What’s the point of worship?

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What do we expect from worship? Our individual expectations will vary according to our experience, and to some extent, on how we are when and where we gather with other Christians for worship. Simply by going to church we may feel a sense of belonging, and by doing so come to feel refreshed and even inspired by what is said and sung and done in worship. But can we expect more? Jesus promised that when two or three gathered together in his name, he would be among them, and so it would not be unreasonable to hope that as we gather with others for worship, we will be met and addressed by God. But even if we believe that there can be moments of epiphany, times when we have a sense of being in the presence of God, can we expect anything to actually happen? At the empirical level, of course, a lot goes on during an act of worship. There is movement, singing, reading, different postures for prayer, and so on, but do we really believe that something can happen in worship that is more than meets the eye?

In my book, The Art of God, I reflected on the biblical and theological understanding that the God who created us in his image seeks to reshape us by the Spirit according to the pattern of his Son. There are, of course, many experiences in a person's life which can be formative, but perhaps it is in worship, especially through the celebration of the sacraments, that God is at work, shaping and re-shaping us more closely to the likeness of Christ. But if this can and does happen, if worship can change our lives, then perhaps we need to raise our expectations and approach worship with a greater openness and receptivity.

When we come to worship we invoke the presence of the triune God who seeks to shape, make and re-make us as Christians, and intentionally place ourselves before God in company with our brothers and sisters in Christ. And as we are encountered by God in worship, we consciously come into the presence of God, who, like the potter in the prophet Jeremiah's vision (Jeremiah 18.3-6) is wanting to reshape and fashion us again as his people, in and for the world. As the deacon announces in the preparatory prayers before the Divine Liturgy is celebrated in the Byzantine tradition: "It is time for the Lord to act!"

In the summer of 2009, I visited Salthouse church on the Norfolk coast, and in that wonderfully light building, drenched in sunlight, I saw a panel of medieval glass which showed a priest offering mass. Above the altar in this panel the stained glass maker had painted the hand of God appearing through striated clouds. Just how are we to read this? Perhaps as the German word for worship, Gottesdienst reminds us, liturgy is also God's work, literally God's service to us. And so, following the visual cue of the medieval glass panel, we could simply say that God has a hand in it. Indeed, when I looked at this image of the celebration of the mass with its symbolic depiction of the hand of
God, I was reminded of Irenaeus, the second century bishop of Lyons, who spoke of the 'two hands of God', that is Christ and the Holy Spirit. As we reflect further on the image of Christ's hand, let me cite the surprising clause found in a prayer of thanksgiving over the water of baptism in the *Leonine Sacramentary*, which asks that the invisible God may be operative in the baptismal washing: 'may your hand be hidden in this water'. The imagery of the hand of God was used by the great preacher John Chrysostom when he told candidates for baptism that they would be plunged down into the water of baptism by the hand of the priest and by the right hand of God. This imagery of the hand of God expresses the hope that the triune God will not only be present, but also active and at work in the sacramental action itself. What God, through the Spirit, is seeking to do is quite simply to form us into the likeness of Christ. This was certainly the message conveyed by Bishop Ambrose of Milan, who in addressing the newly baptized during Easter Week, said that in baptism we come to bear Christ's likeness (*similitudo*), and rise from the waters in Christ's image (*forma*).

This divine intention finds expression in a number of liturgical texts, from different periods of history and from a variety of theological traditions. The first example is drawn from the third of the four prayers which the radical early sixteenth century continental reformer Zwingli composed to replace the Canon (consecration prayer) of the Latin Mass:

> Grant us, therefore, merciful Father, through Christ your Son our Lord, through whom you give life to all things, and through whom you renew and sustain all things, that we may show him forth in our lives; so that the likeness which we lost in Adam may be restored.

This same articulation of the desired effect of our faithful participation in the Eucharist is neatly expressed in two of the Eucharistic Prayers of our own *Common Worship* Order of Holy Communion, in a clause that simply asks that through sharing in the Eucharist we may be formed in the likeness of Christ.

Again and again, the worshipping traditions of the church articulate not only in the words we use for worship, but in the very patterns of our corporate prayer, that God calls us to be icons of Christ, and exhorts us to bring him to expression in the way we live our lives. This, of course, is a view that is deeply embedded in the writing of St Paul, and he insisted that we could only show Christ to others by being ourselves conformed to the pattern of Christ's death and resurrection.

This brings me to my final example of a prayer which expresses what I describe as formational language. Again, it is a historic liturgical text and is a prayer from the *Leonine Sacramentary* for the Easter Vigil, at which we celebrate the paschal mystery of Christ's death and resurrection:

> 'May today's festive sacrifice please you, O Lord, so that we, in accordance with your grace, through this sacred exchange may become acquainted with the form (*in illius inveniamur forma*) of that thing in which our substance is joined to you.'
The key term in this complex construction is ‘form’, and indicates that it is through our participation in the Eucharist that by the working of God’s grace we are conformed more closely to that pristine *imago dei*, manifested by Christ, the new Adam, and the measure of full humanity (cf Ephesians 4.13). This, I suggest, is the end, the final formation and divine re-fashioning of our lives into the likeness of Christ. For in worship, God seeks to work on and through us so that Christ may

‘play in ten thousand places,
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
To the Father through the features of men’s faces.’

(Gerald Manley Hopkins, *As Kingfishers Catch Fire.*)