least of the extraordinary title I have given it. I'll return to explore the laudianizing tendency a little later, but I need to add at his point that, part of my reflection has been to puzzle, to be honest with a degree of amusement, at the way that having branded some of us as neo-Laudians, he then made provision that placed his funeral in Durham Cathedral presided over by the Bishop of Salisbury who, by Michael's definition, was probably the arch-Laudian, and it seemed very like Michael to let himself be taken over in that way. And, of course, it was one of the most powerful liturgical events in which some of us have ever shared.

## What is distinctive about Anglican worship?

But let's begin somewhere else. What are the marks of Anglican worship, distinctive or otherwise? They were explored in *Patterns for Worship* in 1989. On page 5 of the original report, you can read these words:

We believe that some of the marks which should be safeguarded for those who wish to stand in any recognizable continuity with historic Anglican tradition are:

- a recognizable structure for worship
- an emphasis on reading the word and using psalms
- liturgical words repeated by the congregation, some of which, like the creed, would be known by heart
- using a collect, the Lord's Prayer, and some responsive forms in prayer
- a recognition of the centrality of the Eucharist
- a concern for form, dignity, and economy of words: as the four year old (*I am still quoting*) said on TV about Church of England services, 'Now I know churches are true: the people in them enjoying singing and walk about in patterns.'

I slightly regret that that wonderful child's remark has disappeared in later editions of *Patterns for Worship*. But then I would, being one who sings and walks about in patterns in a cathedral almost every day! More seriously, that list is worth revisiting and reflecting upon. It influenced, of course, the outline *Service of the Word*, that is now incorporated in *Common Worship* and provides the structure and framework for everything from Sunday morning all age worship in a packed church to the daily office said by just one, two or three people. The prominence given in *Common Worship* to the *Service of the Word* is very striking. Open the book, pass quickly through the calendar, and there it is, the first major section you encounter. And it is more outline and guideline than text, that in itself saying something new in Anglican worship.

So what does the *Service of the Word* insist, as far as it can, that you include if your service is to be good liturgy with an Anglican flavour? It says (not in order of importance) that:

- you must have prayers of penitence. Anglicans have had a deep instinct, which is rather distinctive, that worship should normally include a general

confession; those who read or listen to Thomas Cranmer's fine introduction to Morning and Evening Prayer know that he urges its appropriateness.

- there should be canticle, psalmody and biblical song. To put it differently, our singing should not be restricted to hymnody, but be highly scriptural (as of course a lot of songs out of the renewal movement are), and our use of scripture should not be only for lesson, lection, teaching, but also for prayer and praise. Scripture becomes the vehicle of our worship.
- there should be some 'set' prayers – the Lord's Prayer and a collect are specifically mentioned.
- there should be at least one reading, and perhaps, more from scripture.
- there should be a sermon. Elsewhere it unpacks the word 'sermon' in terms of a variety of approaches, but the key thing is that the scriptures should be expounded, the faith explored.
- there should be a creed or another affirmation of faith. No church in Christendom has said the creeds more than the Church of England. Some say the Apostles' Creed twice a day and the Nicene Creed once a day. There are even the delights of the Athanasian Creed to tempt the very faithful – Michael Vasey battled hard to rehabilitate it.

And that is about all it does list in terms of crucial content. But, implied or set out elsewhere, are some other emphases. Clearly the whole approach implies recognizable shape and structure. Clearly freedom and variety within certain constraints are permitted, even encouraged, and that freedom can include the possibility of drawing material from many sources, of creating it for that specific worship occasion or of allowing the Spirit to move and something spontaneous to emerge during the service itself. Clearly vocal participation by the whole worshipping community is implied by the provision of texts that are not intended only for the minister. Clearly the reference to songs suggests singing. Though not mentioned, the canons impose the wearing of distinctive vesture, though this is an area where some new thinking is going on.

How distinctive is that total picture? How specifically Anglican? The emphasis on penitence and creed would surprise a Roman Catholic at least in terms of encountering them in every service. So might the likely length of scripture readings and of sermon. Those in a more Free Church tradition might be surprised by the vocal participation in the spoken parts of the service, rather than only in the musical parts, by the insistence on psalmody, perhaps by the robes. Even a very free service ('unliturgical', people call it, but I'm not sure they are right) has a shape and a form, however hidden or even eccentric. To be honest, so far there is nothing hugely distinctive, but, of course, we haven't yet engaged with text.

That's a picture of Anglican worship today, as least as *Patterns for Worship* and the *Service of the Word* picture the ideal. There is a case for going instead to the Book of Common Prayer, which is a much more key foundational liturgical document, to find a classic picture of Anglican worship. Here we find much the same emphasis on penitence, psalmody, canticle, set prayer, scripture, creed, vesture, structure, singing. Perhaps less on sermon, for the Prayer Book only enjoins

one at Holy Communion, certainly less on vocal participation, for much more of the service is to be spoken by the minister alone (including, for instance, within the Eucharist, both the Collect for Purity and the Prayer of Humble Access, however congregational they may have become in common usage), and very definitely the absence of freedom, spontaneity and seasonal variety. These are not natural developments of our historic tradition. They are a very clear departure from it. That is not to imply that they are misguided departures, but classically Anglican liturgy has had an almost unchanging textual form, save in the absolutely key area of hymnody. Indeed you could argue that almost the most distinctive element of classical Anglican worship was its fixity. For Free Churches have gone for less text and more spontaneity and Catholicism and Orthodoxy for set text, but with much seasonal variation. Anglicans, almost alone, have gone for a fixed text with minimal variation through the seasons of the year. Prayer Book Communion on the Feast of the Epiphany differs from Prayer Book Communion on Ash Wednesday only in the collect and the two readings. Now if that is a bit of distinctive Anglicanism, probably few will mourn its passing. But its passing is fairly recent.

Of course Anglican liturgy has changed through the years, but not until the second half of the twentieth century was the change about liturgical text. Until then it was about music, about vesture, about architecture, about service patterns, about frequency of Communion, above all about hymnody. Methodists are not the only church where the faithful have their theology shaped by what they sing. However unofficially, that has been true in the Church of England as well.

I believe it to be true that the two biggest changes in the last forty years or so have been, first, the new emphasis on freedom, variety and spontaneity to which I have made reference already, but also, increasingly, a change in style of leadership of worship, with a new emphasis on welcome, on explanation, on putting at ease – worship with a smile! It is an inevitable change in a church becoming more conscious of its missionary context. It has both strengths and weaknesses. It makes the liturgy more accessible; it sometimes does not let it be or let it speak for itself.

But let's look now to see whether we discover something more distinctive if we turn to text. It is an interesting exercise to see what in *Common Worship* Holy Communion Order One is a distinctive Church of England text. Excluding the very small texts (such as the breaking of the bread text), which are often little more than scripture given a liturgical context, I find six sets of texts in the main order that were written specifically for the Church of England (though some of them have passed now into the rites of other churches).

- one, the Collect for Purity, predates the Reformation, is attributed to an English abbot of the eighth century, but in its present translation is by Cranmer.
- another, the Prayer of Humble Access, is a pastiche by Cranmer, and alongside it now we have a twentieth century equivalent, 'Most merciful Lord...', engaging with the same themes, with echoes of Cranmer's original.
- the Confession texts, both dating from the 1960s, though marginally revised.
- some of the Eucharistic Prayers, though one (C) draws heavily on Cranmer and the 1662 Prayer Book, one (B) has much in common with the eucharistic

prayers of other churches, for it and they draw on the Hippolytus text that is also used by the Roman Church, one (F) draws somewhat on the eastern Liturgy of Basil, and one (G) owes much to a modern ecumenical text. In all the prayers, the mainstream congregational material – Opening Dialogue, Sanctus and Benedictus and Memorial Acclamations are ecumenical. But the presidential text in four of the prayers (A, D, E & H) could be said to be English and Anglican, even if the shape and structure is ecumenical.

- the first of the Invitations to Communion, ‘Draw near with faith...’, which was a 1960s attempt to hold on to the theological emphases of the Prayer Book words of distribution and to spell out the meaning in the somewhat balder ‘The Body of Christ’ of briefer modern words of distribution.
- the two Post Communion Prayers, ‘Almighty God, we thank you...’, and ‘Father of all, we give you thanks and praise...’, both of which, though belonging to the Series 3 / Rite A era have quickly established themselves as classical unitive Anglican-texts.

My own belief is that we can be proud of all these texts. They are good and satisfying pieces of writing, all but some of the new Eucharistic Prayers already tried and tested. But whether they add up to something distinctively Anglican needs further examination, not least under a doctrinal microscope. The most striking thing about our Eucharistic liturgy is not its Anglican distinctiveness, but its ecumenical convergence – it is predominantly a rite of common texts.

But, before turning to the question of doctrine, there is just one related matter to insert. In some ways it is a bit of special pleading, but there is a good reason for it. If we turn from the mainstream eucharistic text to the supplementary eucharistic material, we find a lot of scriptural liturgical text, a lot of text that is the common heritage of the churches, and just a little creative writing that is absolutely new. Among that quite small body of writing are the Prayers at the Preparation of the Table. Here we were trying to escape from the over-used ‘Yours, Lord is the greatness...’ and the ubiquitous Roman Offertory Prayers (‘Blessed are you...’) and to create some prayers that heightened anticipation and tuned us in for the Eucharistic Prayer, but did not anticipate it or detract from it. It was Michael Vasey who wrote most of them. They have a wonderful throw-away-line quality that means they don’t compete with the solemn prayer that follows, but they also have a wonderful freshness and vitality.

*Be present, be present,  
Lord Jesus Christ, our risen high priest;  
make yourself known in the breaking of bread.*

*Look upon us in mercy not in judgement;  
draw us from hatred to love;  
make the frailty of our praise  
a dwelling place for your glory.*

Real quality, real originality. Distinctively Anglican? Yes, but only until another church has the wisdom to import them!

## Worship and doctrine

But let's turn to doctrine. Not that doctrine was off the agenda when those Prayers at the Preparation of the Table were written. Is our liturgy distinctive when we insist on using our own translations of common texts? Long synodical hours went into the wording of the Lord's Prayer, and Anglicans are still asking not to be led into temptation, rather than saved from the time of trial. Only the Church of England could set up a Revision Committee on the Lord's Prayer! And similarly with the creed and the infamous 'ek', which we now translate as 'from' because it is theologically more helpful than 'of'. Do we want to be distinctive by having our private Church of England versions of ecumenical texts? Presumably only if doctrine is at stake, and some thought it was over those two issues.

Why, when we are free to intercede in any words we like, are we required to select from an admittedly large collection of texts when we want to confess and be absolved? Again, because doctrine is at stake. Confession and absolution brings us into the world of the cross and the atonement and the words must be right so that the doctrine can be orthodox. Why, if we want a variation from the creed in order to express our common faith, must the texts be called affirmations of faith, not creeds, why must they be scriptural, why must they have synodical approval? Why not just choose a credal song, whether your inclination be John Henry Newman or Graham Andrew Kendrick? Because the creeds of the church are universally agreed and doctrine is at stake.

Why confuse liturgy and doctrine or at least connect them? The answer is at two levels. One is not a particularly Anglican answer. It must be true, must it not, that the words (sung or said) that we use repeatedly in worship must shape and mould our belief? The prayer I say over and over again must impact on my theology. That may be unconscious. That may be unintended. But it is bound to happen. It places an obligation on all worship leaders and all who create liturgical texts, including hymns and songs, to get the theology right, as far as they are able, and the balance right too, lest we produce Christians with inadequate, imbalanced or straightforwardly heretical beliefs.

But then there is a more Church of England sort of answer that goes a stage further and says, 'We are a church that reveals what it believes, what its theological emphases are, what is distinctive about its doctrine, not in confessional statements, of which we are remarkably short, but in its liturgy. If you want to know what we believe, see and hear us worship.' It is not therefore just a matter of saying that liturgy inevitably carries doctrine, but liturgy is where we choose to enshrine it and guard it or perhaps, if we are honest, to change it. When someone is licensed for a new ministry in the Church of England, they make a declaration in which they recognize that the doctrinal stance of the Church of England is to be found in its historic formularies – The Thirty Nine Articles of Religion, the Book of Common Prayer and the Ordering of Bishops, Priests and Deacons. There is no avoiding it: two of those three are liturgical texts, and the third usually bound up with the other two in a liturgical volume. And, if we recognize that, despite what the law says, it is the liturgy we use week in week out that really forms us doctrinally, then *Common Worship* also needs to be doctrinally sound if people are not to be led astray.

Of course there are other reasons, apart from doctrine, why a degree of common text is desirable. They are reasons that relate to unity, memorability, spirituality. But, for our purposes today, the crucial truth is that, being the kind of Church we have been, only sound liturgy has been able to ensure sound doctrine. It is why the General Synod approaches liturgical revision as a doctrinal exercise. Nobody understood that better or cared about it more in the General Synod of the 1990s more than the then Proctor for the Universities of Durham and Newcastle! Where there is total freedom to draw on texts that have not been scrutinized by the Church and to create texts of one's own, doctrinal integrity is under threat. Part of the answer to the question posed in this lecture has to be 'Anglican liturgy must be just as distinctive as Anglican doctrine', which might be a way of handing the whole issue over to the Doctrine Commission. It certainly accounts for why the House of Bishops sees itself having a particularly responsibility for liturgy and often displays a sense of unease when variety multiplies.

### **Freedom and the limits of freedom**

One of the difficulties we face in this area is how to legislate both for freedom and for the limits of freedom. There is a case that can be made that, if in this post-modern world where choice is inevitable, you want to set limits, broad limits, but limits nevertheless, you treat people as adults, you spell out to them the freedom they are being given, but you trust them also to understand and to accept the limits of that freedom. Michael Vasey, with his strong interest in law and liturgy, went with that view. I confess to being less convinced. I fear there may be more truth in the view that, if you extend freedom, and create a culture of freedom, people will then claim it, rather unthinkingly, even in the areas in which it has not been given. I'm not at all sure; the jury on the issue is still out.

In relation to Eucharistic Prayers, for instance, it is always somewhat disheartening, when one has seen the number of authorized prayers grow from one to four and then to eight, to hear a clergyman say 'I don't know why you bothered. None of your prayers suit the needs of my parish. But I wrote one myself one Saturday night and used it next day and everything thinks it is just right, especially because it is so short, and we use it all the time now.' Has the proliferation of prayers created a culture where people will write their own? And does it matter? I think it does, for both good liturgy and sound doctrine are at stake.

Michael Vasey and I disagreed over another instance – again I don't know which of us, if either, will be proved wise in course of time. It was to do with the lectionary. Michael, with his keen desire to incorporate and include, wanted to bring all those (mainly evangelical) churches that ignore the lectionary and work out their own cycle of readings, usually related to termly preaching themes, within the law, and believed that, if we created for three quarters of the year, a lectionary open season where people would be free, within the law, to choose their own scripture readings, we could hope that in return we might persuade them, for the remaining weeks (which would coincide with the Christian year at its most powerful, the weeks before and after Christmas and Easter) to go with the rest of the church in reading the set lections and so ensure a sense of the whole church reading the scriptures

together through the key periods of the year. I was a bit cynical about that. With others I was not convinced that the best way of commending a new lectionary was at the very same time to introduce a new freedom not to use it. It seemed to us quite a serious departure from Anglican practice where most of the church has been in step in the reading of scripture on most Sundays of the year. So, although we did respond to a call for an open lectionary season, it was far shorter than Michael advocated, not much more than the Sundays after Trinity. Again, the question was about whether you did better to free up the law, and then set limits, or to hold on to the law lest you create a culture when people claim absolute freedom. As I have said, the jury seems still to be out. But I do believe that a congregational culture would mark a significant departure in Anglican self-understanding.

### **Learning from cathedral worship**

I'd like to return now to William Laud and soon I must bring in Saint Benedict too. What was Michael Vasey on about in accusing some of his friends of 'laudianizing' the liturgy of the Church of England? I think he was suspicious of the influence of the cathedral world – members of the Liturgical Commission tend to start life innocently as parish priests with good street credibility, but then get appointed to the cathedrals and, allegedly, climb immediately into ivory towers. It happened to me, to Jane Sinclair, to Jeremy Haselock, and David Stancliffe was there before us. Some of us had plans to do it for Michael himself, but God had something better planned for him. He was suspicious of liturgy that might be too well ordered, too tasteful, too aesthetically pleasing, a beauty of holiness that might exclude spontaneity and lack passion. I can see the danger.

But let me reflect with you for a few minutes about cathedral worship, at least at its best (and it isn't always at its best) because I think it has had a deep influence on broader Anglican worship and still has a very significant contribution to make. And I hope this won't sound as if it is coming from one of those ivory towers. My own cathedral in Derby is a city centre, walk off the streets and through glass doors cathedral, in a multi-cultural city, and located in the heart of club-land. So we are not entirely disengaged from the real world, though of course we have a lot to learn.

Cathedral worship is not, principally, about those extraordinary one-off or annual occasions we lay on to meet a national crisis, or the death of a princess, or a football stadium disaster, or a harvest festival, or a British Legion millennium rededication of standards, or a carol service. It is not unrelated to those, but it is principally about what goes on day in day out, probably in the part of the cathedral called the Quire, where the foundation, which in practice means clergy, choir, vergers and holy hangers on gather to offer each day services of prayer and praise. As the child saw on the television: people enjoying singing and walking about in patterns.

There are three elements of that basic cathedral style that I want to mention.

The first is that it is community worship. There is not much sense of worship laid on to attract, it is not overtly missionary; it is much more a community at

prayer, with its house style, its own authenticity; there are no prima donnas, there isn't much individualism. It is collegial, corporate and communal.

The second is that it has a strong sense of continuity. Not always, but often, there is this long long history of prayer being valid on this spot through centuries. That is not to deny the validity of prayer in a brand new place; that's exciting and has its own freshness. But the sense of continuity through the generations, of clocking into something both timeless and also somehow much bigger and richer than the prayers we offer, is strong and encouraging. Of course the architecture often cries out 'Remember your heritage', but it is more than that: it is a consciousness of the communion of saints in the broadest sense.

And thirdly, it is worship, with the divine office as its base, that is highly scriptural (again scripture as prayer and praise and anthem, as much as scripture as lection), reflective and nearly always rather under-stated. There is movement, but it is not usually fussy. The scriptures are read with integrity and intelligibility, but not often dramatically. Silence is allowed to take over. In the prayers not too much gets spelt out. Quite a lot is left to the imagination and even more to God.

Let me repeat. I am describing an ideal. It isn't always experienced like that. Perhaps I have been fortunate. For I quite often have.

## **Benedict and English spirituality**

But where am I leading you? Not to William Laud, but to Saint Benedict. Never outside the Church of England have I felt so at home in worship as when I arrived one August day in 1980 in the Abbey Church at Le Bec in France, where at Vespers they were celebrating the anniversary of the death of their founder. Le Bec that gave us Anselm and Lanfranc. Le Bec where they live by the rule of Saint Benedict. The worship there in a foreign land was like a coming home. Later I worked at Norwich Cathedral, where, as elsewhere, it was four hundred and fifty years since the monks had left, but still you had a very deep sense of being their heirs, of having caught something of their spirituality. The followers of Benedict have been enormously influential in this land, together with the other religious orders that lived with variations on his rule, and I believe that Benedictine worship – strong on community, strong on continuity, strong on the divine office as the heart-beat of life, scriptural, reflective, under-stated (people singing to the Lord and walking about in simple patterns) – has greatly shaped the spirituality of our cathedrals (and not only the ones who do look back to a Benedictine faction, but even those like my own that started life as a college of secular priests and then were parish churches for several hundred years) and, through them, the spirituality of our Church of England.

This is an aside and I have no time to explore it further, but I sometimes wonder whether there isn't something just a little bit bogus about our current recovery in England of a Celtic Christianity that never took root through much of the land (whoever has heard of Celtic Kent?) and whether there might not be greater fruitfulness in searching for our Benedictine roots, more in touch with Europe, but with huge spiritual potential. Just a provocative thought for you to ponder.

I sometimes reflect on the huge spiritual influence of Basil Hume, his attractiveness to people outside his own communion and indeed outside the churches. In part it was of course a lovely humble holiness, even if he was not quite as much without guile as he was sometimes portrayed. But I think there was more to it than that. I do believe that the fact that he was a Benedictine monk was significant. He was a Roman Catholic and a monk, but he was very English and his spirituality seemed to engage with the English temperament. Now I can't define it more, it is an instinct more than something I can explain intellectually, but I do think that Benedictine worship and spirituality has greatly shaped Anglican worship and spirituality, that the Prayer Book has a Benedictine flavour to it and that, in the providence of God, that Benedictine/Anglican ethos has spoken to the English temperament, or even contributed to it. And, if there is any truth at all in that, it is worth teasing out, worth holding on to, and worth trying to mould afresh for a new generation.

Of course it is very dangerous to talk about the 'English temperament'. How can I begin to speak of it when I live in a multi-cultural city where there are a host of very different temperaments that ought to be able to call themselves English? How would my Benedictine theory hold up in a West Indian charismatic church in Derby? I don't want to claim too much. The strongest growth points in the Church are where there is free, charismatic, wonderfully over-the-top worship that would have driven Archbishop Laud to his grave had he not already lost his head by other means. Nevertheless, remember, in the harsh statistics of Anglican numerical decline, cathedrals buck the trend. Worshipers in them are on the increase. A more Laudian Church would be a disaster (Michael Vasey was right about that), but a more Benedictine Church might draw many to Christ.

We are told, are we not, that we live in an age when people have little time for religion, and less still for the Church, but that, more than any generation for a quite a long time, they are searching for the spiritual. Now this search for the spiritual may be very unfocused. Sometimes the search doesn't appear to be very determined or urgent. Sometimes this spirituality sounds a somewhat vacuous thing. Nevertheless, if we take people seriously, and if we take where they are seriously, with a relatively ill-defined search for the spiritual, we may find that some of the things that places like cathedrals have treasured may begin to speak again: the church as 'sacred mystery', the sacraments as windows into God, the life of prayer; they don't sound very fashionable, but any pursuit of the spiritual will, somewhere along the line, need to look at these afresh. There will be a return to roots and to the rock from which we have been hewn.

The need, I believe, is to allow different parts of the church to speak to one another. The charismatic evangelical with his freedom or her spontaneity in dialogue with the cathedral Benedictine world I have described. *Common Worship* sets out to encourage a cross-fertilization of traditions, the mixing of old and new, the meeting of structure and spontaneity, the beauty of holiness with an earthy engagement with the world.

## 'Deadly serious and great fun'

As I move towards my conclusion, I want to pause to look at one more question, more related to Michael Vasey than to Benedict or William Laud, though I think that on this particular matter all might be agreed. Jo Fison, who was a much loved Bishop of Salisbury in the 1960s and before that one of the line of immensely lively vicars of Great St Mary's Cambridge, and something of a prophet, used to say, with a wonderful twinkle in his eye, that Christianity was intended to be 'deadly serious and great fun'. It is a simple claim that always meant a lot to me and has been true for me and, although Jo used it more widely, I have always applied it particularly to Christian worship. Liturgy has always seemed to me to need to be both deadly serious and great fun. I have to say that, in the earlier years of my life, I nearly always encountered it as the former, but without the latter. And yet I sometimes fear today that we too often opt for a comfortable pleasing affirming sort of worship, that certainly has a lot of the Spirit of God in it, but lacks a real seriousness. We haven't entirely learned the art of being welcome and hospitable in worship while retaining the sense that we are engaged with matters of earth and heaven, life and death.

And I mention this now because one of the parts of *Common Worship* that people are finding difficult to use fruitfully is a part for which Michael Vasey laboured long (and I, incidentally, had minimal engagement). I'm speaking of the baptismal rite, which as you will know has many critics. Some of the criticism in terms of sheer wordiness is, I believe, justified, though the blame for it needs to be laid more at the feet of the Revision Committee than the Liturgical Commission. But the greater criticism is that it isn't a friendly rite, that the minister somehow fails when he or she tries to make people feel comfortable and at ease. But that is not what the rite is trying to do. The response it is trying to illicit is not 'Oh, this is fun, this is nice, what a lovely smiley baby and a smiley vicar too!' But, 'Wow, this is powerful, this is awesome, this is deadly serious, this is life-changing!' If you try to achieve the first with a rite that has the potential for the second, then neither will emerge. There are moments for much fun as well as for sheer joy in the liturgy, but there are also moments to challenge, moments of deadly seriousness, and facing an interrogation before a candidate for baptism is plunged into the water is surely one of them.

It is important to remember that the principal point of the liturgy is not the making of converts, nor is it the instruction of enquirers. It is that the people of God, the fellowship of the baptized, may offer prayer and praise to the Father through Christ, and find strength for daily living. Of course the liturgy does convert. People walk in off the streets and, just sometimes, are swept off their feet, by the authenticity, the beauty, the mystery or the challenge of what they encounter. And it is wonderful when God uses it in that way. But, even when he does, it moves people from unfaith into faith, but it doesn't teach them, instruct them, catechize them. The church needs to do that in all sorts of ways. Michael Vasey was more interested than most in the staging posts on the way into Christian discipleship and much of his good work there has still be received and used by the church. Alpha courses, Emmaus courses, Springboard experiences and much more are part

of how people come into faith and fellowship. Welcome and hospitality, Benedictine or otherwise, play their part. Liturgy does too, but, at its deepest, liturgy is the people of God enjoying themselves and enjoying their Creator as they engage in the deadly serious business of giving him glory and being fed in word and in sacrament.

## Conclusion

I have tried to tease out of what Anglican worship today consists. I have tried to show how that emerges from our history and how, in its new freedoms and varieties, it is very different from what has gone before; there has been a revolution. I have tried to discover where it remains distinctive. I have sought to explore the relationship of liturgy and doctrine. I have set out to commend the Benedictine strand of our story and to see whether it has not been more influential, and rightly so, than we have sometimes imagined. I have sought to honour a friend who gave so much to the liturgical enterprise of the last generation. But now I ought to conclude with a stab at an answer to the question with which I have been grappling. How distinctive should Anglican worship be?

The Church of England needs a liturgy that celebrates the variety of cultures in which we live and that rejoices in the ecumenical convergences of our day, but that is sufficiently distinctive to keep us in touch with our roots, to express and safeguard our doctrine and to allow us to continue to engage with the English character, however increasingly complex to define that character may be.

But let the last word be Michael Vasey's in another of those Prayers at the Preparation of the Table:

*Pour upon the poverty of our love,  
and the weakness of our praise,  
the transforming fire of your presence.*

**The Very Revd Michael Perham** is the Dean of Derby.