

Perspectives



On Going to Church in Cape Town

To what degree, in Christian worship, is the medium the message? A troubling question, for the medium of this morning's worship, no doubt about it, was colonialism: the architecture, the trappings, the language, the accents, the pulpit tone, the priestly presence, the prayer books—the whole culture of the service was British colonial.

I write on a Sunday afternoon here in southernmost Africa, with a stiff salt breeze coming in the window from the Indian Ocean, and I think about Jeremiah, and I wonder about the church.

“Do not,” said Jeremiah, “trust in these deceptive words: ‘This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD’” (Jer 7:4), but I fear we do. One could with no difficulty have walked into worship this morning and been swept away in one's imagination to a British country church. Indeed, little imagination would have been required. And could one not thereby think that, despite the political and cultural collapse of colonialism outside the doors of this Anglican sanctuary, *this* at least, this little bit of Britain, *this* is the temple of the Lord?

Such rumination suggests that my most recent crosscultural adventure has already done its work: to make us see ourselves from a different perspective. The point of all this for me is hardly to try to “fix” this little congregation on the African cape, which no doubt exercises in the name of Christ faithful ministry of which I have no knowledge, but to address the church for which I have some responsibility. And there, too, I fear, the medium may make the message difficult to hear. Here in South Africa, the outsider quickly sees the remnants of colonialism in the culture of Anglican worship, simply because, as an outsider, without the numbing effect of familiarity, one does in fact “see.” And what would the outsider see if she walked into the congregations with which I am familiar? What culture informs them—or worse, tames them?

My fear is that the first impression of many American congregations experienced by most non-American Christians would be how terribly wealthy we are and how desperately needy of “success”—success in the American sense of growth and edifices and busy-ness. That is, they would see just how American we are. But is that so bad? Is the church not to be contextual in, even incarnational of the culture to which it is called? Yes, of course, but then my morning's crosscultural experience comes into play again. Is this congregation on the African cape called to be “colonial,” echoing no doubt the fervent contextual hopes of many of its parishioners? Well, no. Just as American congregations have no “call” to be rich. Incarna-

tional, yes, but incarnational of what? Certainly not, I hope, of the most ephemeral and most trivial aspects of our culture, like wealth and entertainment and frenzy and celebrity. But if we are not to be lulled into such shallow contextualization, which alienates those outsiders who do not share these “values” or tames the message for those who do, making them feel all too quickly at home, what will incarnational depth look like in an American church? What is the true wealth that will make us a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord (Isa 62:3), appropriately both attractive and challenging to those who care to look?

Jeremiah’s sermon might help us with that question, even if it will not comfort us: “For if you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly act justly one with another, if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt, then I will dwell with you in this place” (Jer 7:5-7a). What if that is what an outsider saw who entered our doors unawares?

Now, to be honest, words that matched Jeremiah’s concern were present in this morning’s Anglican worship. And I have no reason to doubt that there were congregational and individual works to go along with the words. But the outsider (me) was put off by the trappings of privilege and power that made me skeptical of the words. And would not another outsider have been similarly put off by the trappings of congregations I have served and in which I have worshiped: *These* are the quintessential doers of compassion and justice in the world?

Jeremiah’s words are hard, for, taken seriously, they seem to deny our ever seeing church as “sanctuary,” for we will never be worthy to be “safe,” worthy to have God dwell among us. But, finally, we know as Isaiah knew, that it is God and only God who can make us a crown of beauty and a royal diadem. And, finally, it is God who sees us—ineffective as we are, whether in Cape Town or St. Paul—wearing the royal diadem of his Son’s thorns and who, for Jesus’ sake, dwells among us nevertheless. But that only makes us the more eager to resemble to others what God sees in us, does it not? That only makes it the more important for us to mirror the depths and the riches of human culture rather than its trivialities and excesses. A tough task. We will probably need the outsider’s eyes—here or at home—to help us figure it out.

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