

# HOLY THEATRE AND HOLY WORSHIP

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IN THE EARLIEST DAYS of human expression and communication, religion and art were integrally related, indeed inseparable in the seeking, finding and expressing of meaning. There is nothing surprising about this. After all, every human being, made in the image of the Creator God, is made to be creative. Creativity is the gift and expression of the creating and creative Holy Spirit in us. The arts—I am assuming here a high view of Art—express beauty, truth and goodness. The arts evoke not simply thought but feeling (head and heart).

Before I was ordained I was involved in the arts—particularly theatre, in directing and writing. When first studying theology in the 1970s, I was also reading about theatre, and was deeply struck by Peter Brook's seminal book *The Empty Space*. I reread it recently and found both his insights and his questions deeply pertinent for the Church today and what we are offering in worship. I confess that some of my reflections here may not simply be *exegesis*, that is, reflecting what he intended to say. There may also be some *eisegesis*, that is, reading into his writing something of my own thinking. But if this is the case, for the purpose of this reflection, it actually doesn't matter. His book, his perceptions and reflections, have spawned in me, and hopefully might also in you, questions for us all which may be of God.

Peter Brook has been described as Britain's greatest living theatre director; many others would add the world's greatest theatre director. I do not know his faith position; but as a seeker of truth, as one who sees the potential of theatre to change lives and even societies, he is looking to communicate, in his phrase, 'the

invisible through the visible'.<sup>1</sup> This, surely, is exactly what we, as Christians, are about. If we are serious about participating in the mission of God we need to put ourselves in the shoes of those who do have a sense that there is more to life than the visible, who are hungry for a transcendent dimension, but who have not found this, or would not expect to find it, in the worship of the Christian Churches.

So, we need to ask the question: if people are not encountering God among us or in our worship, why? Might it be that we have allowed the Church to be Church-centric, as if the Church existed for the sake of the Church? Have we ourselves become too self-referential? The important thing about the Church is not the Church but God, and God's love for the world.

I am using as a template for these reflections the words of the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge: 'He who begins by loving Christianity better than Truth will proceed by loving his own Church better than Christianity and end by loving himself better than all'.<sup>2</sup> These words resonate powerfully for me if—and only if—we take 'Christianity' here to mean what humans have done with the Christian faith, rather than Christ himself, in whom is all truth and who calls us through the Holy Spirit into the truth that sets us free. Have we lost the dynamism of Christ in our understanding and practice of the faith? Have we lost a sense of the transformational dimension of life in Christ through the Holy Spirit? Do we expect, or even want, to be changed by God? Do we want to grow?

In the Ordinal the bishop enjoins those to be ordained in the Church of England to pray earnestly for the Holy Spirit that 'your heart may daily be enlarged and your minds enlightened by the reading of the Scriptures'. This is, surely, in the economy of God, what art does, whether it be music, painting, sculpture, poetry or prose literature. It enlarges our hearts and enlightens our minds. The arts and worship both serve to help us grow in the truth. There is—or certainly should be—something transformative or dynamic

<sup>1</sup> Peter Brook, *Tip of the Tongue: Reflections on Language and Meaning* (London: Nick Hern, 2018), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 'Moral and Religious Aphorisms', in *Aids to Reflection*, volume 9 of *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (London: Routledge, 1993), 107.

at work. We should leave the theatre, we should leave worship, different from how we came in. But is this so? Does this happen?

Brook's first chapter is entitled 'Deadly Theatre'. What are the characteristics of 'Deadly Theatre'? It 'not only fails to elevate or instruct, it hardly even entertains.' We go to the theatre, Brook argues, to take us out of ourselves, for a glimpse of transcendence, of the beyond. We leave not satisfied. Sound familiar? Lord, have mercy. How many people go to church to encounter God? How many people go to church, not to encounter God but for other reasons? How many people go to church hungry for God and leave not satisfied? How many people hungry for God are looking elsewhere?

True worship needs not so much endless reinventions of liturgy and practice, but the Holy Spirit. As Jesus tells us, true worship is worship in Spirit and in truth. (*John 4:24*) It needs the beyond to break into our midst. Composers, artists and writers know that for a work of art to be born, something new has to break in, something that was not already formed in the mind or imagination of the artist. Something needs to be *given*: inspiration—a good Holy Spirit word. Artists offers their gifts, their discipline, their imagination, their hard work. They offer the best that they have to give, but still something more is needed that they cannot provide, something that is beyond them.

Orthodox theology is called ascetical and mystical. The ascetical is the work, it is rowing the boat out to where its sails might catch the wind. So *liturgy* is, etymologically and actually, the work of the people—and the clergy, of course, are part of the *laos*, the people.<sup>3</sup> The archbishop's advisor on evangelism, told me some years ago of a young man who went to the Youth Church which he was then leading, and afterwards the young man said to him 'I didn't get much out of that.' To which he responded 'No? Well, what did you put in to it?'

I often find myself, challenging the consumer approach to worship, saying to congregations that each one of them has a responsibility for the quality of worship. It is not just the people up front. Deadly worship, like deadly theatre, allows, even encourages,

<sup>3</sup> See *Oxford English Dictionary*: 'apparently a derivative of *λαός*, *λαός* people) + *-εργος* that works'.

passive engagement; it is lazy worship. It does not wake us up; it does not challenge or disturb us; it does not help us to see in new ways. It entertains, it reinforces prejudice, it maintains in us a false peace—that Christ comes to break open.

If so much theatre is deadly, to what does Brook aspire? Brook longs for what he calls 'Holy Theatre'. Holy Theatre is 'the Theatre of the Invisible—made—Visible'.<sup>4</sup> This is for us a sacramental language. Holy Theatre, for Brook, takes us out of ourselves, it gives us *a glimpse of what could be and what we could be*. Is not this actually the most beautiful, true and good description of what worship and preaching should be about? When we come to worship, when we come to Holy Theatre we come in to a crucible of change, giving ourselves in to the experience, making space for God's recreating work in us. This theatre, this worship, is not so much about comfort or reinforcing prejudices, it is about transformation.

And what of those of us who lead worship? Brook writes of the conductor of an orchestra: 'We are aware that he is not really making the music, it is making him. If he is relaxed, open and attuned then the invisible will take possession of him and through him it will reach us.'<sup>5</sup> We too surely need to be attuned to the movement of the Holy Spirit, sensitive to the Spirit's leading.

For Brook a 'holy theatre' should also be 'a theatre of joy'. In parallel with the language of faith, he distinguishes between the happiness or contentment we might get from what is going on around us, and joy, which has something of the beyond or invisible about it. He laments, however, that 'a true theatre of joy is non-existent'. How much of our worship brings or is suffused with joy? And here he says something so poignant and so revealing and, perhaps also for us, so *convicting*. He writes 'We do not know *how* to celebrate because we do not know *what* to celebrate'.<sup>6</sup> Such words convict me. We, who know exactly what and whom to celebrate, do we truly celebrate Jesus, the Joy-bringer, do we open

<sup>4</sup> Peter Brook, *The Empty Space* (New York: Touchstone, 1996 [1968]), 42.

<sup>5</sup> Brook, *Empty Space*, 42.

<sup>6</sup> Brook, *Empty Space*, 10, 47.

our lives to the One who is the truth, who will expose and challenge what is not true in us?

For me, a recent experience of worship in Kenya was a wonderful example of knowing both how to celebrate and whom to celebrate. Brook's words, however, certainly ring true about much of contemporary Western culture. Not knowing what to celebrate reduces it to the vacuity of celebrating (if that is the right word) skin-deep glamour and so-called *celebrities*, famous for being famous. I think of words inspired by G. K. Chesterton: 'When people stop believing in God, they don't believe in nothing, they believe in anything'.<sup>7</sup>

If Holy Theatre gives us a vision of what could be and what we could be, it needs to be both visionary and prophetic. It needs to disturb our tendency to deadliness, to 'living and only partly living', to quote the Chorus in Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*.<sup>8</sup> It needs to wake us up. Brook writes of the extraordinary playwright, Antonin Artaud: 'What he wanted in his search for holiness was absolute. He wanted a theatre that would be a hallowed place where the audience could be shocked into action and leave behind the trivial.'<sup>9</sup>

I think of the preacher who began his sermon, 'There are three points to my sermon.' Most people yawned, they'd heard that so often. 'My first point is this. There are approximately 2 billion people in the world starving to death right now.' The congregation had heard that too. Then he said 'My second point is this.' Everyone sat up; he'd only been speaking for thirty seconds and he was already on to his second point. 'My second point is that most of you don't give a damn!' Ripples of shock, offence and rumblings across the congregation. 'My third point is that the real tragedy is that most of you are more concerned that I said "damn" than you are that 2 billion people are starving to death.'<sup>10</sup> Then he sat down.

So where, asks Brook, should we look for Holy Theatre? He answers in 'The Rough Theatre': a theatre without chandeliers,

<sup>7</sup> Émile Cammaerts, *The Laughing Prophet: The Seven Virtues and G.K. Chesterton* (London: Methuen, 1937), 211.

<sup>8</sup> T. S. Eliot, *Murder in the Cathedral*, in *The Complete Poems and Plays of T. S. Eliot, 1909-1950* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1980), 180.

<sup>9</sup> Brook, *Empty Space*, 53.

<sup>10</sup> Tim Hansel, *Holy Sweat* (Dallas: Word, 1989), 40.

without comfortable plush red seats, without programmes and refreshments, and without clever tricks or illusions. This theatre is earthed and earthy; it is characterized by salt, sweat and noise. In our language we might say it is incarnational. God, who is the truth, is with us in the mess, the pain, the struggles of actual life. ‘Theology begins where the pain is’, as Ken Leech once put it.<sup>11</sup> This is the theatre that is outside the theatre. This is the God who does not live in the Church.

I was at Glasshampton Monastery on a retreat shortly before the lockdown and went, as I always do, for a walk. Outside a local church, I saw a notice saying ‘Walking Church’. This is Church that meets as it walks and as it stops in God’s creation. People walk together, and stop and listen to a reading, then walk some more and hear the Gospel and a reflection on the Gospel. Under the poster was a quotation often attributed to John Muir, an ecologist and a prayerful seeker after truth: ‘I would rather be on a mountain thinking about God than in a church thinking about a mountain’.

I like that. I think of R. S. Thomas’s poem, ‘The Moor’, which begins, ‘It was like a church to me’. He describes God’s creation—the moor—in sacramental language: the air crumbled / and broke on me generously as bread’.<sup>12</sup> In the poem he uses language deeply resonant of contemplative prayer. He writes of the mind’s cession of its kingdom’: we need to get out of our heads. I think of the conductor Thomas Beecham, who describes music as that which ‘releases us from the tyranny of conscious thoughts’.<sup>13</sup> Are we in the Church too much in our heads? Does our worship go deeper than our conscious minds? Are not people hungry for depth?

Brook goes on to say, ‘we cannot assume that the audience will assemble devoutly and attentively’. Long gone, I hope, are the days when we assumed that congregations would do this, when our missional assumptions were based on a ‘you come to us’ model. For Brook—and I think this is absolutely pertinent for us—‘It is up to

<sup>11</sup> Susan Thistlethwaite, ‘What Did Jesus Really Say (and Do)?’, sermon, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, 10 February 2013, available at <https://www.first-church.org/Downloads/sermon21013.pdf>.

<sup>12</sup> R. S. Thomas, ‘The Moor’, in *Collected Poems, 1945–1990* (London: J. M. Dent, 1993), 160.

<sup>13</sup> *Beecham Stories: Anecdotes, Sayings and Impressions of Sir Thomas Beecham*, edited by Harold Atkins and Archie Newman (London: Robson, 1978), 80.

us to capture [the audience's] attention and compel its belief. 'To do so', writes Brook, 'we must open our empty hands and roll up our sleeves. Only then we can begin.'<sup>14</sup> To me there are the echoes in this of the poverty of spirit with which we must approach both God and worship. In the words often attributed to St Augustine writes, 'God longs to give us the gift of his very self, but so often our hands are too full to receive him'.<sup>15</sup>

The final chapter is entitled 'The Immediate Theatre'. It raises the question of the attitude of the audience. This in itself so much determines whether the 'empty space' holds transformative energy. The French language captures something important here. In France you do not watch a play, the phrase they use is *assister à*. The audience assists, has a part to play, in the quality and significance of the encounter. The audience participates in the event, and can catalyse the work of the writer, director and cast to release its life-changing potential. And this is so too, of course, with worship.

So what is the *empty space*? It is the space of encounter. The question is, for Brook and surely for us too, do we *want* to be encountered? Do we want to risk being changed? Brook asks of the one coming to the theatre: 'Does he want any change in his circumstances? Does he want anything different in himself, his life, his society?'<sup>16</sup> Do we dare ask those questions, in the first place of ourselves, and then of those who come to church? If the honest answer is 'No', then that is our challenge. I'll close with the words from a novel by the African American writer Toni Cade Bambara: 'Are you sure, sweetheart, that you want to be well? ... Just so's you're sure, sweetheart, and ready to be healed, 'cause wholeness is no trifling matter.'<sup>17</sup> Jesus calls us into life, life in all its fulness.

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<sup>14</sup> Brook, *Empty Space*, 97.

<sup>15</sup> Quoted in Gerald May, *Addiction and Grace* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 17

<sup>16</sup> Brook, *Empty Space*, 137.

<sup>17</sup> Toni Cade Bambara, *The Salt-Eaters* (New York: Vintage, 1992), 10.

drama, and retains a strong interest in the arts and theology. His other interests include rural life, the Eastern Orthodox Church and prison ministry. He is President of the Association for Promoting Retreats (APR). He is the author of *Turned by Divine Love Starting again with God and with others* (2020).