

Why worship can seem strange



BY BISHOP CHRISTOPHER

IT'S clear that opera is not everybody's cup of tea. For those who love it, there is nothing quite so moving; for those who don't, it can be hard to understand why quite so many vowels are required to get the point across. Once we become immersed in something we love, we can quickly forget how much there is to grasp in order to enjoy it.

Similarly, my chaplain told me that he recently went out for an evening of experimental post-hardcore math-rock music. I don't know what that means and I'm content not knowing, but if that sounds bewildering to you then hold onto that sensation, because it will remind you what it might be like for some people when coming to Church for the first time.

If you find one or other form of worship familiar, then there will be plenty for whom it seems totally alien. There will be words that are unusual, tunes they don't know, and a strange pattern of standing up or sitting down. And where else in the world do we all read out words from a book at the same time?

Perhaps then we should try and make Church simpler and more accessible so as to remove barriers between people and God. I've some sympathy with that, but our response should be more subtle. Opera, cricket, or math-rock fans may well be keen

to make their chosen art more accessible to new people, but they would never want to sacrifice the richness of the thing that means so much to them.

And for Christians, while it's true that we worship God and not Church, our forms of worship are in various ways an expression of the deep reality we have come to know in Christ.

Christ is in many ways a stranger to us, and we must never forget that the kingdom of God is in some sense a threat to our world, at least as far as our world is hurtful. So the strangeness of the gospel is properly reflected in the peculiarity of our worship, and for Christians who have become familiar with Church, experiencing an alien style of service can be a vital reminder that God calls us into a new and uncontainable kind of existence.

If we are to welcome new people into our Church communities, then we are inviting them into something strange and new. Our task then is neither to bewilder our neighbours, nor to offer something so easy that it lacks any kind of flavour or challenge.

Rather, if we can communicate the depth of beauty in the gospel, the profundity of God's love, then we can have hope that people will take the courage to taste and see that the Lord is good.

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