

Well, I think that our Elizabethan predecessors got it right when it comes to understanding the language and practice of devotion. And an unlikely exponent of this understanding is the hapless Mr Henslowe, around whom John Madden drew his brilliant portrayal of late 16<sup>th</sup> century London in the film, *Shakespeare in Love*.

Henslowe was committed to the theatre and the precarious life of a company of players. He grasped that it needed to pay its way: filling up the seats was essential for survival. “Comedy and a bit with dog, that’s what they want, Will” was his encouragement to the struggling author of a play that might at that stage have been entitled, “Romeo and Ethel the Pirate’s Daughter”. Great title, but never one you’d want on your CV.

With this in mind, and moving forward to our own Elizabethan age, I do sometimes worry that the people who encourage us to fill up the seats of our churches in any way possible, might be willing to settle for “comedy and a bit with a dog” if that does the trick. Perhaps this sounds a little harsh, but it’s not entirely my own assessment.

A much respected adviser on youth ministry has made a similar observation, commenting that if young people in our own generation do not respond to the gospel of Jesus Christ, it will not be because they have not been entertained; it will be because they have not been challenged by our example of a faith that we would die for, and a mystery that we enact transformatively and authentically in sacred drama.

If I’ve been a bit harsh on those who, rightly, ask pertinent questions about the number of people in our worshipping congregations, I might also have been a bit tough on poor old Henslowe. His commitment to the play, which, as he also observes, must.... “go on”, takes him into the context of risk and danger which is at times life threatening. He goes to these extremes, however, confident that

it will all work out in the end. “How?” asks his mercurial financier (who has secret Thespian ambitions). “I don’t know,” Henslowe replies, “it’s a mystery.”

Henslowe’s troop of players is indeed about a mystery. He is forging a new dramatic narrative. It holds a mirror to our life and loves, demands an account of their meaning, and it is also a continuation of the mystery plays of late medieval England which were a popular introduction to what would be enacted in the sacred drama of the liturgy.

The new play houses of London, the Globe, the Curtain, the Rose – to name the best known – were a 16<sup>th</sup> century fresh expression. The drama of mystery that had been lost in church was now being reproduced as the drama of romantic love, of the mystery of human life, on the stage. And if we look carefully, we can also see that the threads of Christian drama reinterpreted and interwoven into the fabric of the State.

Practices drawn from the centuries-old ritual of Christian faith, now detached from their origin, were nonetheless applied to the new custodian of faith in England, the Supreme Governor of the nation’s church. The dynastic claim and the cult of Elizabeth I, the Virgin Queen, is built on this transference.

Again, there is multi-layered expression of this in the film. Right at the end, after the performance of the play that had become Romeo & Juliet, the Queen emerges from her disguised presence in the midst of the audience, to challenge the Master of the Revels, who denounces the whole thing as an act of lewdness, in the name of her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth. She steps forward onto the stage, reproves Mr Tilney with the words, “Have a care for my name, Mr Tilney” and the whole audience falls to its knees, in recognition of the presence of their anointed sovereign.

It’s a sequence I’ve watched repeatedly because it speaks so powerfully about the transference of devotional practice from church to state. To a remarkable

degree this practice remains intact in the ceremonial processes of the state, I'm glad to say. But it does so in Parliament or the presence of royalty in a way that has limited access for society as a whole. And more importantly, it has left the church in danger of failing to appreciate the drama of devotion as a popular statement of awe at the mystery of the presence of God in our midst.

One of the achievements that the Oxford Movement set out to accomplish was recovery of the drama of devotion as an expression of witness and worship that was accessible to everybody. What's interesting about the history of piety and devotion in the Church of England is the range of forms in which it is encouraged. In the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, we see manuals that were popular enough among the reading classes, but there is little on offer to those who had no opportunity to collect and read books.

The revival of faith promoted by John and Charles Wesley among the working people of England depended on dramatic preaching and life-enhancing hymnody that insisted access here and now to the union between earth and heaven, as Charles Wesley puts it:

We need not now go up to heaven  
To bring the long-sought Saviour down;  
Thou art to all already given  
Thou dost e'en now thy banquet crown;  
To every faithful soul appear  
And show thy real Presence here.

Building on this the Tractarians opened up the power of poetry in their hymns and devotional works. Authors as different as John Keble and Christina Rossetti are obvious examples. But of similar power, in terms of Christian converting experience, was their claim upon the recovery of the drama of devotion, and participation in it made accessible to all people.

In *The King's Highway*, an Anglo-catholic manual written for ordinary people, published in 1924 (in English, Japanese and Swahili, interestingly!), the author writes, "Since we are sacraments, our bodies as well as our souls have their duty of worship" and express this through material things, such as vestments, music, incense, and candles.

This perception of soul and body, forming the unity within the human persons who congregate to form a people, engaged in the holy worship of God is a point that Pope Paul VI stresses in the promulgation of the Roman Missal in 1969, noting that "everyone has the right and duty to take an active part" appearing as one body in listening, praying, singing, offering the sacrifice and sharing in the Lord's table, through actions that "fittingly manifest" their unity and worship.

As we gather to give thanks for the gift of the holy Eucharist, let us also use this opportunity to recover the drama of devotion, so that our souls and bodies might cohere in the sacred act of worship. Let us nurture, consciously in our own devotion, and in those with whom we share our faith, the practices that witness to the truth we proclaim.

Not everyone can, perhaps, fall to their knees with ease, and get up again. But as the mysterious presence of God with us, Jesus Christ, is revealed in this theatre of worship, let us make whatever gesture of humble adoration we can. As we receive the blessing of that presence, marking ourselves with the sign of the cross is a further statement that asserts bodily response to spiritual reality and truth, our actions giving expression to the inward response of love.

And let us work to nurture this drama among our congregations, especially at the moment of holy communion. The bow or genuflection, the careful making of the sign of the cross before communion, the humble self-offering of outstretched hands or open mouth, these are your actions in the drama of witness and worship. These gestures are the well-spring of a Christian

anthropology that asserts the dignity of every man, woman and child and our capacity to stand in the presence of God to offer sacrifice on behalf of all creation, uniting our oblation with that of Jesus Christ the High Priest and Shepherd of our souls.

This is not play-acting; this is the drama of reality in devotion. It is our declaration of the inviolable nature of human dignity, the mandate to subvert injustice and withstand the degenerative systems of this world. This is our faith; this is what we mean; this is the manifestation of our apostolic life.

And to sum up here's poetry, from which playwrights fashion drama and we evoke something that prose or sermons can never quite express. It's the work of another Elizabethan, John Betjeman, who endlessly surprises us beyond his sentimental humour, with the solid stuff of truth. Writing of the Victorian church, St Saviour's Aberdeen Park, Highbury N1, he concludes,

Wonder beyond Time's wonders, that Bread so white and small  
Veiled in golden curtains, too mighty for men to see,  
Is the Power which sends the shadows up this polychrome wall,  
Is God who created the present, the chain-smoking millions and me;  
Beyond the throb of the engines is the throbbing heart of all-  
Christ, at this Highbury altar, I offer myself To Thee.