

22nd March 2021

Performance

**“And, pleased th’ Almighty’s orders to perform,
Rides in the whirlwind, and directs the storm.”**

Joseph Addison, The Campaign (1705)

In a recent discussion with minister colleagues, the conversation turned to the styles of worship emerging in our churches during the Covid-19 pandemic. With Zoom worship, live-streaming, digital uploads, church YouTube channels, the use of social media platforms and much more besides, what will “stick” and make our worship continue to be different, and what will we hold onto from the “traditional”? And if there’s to be a combination of things, are our church buildings designed for the kind of creativity that appears to be developing?

From the Anglo-Catholic “high altar” to the central pulpit in mainstream Presbyterianism, from the “cathedral” lay-out of many buildings to the “fixed pews” in most, church buildings are designed for “performance”. The hope is that the “audience”, in the form of an attentive, but primarily passive, congregation sits, watches, wonders, focusses, marvels at what’s happening in front of them. Sometimes, all that’s lacking is the applause.

In the Middle Ages, the sermon was an occasion for a great performance – *and* a news bulletin. In 17th and 18th century England, the sermon developed into a literary form in the hands of the celebrities of the day. In Presbyterian Scotland, many still yearn for the days of “the preaching station” and the great sermonisers.

I will never decry the value and inspiration of a declamatory sermon or the drama of a sung Communion. I’m sad that there are fewer great orators and communicators known throughout the Church these days. But I believe that the “auditorium” style of churches is a barrier to the creativity many crave, and can offer, in contemporary and relevant worship.

Let performance be in the stirring of people’s souls, the raising of people’s commitment, the inspiring of people’s love, in whatever way. And let *us* then go and “perform” the Gospel, beyond our auditorium walls, out in the world where Christian performance is needed most.

A prayer for today

Lord, as you perform your wonders for me, is my performance for you up to scratch?

An original reflection by © Tom Gordon

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