

Faith and Society Files: Real Life Worship Files - Songs

Does what happens at Sunday worship connect with life in the real world? For many people the answer to that question is often 'no'. This leaflet introduces a series of worship files published by our Union to help churches relate their worship to the realities of contemporary living. In this file we look at the picture of Jesus that we paint with the choices of worship songs that we make.

Who is Jesus?

'It all about you Jesus' are words many of us have sung many times in recent years. Contemporary worship has become increasingly Jesus focused. This raises the question of precisely who this Jesus actually is. If you were to look at the most frequently used songs at your church, what titles or descriptions of Jesus do you find? Is there a breadth of language?

During the Reformation, John Calvin popularized the understanding of Jesus through the three key Old Testament offices: prophet, priest and king. The majority of contemporary worship songs refer to Jesus as king (which, along with 'Lord', is the most frequently used title) and there is a lack of songs that explore what it means to speak of Jesus as prophet and priest. This means that our worship lacks a crucial aspect of Jesus' heavenly and earthly mission. And if our songs are the major communicators of theology, this can leave our congregations bereft of a truly Scriptural understanding of who Jesus is.

Jesus as Priest

Priestly language helps us see that Jesus is God's mediator between God and humanity – that God creates in and through Christ and God saves in and through Christ. Priestly language also helps us see that Jesus is the one who continually leads our worship: he is the risen and ascended one, who intercedes on our behalf (Rom 8.34). Part of Christ's (and the body of Christ's) priestly role is representing the people to God, a practice we call intercession. Could the disappearance of serious intercession from our churches' worship have something to do with failing to acknowledge Christ's priestly status in our worship?

Jesus as Prophet

Prophetic language, speaking of Jesus as prophet, helps us see that Jesus is God's address to the world: God's word spoken to us, for us and against us. In an individualistic, self-interested, and therapeutic culture such as ours, prophetic language guards our worship from presenting Jesus as a personal therapist who meets our every need and satisfies our every desire. The Jesus that we find in the

gospels is one who confronts culture with a prophetic voice. An emphasis on the prophetic Christ enables our worship to go beyond an encounter of me and God to the broader horizon of God and the world, which calls the church to act justly and witness faithfully to the kingdom of God.

One song that does precisely this is 'Jesus Christ is Waiting' (*Songs of Fellowship, Book 3, 1387*) by John Bell and Graham Maule of the Iona Community. The song speaks of Jesus in the streets waiting, raging, healing, dancing and calling. Many of the Iona songs help open up our worship to the real world, which is at the heart of real life worship.

Examples...

There are examples of songs that give attention to Jesus as prophet and priest. These include:

- 'Christ's is the World'
(*Songs of Fellowship, Book 2, 685*)
- 'Praise to Christ, the Lord Incarnate'
(*Songs of Fellowship, Book 3, 1503*).
- 'From the Squalor of a Borrowed Stable'
(*Songs of Fellowship, Book 3, 1239*).
- 'You're the Word of God the Father'
(*Songs of Fellowship, Book 3, 1669*).

Questions...

What songs do you use, or know, that can help enable and encourage our worship to engage and confront the world?

What songs do you use, or know, that help teach about, and encounter, the Jesus who is not only 'King' and 'Friend', but 'Prophet' and 'Priest'?

Challenges...

To include these crucial dimensions of Jesus' identity into our worship will, for many of us, mean broadening the range and style of the sources from which we choose our songs. For many it will mean going beyond collections of songs that emerge out of traditions such as Hillsong, New Wine, Soul Survivor, Spring Harvest, New Frontier's to traditions like that of the Iona Community. It may, for those with appropriate gifts, mean writing songs that portray a picture of Jesus that represents more fully the Jesus Christ revealed in Scripture.

