

Ritual plays an important part of our time together in worship. The pattern with which we carry out our services is important as it not only provides familiarity with an otherwise obscure set of actions, but it is also full of symbolism in order to reveal spiritual truths. Ritual is not only to be found in the church but can be found in many other areas of life. I am not talking about superstition here, such as a gambler who ensures he puts his lucky socks on in the right order, but the rituals which take place regularly as a means of bonding people together in a common belief. For example, the crossing of arms and shaking hands whilst singing Auld Lang Syne at new year is a form of ritual meant to bond us as a common humanity for the year ahead – you probably know the tune better with the words “Australia will be there”.

Perhaps most surprisingly, a rich source of ritual can be found at sports grounds every week. For example, in soccer, along with the actions that take place on the pitch (the toss of the coin, shaking hands, exchange of banners and so on) the crowd are also deeply involved in the ritual of the game. This is most evident in the chants that can be heard from the terraces.

As a lad growing up in Middlesbrough I was lucky enough to live a kilometer away from Ayresome Park where my local team played. Every home game there we could hear the songs and chants from the terraces (even though our gentle ears didn't understand some of the actual words themselves). And there were special songs reserved for opposing teams. Newcastle United supporters (our nearest rival) had some very choice words indeed!

It's a long-standing tradition for fans to sing chants, but chants can increase rivalry and therefore possibly hostility as well. Certainly our experience shows that chants and slogans have been manipulated to incite violence – and sadly, something with all the potential to unite people can be misused for destructive and harmful purposes.

Wherever people meet together, disagreements arise. We see it in the political life of the nations (Brexit didn't arrive because Europe got on so well with each other – but don't let me get drawn on that). We also see it in the church between denominations as well as within individual churches themselves.

In writing to the Christians at Corinth, Saint Paul doesn't hide the fact that there were splinter groups within the early Church. People from Chloe's household (who Chloe was is not known – we don't even know if she was a Christian, though clearly some of her household were) had informed Paul of a split in the church at Corinth – not big enough to fracture the church there but certainly big enough to damage it. Different groups claimed to represent different people's points of view and each had absolute certainty that they were right and everyone else was wrong. Thankfully that doesn't happen here!

Each group had its own slogans. Differences and disagreements made them appear like opposing teams. Some shouted “I am for Paul”. Others were for Apollos or Cephas. Around the leaders of the early Church personality cults had grown up and those who chanted ‘I am for Christ’ were reduced to one voice among many.

Paul hated this disunity. He pleaded that Christians should be united in faith and belief. It was Christ crucified, not Paul or Apollos or Cephas. They were baptized into the name of Christ and no-one else. Paul's message was straight and direct – he put Christ at the centre; in the seat of glory – and stressed that He must be the basis for unity and not a source of division.

This clearness and simplicity of Christian discipleship is made very clear in the Gospel where Jesus first calls fishermen by the Sea of Galilee. HE is the focus of their response and they leave everything to follow HIM. HE becomes the centre of their lives. This amplifies John

the Baptist's stance, who insisted that he was not worthy to untie Jesus' sandals; as he says in St. John's gospel "He must increase, but I must decrease."¹

Divisions among Christians were not limited to Paul's day in Corinth – divisions have led to the various denominations that we have in the world today – so much so that to say you are a Christian is often insufficient to let others know the full range of what you believe. Divisions are still with us today but, mercifully, many Christians are working together in peace and harmony. The chants and slogans of opposition are giving way to the efforts of dialogue and co-operation. Sadly, there are still those narrow minded who present an all too disunited a front. We are all very familiar with the differences between the various denominations in the Christian church, but we also observe the factions within Anglicanism itself - divisions borne out of ideals which people hold very dearly but which cause bitterness and faction. Two people are talking:

Person 1: I'm a believer in God.
Person 2: So am I.
Person 1: I'm a Christian.
Person 2: So am I.
Person 1: I'm a member of the worldwide Anglican Communion.
Person 2: So am I.
Person 1: I'm a member of the Church of Australia.
Person 2: So am I.
Person 1: I prefer the 1995 "A Prayer Book for Australia" to the 1978 "An Australian Prayer Book"
Person 2: HERETIC!

Whereas which version of the Prayer Book is unlikely to get passions aroused (although no too many years ago in England, if you didn't use the 1662 Book of Common Prayer you could find opposition from other parishes in your deanery), modern issues have taken their place. The arguments over women bishops, same-sex marriages, and so on all cause dissent. Despite often appealing to our interpretations of the gospel to back us up, it is interesting to note that Jesus said remarkably little about any of these subjects.

And, of course, there is now the bigger and wider vision of seeing how we can work together with believers of the other world religions and faiths, Muslims, Hindu's, Sikhs and so on. If we struggle to work with our fellow Anglicans - if we struggle to work with our fellow Christians - how can we expect to work with those of other faiths? And yet we are called upon to work together: we have seen excellent examples of how we can work together no matter what our faith in the stories that have come out as a result of natural disasters. When we ignore our differences we can actually work well together.

We are called to build up our communities into places where Jesus, the person of love and forgiveness and compassion, is clearly at the centre and the focus and the proclamation of his kingdom. A Christ-centred community is one that works to put divisions aside. If we honour Jesus in this way it might just be that we find that there is more that unites all believers of all faiths than would tear us apart.

1 Jn 3:30