

Do our styles of worship matter?



The Rev Matt Bray examines what's better: traditional or contemporary forms of worship

AT a very basic level, I think every tradition attempts to answer this very simple question; how do you meet with God?

And this question, and of course it's answer, often shapes our worship. Without wanting to be too simplistic, I believe it plays out like this: some Christians primarily meet God as they celebrate the Eucharist; while others tend to hear God speaking to them via the Bible and the preaching of God's Word.

Some Christians might meet God through social action, experiencing God by sharing his love; while for others it's in contemplative prayer or sung worship. And of course, for many of us, meeting God involves a combination of several of those elements.

Each has a firm footing within scripture: Jesus taught and commanded that we remember him in the bread and wine. Jesus taught in Matthew 25 that in serving the hungry, thirsty, and in clothing the stranger we in fact serve him. And in Psalm 22 we are reminded that God is a God who inhabits the praises of his people – where there is praise, God is to be found.

I consider myself incredibly fortunate to serve as curate both

at Harbour Church in Portsmouth and in our cathedral – two very distinct styles of worship.

On a Sunday I will have sung something that dates back to the sixth or seventh century, and within a couple of hours be singing something that Hillsong Church would have just released a couple weeks before.

'The heart of worship never changes, but the styles always do'

I guess I'm one of those odd hybrid-type churchgoers that finds both the traditional and the contemporary spiritually satisfying. I have been moved to tears during the Cathedral Choir's anthem at Evensong, and I have been brought to my knees in worship during a time of prayer ministry in Harbour Church.

I find it amazing that I'm saying or singing the same words as all the saints in the early days of Christian faith, and I'm always blown away when a new song captures a fresh way of worshipping God.

The style itself has only ever remained secondary to the purpose of why I have come to worship in the first place: to meet

God and to experience his love. The heart of worship never changes. The styles, however, have always done so, even within the same tradition, and will continue to do so. What's new today is old tomorrow – I can't even remember the last time we sang a Matt Redman song at Harbour Church!

I don't think 'relevance' has anything to do with it either. We're seeing a growing number of young people across the country exploring more traditional forms of worship, particularly in the choral tradition. Someone once said to me that "people aren't necessarily looking for a particular style, but something authentic".

And we need authentic expressions of faith and worship. We need the richness and awe-inspiring worship that the more traditional brings, and we need the innovative and creative worship of the more contemporary.

I don't like worship because it's loud and there's a synth bass, or because of its history and it's got plenty of polyphonic harmonies. I like worship when it helps me to meet God – because when I meet him, I am changed.

Traditional or contemporary? For me, it's both.