Common Worship and the formation of the people of God

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We must not claim too much for the liturgy. Christians are formed in the likeness of Christ in a number of ways and their participation in worship is only one of them. But it can be a very rich and fruitful one. Ten years into the Church of England’s Common Worship, can we say confidently that it has been significant in the process of liturgical formation? Its architects, producing material right through the 1990s and still producing it well beyond publication of the Sunday volume of Common Worship, certainly intended that it should do so. My own view is that it has indeed done so in a number of ways, but that the major task, to which the Liturgical Commission set its hand after 2000, of helping people to understand the liturgy and to celebrate it well is still in its early days.

Perhaps one should explore that first. The Common Worship volumes are principally about text. It is bound to be so in a church where every line of liturgical writing has to be argued over in revision committees and synods before ever it is authorised. There has been a new breadth and freedom in that Common Worship does provide much more in the way of background essays, extended notes and helpful rubrics designed to help the worshipper and the worship leader to take as much care about the actions, gestures, music, style and architectural setting of the worship, but still what comes across is that these are chiefly books of texts. In general the Church has embraced these texts and they have brought real enrichment to the Church’s life. But in many places the new texts are still being used within a celebration in which there has been little fresh thinking about how the community gathers, how the liturgical space is used, how all the senses are best employed and, most crucially, how a collection of individuals gathering for worship can be drawn into a deep communal experience of shared encounter of the living God. There is a huge transformation task still to be accomplished. Common Worship helps, but no more than that.

That said, let me explore briefly three areas where I believe Common Worship has brought about important change and genuinely helped the people of God to be more formed in the likeness of Christ.

The first is through the lectionary, because I believe that, through the Revised Common Lectionary that was adopted for Common Worship we have recovered a satisfactory way of reading the scriptures. Through the Alternative Service Book 1980 years, the Sunday readings followed narrow pre-determined themes and made the scriptures fit these themes so that there was never a settling into a book of the Bible and allowing it to unfold its theology and its message over a period of time. The Revised Common Lectionary, especially where churches take seriously the reading of all the provision, with its insistence on exploring the text, not falling back on a pre-determined theme, can bring the Bible alive for people. Where people are finding their way into it through lectio divina, and there seems to be a growing number of people exploring the weekly readings through that approach together,
people are enabled to meet Jesus in a dynamic way and so enter more deeply into the mind of Christ.

The second is through the Christian year. Of course Common Worship built on the earlier work of the Liturgical Commission in Lent, Holy Week, Easter (1984, 1986) and The Promise of His Glory (1990, 1991), but it is in the careful restating of the seasons and the provision of seasonal material in the Common Worship main volume, and even more, in the Common Worship Times and Seasons (2006) volume that the Church has been given most helpfully provision that enables the Christian community and the Christian individual to enter into the mind of Christ by reliving the events of the life of Jesus and, most significantly, to walk with him through the days of his passion. Those who keep close to Christ through Lent, join in as he enters the holy city on Palm Sunday, allow their feet to be washed, as if by him, on Maundy Thursday, come to the cross on Good Friday and wait with him on Easter Eve, do more than enter his mind. In a sense they get inside his skin. They catch something of his love for the Father and for the human race. Holy Week is at the heart of it, but the whole liturgical year, which Common Worship takes very seriously, is formative.

The third is the daily office. Here, of course, the Society of St Francis has had a special role, working with the Liturgical Commission to produce what was, in effect, the first draft of the Common Worship office book, Celebrating Common Prayer (1992). Its immediate popularity may have caught people by surprise, but demonstrated how much people were yearning for a daily office that would nourish and sustain them. Its publication brought to an end a period of, perhaps, 30 years during which many of the clergy abandoned the saying of a daily office and during which there was little to encourage lay people to clock into the Church's daily offering of liturgical prayer. Celebrating Common Prayer has given way to Common Worship Daily Prayer (2005), which is a fairly light revision. Its increasing use by clergy, by lay people, by people gathering in little communities, but also individuals using it on their own (especially "Prayer during the Day") is restoring to the Church a sense of a community at prayer, as well as providing a rich provision of liturgical material to feed the individual soul.

There is an area where we are not clear whether Common Worship has got it right. Have we too much variety? Are there so many texts that, rich and beautiful as they are, we are in danger of using any particular text so rarely, as we employ all the options, that we never commit it to memory, where it can nourish us and form us? Memorability is important in liturgy. That insight seemed to be lost in the late twentieth century. To some extent Common Worship has tried to reassert some limits by providing string sets of texts intended for use throughout a season, but in other ways it has gone with the fashion that variety must be better than repetition. I suspect it has been a fashion and that we shall come to value, as our forebears did, texts we used so often we needed no book in church, could draw them into our personal prayer and be thankful for them coming to our rescue in times of crisis. If we are to be formed in the likeness of Christ, we need words that inhabit our souls.