

Worship in a Sea of Diversity

ACLE Elective

Some years ago I saw a rather gripping Australian film called **The Last Wave**. It was set in Sydney and told the story of somewhat unreligious, secular, well-educated young man who had become aware of the supernatural realm by his association with a group of urban Aborigines in Redfern. In the middle of the film, he visited his stepfather, an Anglican priest, and sought, rather unsuccessfully, to get help from him in dealing with his weird experiences. In exasperation he said to the hapless man, "Dad, you never told me that there were any mysteries." All indignant, his father replied, "That's not true! I've tried to explain the mysteries of Christianity to you again and again." At this the son exclaimed, "You never explained them, Dad; you explained them away!"

That little exchange sums up the dilemma that we face every day in our Lutheran schools. On the one hand, the academic world decrees that there are no mysteries. What appears to be a mystery is, they say, something unknown and as yet unexplained. The assumption is that everything is explicable. If we go along with that view in Christian studies and in our school devotions, we end up explaining the mystery of Christ away and producing practical atheists. On the other hand, popular culture is fascinated with mysteries. But it confuses mysteries with secrets and supposes that spirituality has to do with the occult. A good example of this is the **Da Vinci Code**. Those who possess the secret knowledge of the grail and the teaching associated with it are truly enlightened. They are superior to others because they can decipher the secret symbols and codes. Or take the Harry Potter books with their interest in power of magic! No wonder that so many of the students in our schools seem to be more fascinated by the manipulative and deceptive secrets of the occult and new age religiosity than the wonderful mystery of Christ.

Our dilemma is this. How can we, in school worship, enact the mystery of Christ in such a way that we do not explain it away, or use it to manipulate our students with deceptive promises of personal empowerment? This is, as you know, a huge topic. I want to focus on two things: worship as initiation into the mystery of Christ, and respect for the mystery that is enacted in it.

a. Worship as Initiation into the Mystery of the Risen Lord Jesus

A mystery is not the same thing as a secret. Even though both have to do with something that is hidden and unknown, a mystery differs from a secret in one important respect. A secret remains a secret only as long as you don't know it. Once it is revealed it ceases to be a secret, because a secret exists only as long as information is withheld or the facts are not yet known. But a mystery remains a mystery even when it is revealed. In fact, the more you know about it, the more mysterious it becomes. You may be able to explain a mystery, but you can never explain it away. It remains a mystery.

My basic contention is that Christian worship involves people in a mystery, something hidden from sight and all our other senses, something invisible and yet real, something

that is open to all and yet accessible only to those who are ready to receive it. St Paul speaks of it in this way in Colossians 1:25-28:

"I became the servant (of the church), according to God's commission that was given me for you, to make the word of God fully known, the **mystery** that has been kept hidden throughout the ages and generations but has now been revealed to his saints. To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of **this mystery**, which is **Christ among you**, the hope of glory."

Here Paul depicts himself as a mystagogue, a person who initiates others into a mystery that he himself has experienced. That mystery is the presence of the risen Lord Jesus with his people in the church. Through his teaching Paul discloses the mystery of Christ's dwelling with the saints, holy people who are united with Christ and so share in his holiness. He reveals the presence and activity of the risen Lord to them by speaking God's word to them, the gospel that proclaims Christ and brings "life and immortality to light" for its hearers (2 Tim 1:10). Apart from God's word and the Holy Spirit that comes to them through faith in his word, people have no access to the risen Lord Jesus; they have no knowledge or experience of him. That word initiates them into the mystery of Christ, something that no eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no human heart has ever conceived (1 Cor 2:6-10). Through Jesus they have access to God the Father (Eph 2:18). The disclosure of Christ's hidden presence gives them a glimpse of glory, a foretaste of heaven here on earth. Only those who hear God's word with the ears of faith receive Christ and his gifts. Even though his gifts are offered to everyone they are not forced on anyone.

Christian worship depends upon the presence of the risen Lord Jesus. Apart from him, it does not work properly, nor can it work properly. When we gather for worship Christ serves us and gives his gifts to us. He involves us in his own interaction with God the Father. This means that worship is divine service, God's service of us in Christ and our service of God through Christ. We do not worship an absent Christ who deals with us from afar, but Christ who is present with us to serve us. Everything that we receive in worship comes to us through Christ, just as we act together with Christ in everything that is done in it. It is all a matter of grace, the free gift of God the Father to us in Christ.

We will not know what to do in school worship unless we realise that the work of Jesus as mediator did not end with his ascension. When he ascended he made it quite clear to his apostles that he would be present in the church with his disciples to the close of the age (Matt 28:20). After his ascension he became invisibly present with them in such a way that his presence transcended the normal limitations of time and space and matter (Eph 4:10). In the prologue to the book of Acts Luke goes one step further. He says: "In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus **began** to do and teach until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen." The key word here is "began." Luke claims that Jesus continues his ministry in word and deed among his disciples in the church. That's why we read from the gospels and tell the stories of Jesus in our times of worship. Those readings and stories from the gospels do not just tell us what Jesus said and did long ago; they tell us what Jesus says and does now in the assembly of his disciples. There the risen Lord Jesus

interacts with them through his word and his Holy Spirit; there Jesus also leads them in their prayers and praises to God the Father.

My basic contention is that those who teach the Christian faith and conduct devotions in church schools are called to be mystagogues. Their task is to initiate members of the school community into a wonderful mystery that seems so ordinary and yet is almost too good to be true, a mystery that evades our grasp and beggars our imagination. The focus of that mystery is on the presence of the crucified and risen Lord Jesus and on access to the heavenly realm through him in worship. Yet involvement in that mystery goes beyond what happens in chapel or class devotions, for it embraces the whole history of the world and the whole of our physical lives as we journey with Christ from earth to heaven. It will remain a mystery until the reappearance of Christ on the last day. Only then will all that is now hidden be disclosed for all to see.

Worship opens the door to participation in a heavenly mystery. It revolves around the hidden presence and activity of the risen Lord Jesus. While we may speak about it in the religious curriculum, just as we may speak about marriage without any direct involvement in it, worship actually gives us access to Jesus and God the Father through Jesus. It delivers the goods. There Christ's hidden presence is revealed through reading and speaking and singing his holy word. There people may, if they wish, respond to him in prayer and praise. There, as God's word is rightly enacted, people have access to heaven here on earth.

b. The Proper Enactment of Mystery in School Worship

We have no choice but to make provision for worship if we wish to teach the Christian faith to our students. There is, as far as I can gather, agreement among us that apart from the experience of worship, religious instruction is largely theoretical and unconnected with reality. The problem is how to do it in such a way that our efforts are not counterproductive, for it is really hard to maintain regular compulsory school worship, without either compromising its integrity, or violating the consciences of students and teachers.

How then can we have worship that is appropriate to our schools and yet true to the wonderful mystery of Christ?

It is, I hold, necessary to work within the given parameters of our schools. Even though they have been set up by the church, their primary business is education rather than worship. In this they differ from our congregations. Schools cannot do all that is done by a congregation. They do not enact the full mystery of Christ with the service of word and sacrament; at the most they initiate disciples into that mystery by teaching them to listen to God's word as it speaks to their consciences, and by teaching them how to respond God's voice in prayer and praise and self-giving love.

There are, I maintain, five keys to the appropriate presentation of the mystery of Christ in school worship that I put before you for our consideration.

1. We must be quite unapologetic about its value and fully convinced of its importance. All too often those who are responsible for worship in our schools seem to give the impression that they regard worship as an optional addition to the school program, like pottery, instead its core. Yet if the Christian story is true, then those who do not worship the triune God are missing out on the very best thing that we have to offer to our students, a foretaste of heaven here on earth, the prospect of sharing in the divine life of the Holy Trinity already now in this life, the foundation for the enjoyment of everything else in life. So let's do all we can to highlight its importance and to insist on its relevance to the educational enterprise.

2. We should present the mystery of Christ as good news rather than a crippling obligation, the free gift of good things for all those who wish to receive them. We are, I fear, so intimidated by our secular culture that we try to be relevant to our students by using our times of worship to promote right values, or to instruct them in morality, or to entertain them with their music. Is it any wonder, then, that they reject what we offer? Yet we have something better than the best things on offer in our culture. We have the privilege of offering and celebrating Christ himself, present among us and available to all who receive him in faith. In worship we have access to God's grace and all his heavenly blessings through Jesus. Yet all that is hidden from our eyes. It is revealed only through his word and Holy Spirit. We must then use the Bible with all its sayings and stories as a mystery book that unpacks the hidden riches of Christ for us. So let's be bold in using the whole of the Bible to reveal the mystery of Christ and his good gifts to those who are open to receive it.

3. The mystery of Christ needs to be presented and enacted ritually. In school worship we are often far too verbose and didactic. The emphasis needs to be on doing, whether it be on ritual enactments like giving a blessing and placing ashes on the forehead on Ash Wednesday, or on involvement in ritual acts like joining in prayer and by silence before God, or on ritual posture like kneeling and standing for saying the creed, or on ritual gestures like making the sign of the cross and the folding of hands. This has a special appeal and power for children in primary school. With the use of appropriate ritual comes the use of sacred space and sacred furniture, such as an altar in a classroom with a crucifix and candles, and the celebration of the church year with its festivals, seasons and days of commemoration. By ritual we enact what we believe in such a way that others can join with us in receiving God's gifts. Let's then teach God's word by enacting it in school worship.

4. The mystery of Christ is best celebrated and presented imaginatively to young people who have been steeped in television and formed by it. This calls for the use of visual arts and drama in school worship. We do not have to start from scratch in this, for we have a rich tradition of the use of colour and symbols for the various seasons of the church year as well as a rich tradition of Christian art and icons. Much fine Christian art is now available electronically in a way that can be put on power point and readily projected onto screen for use in school worship. Above all else, the stories of the Bible can be told and retold imaginatively so that those who hear them can envisage what they say, and

begin to see what is good. I know of nothing that kindles a deep sense of spiritual awe and wonder than God's word that has touched the fresh imagination of a young person. Let's then use God's word to appeal to the imagination of our students and to refine it, so that they are freed from captivation by the vision of darkness, and attracted to the good things that God gives so richly for our enjoyment.

5. We need to avoid the ritual abuse of students and staff by violating their consciences. This is inconsistent with the mystery of Christ, a mystery that is available only as a gift and received only in faith. The plain fact is that our schools are diverse mixed communities that have large numbers of people who are not Christians, let alone Lutherans. Participation in compulsory worship may therefore lead to the violation of the conscience of unbelievers and believers if care is not taken in how it is done. So, on the one hand, worship should be organised in such a way those who are not Christians are not forced to say or do things that wrongly assume faith and commitment to Christ, such as singing songs about their love for Jesus. If these elements are included, permission must be given for students to opt out of involvement in anything that they do not yet believe. On the other hand, school worship should not be so watered down and deformed that Christians feel compromised by their involvement in it. The LEA *Statement on School Worship* is quite helpful in spelling out the implications of this quite concretely. It suggests that the following things should be avoided: a communal confession of sins, a communal confession of faith, required responses to prayers, calls for personal commitment, and participation in Holy Communion. It argues that school worship should rather focus on the following elements: Bible readings, telling Bible stories, Gospel messages based on the Bible, prayers for the school and the world, blessing, optional singing of songs (and psalms?), group silence for meditation and contemplation, and ritual acts. However school worship is done, both believers and unbelievers need to respect each other and do nothing to belittle anyone's involvement or lack of involvement.

Conclusion

Australian schools are confronted with impossible demands. As a nation we expect far too much of our education system and too little of our families. Lutheran schools have additional demands from the church to take on the task of evangelisation, nurture and spiritual formation. To make matters even more difficult, the diversity of our schools and their uncertain future in the open market for education make it harder than ever to achieve much in Christian education. Lutheran schools therefore need to be modest and realistic in their expectations about what can be done in school worship. Such modesty is based on the sound conviction that, even at its best, Christian education is a matter of sowing rather than growing and reaping. The only valid criterion for its effectiveness is how well the good seed of the gospel has been sown. The growth and the harvest come from God.

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