



A Return to Symbol

One of the greatest strengths of Christianity has been its malleability within various cultures and time periods. I don't mean that the main tenants of the faith are to be altered over time or disassembled to fit a particular culture. Rather, the expressions of the faith through our styles of worship have evolved over time. The Church can also be accused of pandering to the popular culture, but that will be reserved for another discussion.

Unfortunately, it seems like the contemporary Church often forgets how to be truly creative and free. The Psalms of David and the poetry of Solomon are both magnificent. They continue to inspire us to this day. However, some of the symbols, with foundations in the lives of Palestinians from thousands of years ago, do not resound with us as clearly today.

I recall a discussion I once had with my former pastor. I noted that there were a couple *Praise and Worship* choruses that we had been singing that I didn't personally care for. His response was, "They're just pure scripture. How can you not enjoy them?" My explanation was that it wasn't the style or the fact that they were based in scripture. It was really the allusions of David that left me a little cold. As a 21st century American the association of God with a "Strong Tower" to which I run for protection was a bit foreign.

I further explained my disappointment with the lack of true creativity in the current Church. If God could inspire David to write richly nuanced Psalms that had depth of meaning for the people of Israel in his day, why did we find it so difficult to believe that the Holy Spirit (now available to all) could not do such wondrous things in God's people today? I'm not knocking scripture or its importance, just questioning our faith a little.

A visual example comes from a tour that I gave at the Boston *Museum of Fine Arts* several years ago. One of the priests from the church group I was leading was originally from England and had brought along a couple friends visiting from Britain. After I talked about several specific works the group wandered through some additional galleries. One of the Brits asked about the symbolism of what appeared to be a cucumber in a painting of Christ being taken down from the cross, by the early Italian Renaissance painter Carlo Crivelli. I didn't have an answer then, but I assured him I would find out and get back to him. What I found was that what looked like a cucumber was actually a gourd and the gourd was a traditional symbol of Jonah (i.e. the gourd plant God caused to grow to protect Jonah from the heat of the Nineveh sun). And finally, Jonah was seen as an Old Testament precursor to Christ because his three days in the belly of the fish was like Christ's three days in the tomb. The gourd was ultimately a symbol of resurrection.

The "cucumber" story is important because it reminds us of just how remarkably creative our forebears in the faith were. These men and women developed rich catalogues of symbols from the natural world. For them, countless flora and fauna spoke of the Gospel and the nature of God. These were often simple items that those believers would encounter on an almost daily basis, yet the symbolic content that had been endowed to the objects made these ordinary encounters transcendent.

As a culture—both in and outside the Church—we have lost the language of symbols. There is a power in symbols that draws the Christian into prayerful communion with God at unexpected times. In the same way that I don't think we need to strictly confine God to the symbols relayed in scripture, I don't think we have to rely on or return to the symbols established several hundred years ago. It is time for our artists and pastors to work together to provide fresh symbols for our relationship to and with God—symbols that fit a new generation and call us deeper into that relationship.