

Article

Colouring in the dots - liberating different media to express worship

Did you ever see the cheesy but regrettably profound Warner Brothers film, *Happy Feet*?

The story concerns a group of penguins who each have a unique 'heart-song' which they use to attract a mate. But one day Mumble is born – a penguin with a terrible voice. Instead, Mumble has a talent that none of the other penguins have ever seen before... he can tap dance.

Hear the context

Are you listening? I hope so, because if you're not, you might miss most of what it's all about.

For most of us, personal devotions and corporate acts of worship have become mostly spoken and auditory, and for many of us, largely sung. And in corporate gatherings it's usually accompanied by teaching that is auditory too. There might be some pictures behind projected song words or some visual aids in a sermon or prayer time. And depending on where you meet, there might be some visual reminders in the fabric or decoration of your place of worship. Occasionally, you might see a dance or a drama. But right across our denominations and the spectrum of theologies, you will find a lot of words.

There is of course absolutely nothing wrong with this on one level. Christian language is rich with symbols, stories and images which bring the words alive. Many of the things we say and sing have an amazing resonance, having been crafted or repeated over hundreds of generations – there is rhythm, beauty and variety. Songs have a special place in the Bible. And of course the Bible itself is the Word.

But research into learning styles and the way that most people process the world around them has revealed that a staggeringly small percentage of people (less than two per cent) are primarily *auditory processors*. Instead, nearly thirty per cent process things by touch, sense and experience, or *kinaesthetically*, and a huge seventy per cent literally see the world *visually*.

Rhythm and music do connect with us all, but clearly we are missing the first language of a huge number of people if we limit our corporate worship to only include word and song.

Does it matter to God?

At one level - definitely not

The media, and even the individual songs and prayers we use as we come together in worship are far less important than the hearts behind them, and the lives lived which give them authenticity. (See John 4:23 and Isaiah 58, Amos 5:21-24 and Matthew 25:31-36).

Our worship is for God, not for ourselves. It often involves a choice to engage whether the medium of expression is our own or not, and no matter how we are feeling. It isn't about entertaining ourselves, or putting on a show. It's all for him. Whether we express it in a way that connects with us is not the primary objective.

But on another level - perhaps

God passionately cares about each individual. Each one carries a unique facet of his image. Each one is precious. And he longs to meet with them all – is eager to receive their specific heart-felt worship.

If you chat to a group of Christians about how they seek to meet God in their personal lives, or to gain his perspective, you will probably hear some consistency, but also quite a lot of variety. Some walk in nature, some listen to a lot of worship music, others paint, meditate in silence, or dance. Some run, some try fasting, some like written prayers, some spontaneous in-the-moment songs and prayers.... the list goes on.

The Bible will nearly always come up in people's worship, but even here there are variations - some people find remembering verses or reading lots of text difficult, whilst others can't get enough scripture. And the parts of the Bible they hold most dear to their personal walks are all different.

And when you talk to Christians who place an emphasis on listening to God and receiving guidance, you will also hear a variety of answers. Typically people feel there are a number of different ways they hear from God, but one or two are usually predominant. Many feel led to scripture references, or particular passages, some feel a sense, or experience God underlining song lyrics. Others see pictures or symbols, and some feel they receive the greatest revelation when outside in God's creation.

Often, if you know these people, you realise that the primary ways they find it easiest to connect with, or find they often 'hear' through are related to their core identities as individuals. This is no accident – God knows them inside out – he created them. He knows their first language – whether that is spoken or not. Zephaniah 3:17 describes the Father literally singing over us. He is going to make sure we understand his voice at the deepest core of our spirits.

God is the creator of words and music. But he is also the master designer who came up with nature, painting, sculpture, crafts, sport, movement, posture and dance. He created writers and musicians. But he also created nature-lovers, artists, athletes and dancers.

Worship shouldn't be defined as dots on the page. Instead, it should seek to find expression for everyone to connect with. Those strong in one area should lead and teach the rest of us until all areas of our lives come alive with the joy, variety and colour of worshipping him.

And then there's God's passion for the outsider...

For many people, the fact that corporate worship is expressed so exclusively through sound is not really a problem. Their primary language might not be words or music, but they do understand it. They have learnt to focus more on this area in worship and they enjoy it. They are comfortable with its limitations because they expect them, and perhaps they consider that their own first language might be a block for others, and assume that music and words are good for everyone.

But how would you fare in most of our churches if you were illiterate, only poorly educated, or had English as your second or third language? Would you find much that spoke to you if you had learning difficulties? And if you were deaf or had a speech impairment of some kind, would you feel these struggles were constantly highlighted? What if you were simply tone-deaf or just really didn't relate to music? Or new to church so unfamiliar with all the language that is used and constantly faced with learning tunes you didn't recognise simply to join in?

Then, perhaps our worship, with its almost exclusive focus on word and song, would make you feel like an outsider.

Right through the Bible God's passion for the broken and the outsider is stated again and again. And the 'stranger' and 'outcast' are repeatedly included in the groups which God asks his people to proactively consider and care for.

Does it matter to people?

For all the reasons above, clearly it does.

The church is a body, and if we are not using or stimulating all of the body parts at some point, then we are not functioning correctly. And that affects us all – whether we are the over active mouth, or the overly passive feet.

And then for the individuals within the body...

Probably the biggest group of people adversely affected are those who are missing out on the chance to fully express their worship in the context of the body as a whole. For some of these, that may also mean that they are missing out on expressing their worship in their personal devotions as well. Many people derive an understandable sense of permission (or in some cases even definition) for their personal devotion from what they experience in corporate devotion. Or it may mean that they mistakenly define themselves as 'not really being worship people' because they are not musical.

Out of this group, there are also a smaller group who are missing out on their call and gifting to lead and inspire others through this medium of worship.

Others, most concerningly, may actually be feeling excluded as they are struggling to access our expression of worship at all. And, if they are new to church, or struggle to understand, they may think this means they don't understand, or 'are no good at' worship. When of course, nothing could be further from the truth – we are all created as worshippers.

Perhaps surprisingly, the other big group missing out are some of those whose first language is words and/or music. For some, this is because the continual reinforcement of their primary language of devotion is preventing them from learning different forms which might bring them great joy and different types of connection. For others, it is because their skills in this area are very high and so it is difficult to avoid their worship becoming about the excellence of the channel being used, and their own skill in expressing it. For a few, there is the added loss of always needing to lead, or be on the leading edge, therefore missing the refreshing and life-giving experience of being led and taught by another area of the body in worship.

We are not talking about individualism or idolatry

There are perhaps two things that might frighten us as modern Christians from pursuing a broadening of worship expressions in corporate gatherings.

One concern is founded on a right desire to be different to our context

We live in a post-modern world where everyone gets to choose their own adventure. Culture tells us you don't have to be the same as others; that as long as you don't actively hurt anyone, you can do what you want, where you want, with whoever you want and when you want.

The church of Christ, though it suffers from divisions which make it more similar to its context than it should be, is not built on this premise. We have a shared story and a shared redemption. Actively seeking to love and prefer your brothers and sisters means preferring what they want, going where they are, being with them all (rich, poor, old, young, male, female, educated, non-educated, black, white...) and trying to do this at set times so that everyone can

lay aside the time to come together. It stands to reason that if you have thirty people in a room, let alone three hundred, or ten thousand, you can't possibly tailor the corporate worship so that it resonates with the personal preferences of everyone present. Nor should you be offering so much variety that either nothing has any depth, or people are offered choices which lead to the body fragmenting into like-minded sub groups...

What we *are* suggesting, is that over a course of any given period, there is a range of expressions to be explored, experimented with, or incorporated.

The other concern is founded on our inherited church view

Many of us have inherited a distrust of visual arts, performance and nature as media for connecting with God.

The Reformation brought us the Bible in England and a revolutionary understanding of the grace and power of Christ's work on the cross. But in the desire to reform some of the excesses of wealth, idolatry and the power of the church, we lost, or became wary of some very precious things. One of these things to affect the UK particularly was an overly suspicious attitude to the visual. Compounded by Puritanism and Cromwell, our churches were stripped bare. And many of us have never had the confidence to come back to the middle again.

In addition, with our pragmatic, western minds, we have a distrust of anything that isn't rational and intellectual. Even Charismatic Christians who place an emphasis on the things of the Spirit can still be wary of the 'mystical' – whether that is symbolic art which is open to interpretation, or meeting God through nature and loving his creation which we fear might be too close to paganism or the New Age movement.

But God is the inventor and creator extraordinaire. He invented art. He is visual. He personifies beauty. He is the sunset painter and the one who invented white sound in rushing waterfalls. He made creation speak of his existence so no one could miss out (Psalm 19:1-4) and he made humans all as unique expressions of his image - dancers, runners, poets, musicians, artists... everything good comes from him, and speaks of him. All these gifts were given to help us to recognise our Father, and have relationship with him.

We don't want to have such a focus on the arts, beauty, or nature that we go to the other extreme and become overly preoccupied with other forms of expression. We don't want to leave behind the life, truth and meaning of words and music that help us express and reflect something of God. We don't want to put on such a technicolour display of excellence and stimulus that we are distracted from looking at the simple lines of the empty cross.

But we surely do want to recapture some of what we've lost, so that we can know God more, and worship him more fully.

We're not even primarily talking about being culturally relevant

We live in very visually dominated times – TV, video games, advertising – we are barraged by thousands of images on a daily basis. 'A picture speaks a thousand words' is the mantra of the digital age.

It is true that we need to consider this when we think about new Christians in particular. People are not used to the same number of words, or the same length of solid talking that they were, and it's important to bear this in mind.

But we don't want to mimic the world. And that's not what we're talking about. We're not really talking about making our worship visual, or more stimulating to different senses, or imitating certain styles or emphases.

What we're suggesting is much more profound – a commitment to learn all over again. A desire to connect with all the timeless media that God has given us (as well as the modern technological tools for expressing them); to learn

from the heritage of Old Testament Judaism, and the Christian church through the ages, and across the denominations in this country and throughout the world; and to allow the people of God to express their diverse and incredible depths of worship to their Father.

One step at a time

Back to Mumble the penguin then... over time, his dancing feet did convince a female penguin of his love for her.

Let's be patient. Let's admit where the problems lie, and begin to prayerfully experiment. Retaining all the brilliant things we have learnt in our auditory phase, let's also begin to try to dance, kneel, paint, and see...

Let's release a new generation of worshippers and worship leaders alongside the musicians, and let's never forget to put it all – every expression, media and revelation – into action when we walk on to the streets to love like Jesus.