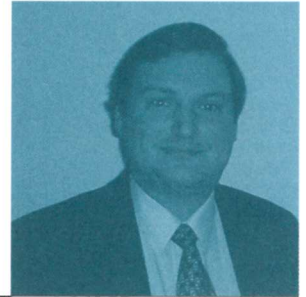


# EDITORIAL

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**'FOR I HAVE KNOWN THEM ALL ALREADY, KNOWN THEM ALL—  
HAVE KNOWN THE EVENINGS, MORNINGS,  
AFTERNOONS,  
I HAVE MEASURED OUT MY LIFE WITH COFFEE  
SPOONS ...'**

So wrote T.S. Eliot, in 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', reflecting his endless fascination with the banal rituals of modern life, and the long-held desire to find less banal rituals that would reconnect life and truth. Eliot finally found his resolution of this problem in his embrace of the rituals of (Anglo-)Catholic Christianity, but he had expressed the question most powerfully a decade earlier, in the stunning collision of mythology and banality in 'The Waste Land', a poem thoroughly (and explicitly, in the notes) indebted to the then-new discipline of anthropology.

In Eliot's day, anthropologists argued over the relation of ritual and belief: is ritual the expression of belief, or belief the interpretation of ritual? Like so many arguments, the reality is more complex than either side would suggest: chicken and egg depend on each other. Ritual, what we do together, is shaped by belief, what we think together, but it also reinforces and shapes it. The Christian doctrine of the Trinity was articulated in the fourth century in part by reflection on the pattern of worship, particularly Eucharistic worship, in the churches – but, of course, that worship was the way it was because of beliefs about the way God has met us in Jesus Christ.

'Ritual' has, however, become a much broader category for anthropology. Spreading from a narrow definition in such symbolic religious acts as the celebration of the Eucharist, scholars increasingly recognise a ritual dimension to almost all human behaviour. The cashier on the supermarket till exaggeratedly averts her eyes as I enter my PIN; the waiter in the restaurant returns precisely seven minutes after serving our food to enquire whether everything is to our satisfaction; my daughter will right now be lining up outside her school door, to greet the headmaster in chorus with the other children before being allowed in; the university library in which I am writing has unwritten, but rigidly enforced, rules about where one may talk, and where silence must reign.

Each is a fragment of ritual behaviour embodying and reinforcing beliefs about, for example, the importance of money, or the place of discipline in the school. We measure out our lives with coffee spoons still.

Rhythm is closely allied to ritual in our cultural lives, although there are also natural rhythms that shape us: up here, in the north east of Scotland, in summer the days last forever – and in winter the nights do. Friends who visit in June, even from London or New York, struggle to sleep, when the sky lightens before three and darkens again gone eleven. Family who visit around Christmas, when the sun struggles into a tiny space above the horizon for a few short hours, wonder how we survive. Our cultural rhythms are different too. Scots Presbyterianism bequeathed us a stronger weekly cycle than ever was known 'down south' (I have friends who remember the playground swings on the islands being chained on a Saturday night, lest the Sabbath was desecrated by play), and with it a scorn for the 'Papist' rhythms of the Christian year. Most of us have learnt to celebrate Christmas, but Hogmanay, the turning of the year, is still the bigger news; my university follows Scots custom in regarding Good Friday as a normal working day (the Divinity School quietly demurs ...). A colleague spoke of a pastor he knows, in the Highlands, proposing that the church might move from celebrating the Lord's Supper twice each year to three times; 'You'll be wanting us to become papists next!' was the dismissive response from one member of his congregation.

As these examples illustrate, Christian approaches to rhythm and ritual have differed, and the articles in this issue of *TransMission* reflect that difference. Jason Clark reflects on his own story, travelling a fairly common path today, from 'low church' roots that taught a disdain for liturgy, to a rediscovery of the value of rhythm and ritual. As he acknowledges, 'we are all liturgical': every regular communal act of worship is shaped in certain ways that are broadly repeated and so provide shape and familiarity for the participants (I recall a friend speaking of her charismatic fellowship in the 1980s: 'we start the service by singing for 20 minutes, and then every week have three prophecies ...'). For Jason, planting new churches, and with the acute awareness of cultural context so common within the emerging church movement, the rhythms of the Christian year and a recovery of aspects of traditional ritual have become ways of remembering and re-telling, and even indwelling, the Christian story in a world that tells so many other stories and forgets this one.

(Of course, the 'low church' sabbatarian rituals of old Scots Presbyterianism, or the classical Evangelical daily ritual of prayer and Bible reading, are no less valid than



► the more ‘Catholic’ traditions of the annual cycle of the Christian year; Jason’s complaint about the background into which he was converted was not that its rhythms and rituals were wrong, but that they were forgotten. It may be that more Reformed and more Catholic patterns of rhythm and ritual embody slightly different emphases in telling the Christian story, but we will all acknowledge that it is the same story being told.)

Pete Greig owns a similar history, of an ‘accidental’ discovery of the power and utility of a rule of life and rhythms of prayer. He indicates something of the history of such practices and gives testimony to the sense of community and togetherness that being part of a rule has given him. His appreciative recovery of older monastic forms of prayer provides a helpful way in to David Foster’s introduction to the practice of *lectio divina*, praying with the Bible, which forms so much of the content of many of the old, and not-so-old, monastic rules. These are patterns of prayer that sustained Christian people as the walls of Rome fell to the barbarians and again before the Berlin Wall fell to the forces of democracy and capitalism; they are surely patterns that demand our respectful attention today? Pete helpfully highlights the intentional attitudes at the heart of several of the rules he discusses: availability and vulnerability; or authentic, relational and missional living.

Of course, the practices encouraged by such rules, the disciplines of the spiritual life, are not confined to prayer. James Catford speaks powerfully of his own experiences with Renouaré, exploring the ancient spiritual disciplines. Fasting, confession, silence and slowness sit alongside, or perhaps beneath and around, prayer as ways of clothing ourselves with the habits of Christ, and so learning in stumbling steps to live in a more Christlike way. James calls the disciplines ‘holy habits’: patterns of rhythm and ritual that have the power to make us Jesus-shaped.

Christine Sine highlights the Sabbath, as the one rhythm of Old Testament life that has no counterpart in the created order. The seasons turn; crops are planted and harvested; day gives way to night – but to stop, one day in seven, and to mark it as different, points, she suggests, to God’s shalom, which will one day be the only reality of the creation. She challenges us, with helpful examples, to find ways of structuring our rhythms and rituals of life so that the primary driving force is not the demands of our employer, or even the

social lives of our children, but the promise and experience of God’s peace and wholeness. In her examples we find illustrations of other spiritual disciplines, such as service, and pictures of what a rule of availability and vulnerability might actually look like.

Michele Guinness, finally, recalls the sheer exuberance of her own experience of Jewish ritual, in celebration or in grief, and asks why we can’t have the same experience in our churches? ‘Dramatic punctuation in the dreary, daily script of our lives’ that conveys meaning and compels emotional engagement: it is a vision of what Christian ritual should be, that should challenge us all. If ritual is about the creation and affirmation of shared meaning, as the anthropologists suggest, what meaning is created and shared by a half-hearted baptismal service shoved to the afternoon so that it does not disrupt the life of the congregation, or a rushed Eucharist of foul-tasting synthetic, non-alcoholic ‘wine’ drunk out of tiny individual cups? Michele’s call should be heard: if we are going to celebrate the Eucharist, then we should *celebrate!* Celebration too, of course, is a spiritual discipline.

Rhythms and rituals are ways of living meaningfully, shaping our lives to reflect the truths we confess. Sometimes, we will feel the need ourselves to create our own rhythms and rituals, intentionally shaped to express and reinforce Christian values that are alien to our culture. Sometimes, we will hear in the invitation of a community, or of the Christian tradition, the call of God to expose ourselves to rituals and rhythms we do not understand. If God truly calls, however, we will find that these ways of living form and inform our lives and thoughts, teaching us new truths we had not begun to imagine before, truths that perhaps we could not have understood until we had experienced them from the inside.

The alternative is not just to refuse to learn these truths – that might be bearable. If we do not embrace Christian rhythms and rituals we will be engulfed by foreign ones, and participate unthinkingly in rituals that distort, rather than shape, our lives. Unknowingly we will live falsely, following patterns that etch untruths in heavy lines on our minds and hearts and souls. The despair against which Eliot so powerfully reacted is there still, and it will devour those who unthinkingly live out the cultural rhythms that place meaning only in consumption, who end up measuring out their lives with coffee spoons. ■