Sumptuous harmonies

A glimpse of vestments

Katharine Rumens

I ALWAYS LIKED CLOTHES AND DRESSING UP. As a child, playing at 'posh ladies' was a serious matter, with its own ritual of going to the dressing-up box to compose an outfit. There is application and discipline to the art of dressing and deportment, and transformation can take time. Then we trailed around in long frocks, with a peculiar arrangement of headgear and handbags, blissfully happy and elegant. In spite of being brought up in a vicarage we never thought to 'play church', though children in the village menaced us with observations that our cloaked father was a ghost. Clergy dress was intriguing for others, but then they didn't see long black garments hung on the back of the study door as an everyday occurrence. Nor did they meet the man who wore them cleaning his teeth.

After doing other things I trained in fashion production. Still knowing alarmingly little about that world, I set up by myself and discovered the trade shows and suppliers' showrooms to source glorious fabrics. The Dickensian workshops in Soho which made belts, covered buttons and preferred cash. The conversations with buyers about mood, drape, fall, and handwriting of garments. The conversations with machinists about the length of stitch to stop a seam puckering, and using interlinings that didn't shadow. It meant getting a label and getting an accountant.

Fabrics still give me tremendous enjoyment – the light trapped by velvet, the springy handle of mohair, the density of colour that can be absorbed by silk, the chunkiness and roughness of some linens. And how fabrics can be structured through pleating, folding, or gathering so that it takes on a new form even before it is cut and seams are stitched. Or how generously a pleat is made, and whether you topstitch with a single or double line of stitching can make all the difference to the appearance of the final garment.

I was working at the top end of the market: 'occasion wear' for the bride's mother, Royal Ascot or a smart reception. Straightforward shapes but nice details with appliqué and beading. I was good at it – you have to be: the competition is fierce and your range has to be worth

buying season after season when there is so much else on offer. My hunch was well developed, being able to catch the mood of what was coming: colours, storyline, fabrics and silhouette. And there were times when I saw the garments on the catwalk. It is a step up when clothes are taken off the hanger and put on a body, and not just any body but that of a model with her perceived perfection. To complement the event there is a special venue with lighting and music and choreography. The clothes are paraded before an invited audience, who also are immaculately groomed and dressed. It is a glimpse of a way of life unaffordable to most, of those who buy the very best and move in charmed circles. The designer mingles, wearing her own label, and then goes home to the reality of getting on with the next season. But the applause has been a good experience, and doesn't happen after sermons. Nor to my knowledge do congregations clap when they see a stylish set of vestments coming down the aisle. But neither are they encouraged to put in an order for a set of their own after the last hymn – they have seen, but they cannot have.

From fashion to vestments

A manufacturer approached me to design decorated panels for use on a womenswear range. He bought some of them, I showed the remainder to an ecclesiastical outfitter which led to freelance work. It was a great relief to work with flat basic shapes, semi-circles and rectangles, after nipped waists and complicated sleeve setting. There is a freedom to, as it were, painting in fabrics, also a new freedom through working with a variety of fabrics impossible to utilize in the commercial world because of cost or particular dry-cleaning requirements. Cloth of gold frays as you look at it, and I once used a grey silk twill originally woven for wrapping guns. Such are the fabrics of which altar frontals are made. This was the bespoke, designer end of the ecclesiastical market. Not the catalogue end, which can include competitively priced ranges of chasubles and stoles 63 per cent polyester and 37 per cent viscose, and special offers. Some feel that catalogues should be avoided at all costs, but this may be a luxury others can't afford.

The language of design

Shapes have not changed that much over the centuries, the standard ones being described recently by an Anglican priest as 'outfits thought fetching in Carthage in the fourth century'.[1] Fabrics have – Carthage was free of polyester mix. And now in this country, thanks to the

embroiderer Beryl Dean and others, there is now a whole variety of images used to decorate vestments and church hangings; images which tell us something of God and God's world. Doing freelance work meant talking through designs with those who could see that what goes onto vestments and altar frontals can be more substantial than sideways swirly shapes in blue and green for the creation, and up and down swirly shapes in reds and oranges for the flames of Pentecost. What is this design saying? Is it strong enough for the scale of the building? Will it be seen in daylight, or through the filtered light of stained glass? Thus designers spin their yarns.

There is a limit to the number of perceived Christian symbols. Traditional workings of the dove, the seated lamb, the lily may not speak to us at all if we do not know the language of the Church, nor am I convinced that the decoration on vestments has to be part of a ministry of instruction. The lamb and the lily may speak least of all to our imaginations and our sense of the spaciousness of God. Nor does it necessarily contribute to the liturgy to see a paten and chalice embroidered on a stole when an actual paten and chalice form the central part of worship. Duplication and repetition of what already is.

Vestment design can open us up to a new and different world, and a new way of seeing: they can make us look, and look again. In worship where vestments are worn, they are forming part of the visual whole for an hour at a time. They stand in our line of vision, both at a distance and when seen close to, so it is important for the design to stand up to scrutiny, to contemplation and to frequent viewings. One designer who uses a very free interpretation of Scripture, the Christian tradition, poetry and music, and the world around us, writes of her work:

> There is no guarantee that a symbol will convey its meaning, any more than the effect of a poem or a symphony can be guaranteed. They are by their very nature suggestive, designed to catch the attention, to challenge and illuminate, and lead on to a fuller appreciation of the deep things of life. All religious language is suggestive in this sense, distinct from the colder, more precise, prose of the scientist, or even the historian. So the artist can be of great help to the Church in furthering its message and mission.[2]

A bishop, Colin James, commissioned a cope, mitre and stole from this designer. Worked on gold silk, the themes are of ladders and windows to illustrate how he saw his task as a bishop to provide ladders and windows into God. Designs that lend themselves to creative

interpretation, that let the eye travel and stimulate the imagination, that help us see again our own channels to God.

When a number of us were ordained priest in 1994 we decided to have an identical stole for each one of us which I designed and made. I wanted a design that would let foreground and background interact one against the other. This was not to be shapes floating on a sea of white, or cowering in a bottom corner. It was to be strong, and distinctive and simple, in gold and ivory silk. We liked the idea of the sea, so the 'waves' run the inside length of the stole. The sea lends itself to different interpretations: as a tribute to women and men who made waves so that we could be ordained priest; in a sense of companionship as 'Distinct as the waves, one and the sea'. I enjoy the ambiguity and layers of reading that the abstract suggestion rather than the concrete illustration allows. So in moving away from the sea image the design can be seen as a form that grows from earth: Jacob's ladder, or the tree of Jesse. There are three crosses on the stole, one centre back and two caught up in the outline of the waves. They are deliberately irregular and asymmetrical – there is nothing much regular about the cross, or the sign of the cross drawn with the thumb which marks us as the baptized of God's Church. I think we all enjoy wearing our stoles – this too is important, and they certainly look very striking when two or three or us are gathered together.

Vestment design does not usually get much mention in the press. However, in the *Church Times* 'Review of the Year' (1998) section on 'Being Relevant' there was an accolade for Birmingham Cathedral clergy's new vestments. The designer Yvonne Bell visited Birmingham and wanted to produce inventive and different images for the project. The resulting designs include the Sea Life Centre, Landrover Plant and the National Indoor Arena, but it was the image of 'Spaghetti Junction' (a complex of motorway intersections) on the green set which caught the wider imagination of the world. Hence John Barton's comment, 'God is in Spaghetti Junction as much as anywhere else', listed as one of the relevant quotes of the year in the *Independent* newspaper.

White, green, violet and red

There is a palette of four main colours, with the possible addition of blue for Advent and other variations, to draw the attention of worshippers to the rhythms of the liturgical year. Unspoken signals that we are moving on, that there is a beginning and an end to a season as legislated in rubrics by Pope Pius V in 1570. Simply the repetition of

these four basic colours in sequence: white, green, violet and red for vestments and church decorations to set the scene for the act of worship in ever changing times. As the liturgy unfolds we watch the movement of colour in relation to the setting, apple green linen in relation to stone, deep violet brocade in relation to marble. Texture against texture, movement against stillness. Patches of colour given additional impact by modern lighting, indication of colour far away in the shadows round the high altar. And colour taken away as the altar is stripped on Maundy Thursday, leaving the bleached bare bones of the building.

As a child I liked standing up for the first hymn on a Sunday morning because then the procession of servers and clergy would come into view. I had no patience with different colours for different seasons and each week hoped it would be my 'best' colour: red – disappointingly it was so often green. First there would be flashes and intervals of colour against white albs as crucifer and acolytes passed, then whole chasubles and copes of satin, speaking of gravitas.

What challenged my sense of the place of liturgy was going to a pilgrimage in Glastonbury. Although I did not understand anything about church tradition it was here I first saw the birettas and lace of Anglo-Catholic Anglicans. Here was the stuff of Sunday processions walking across the car park and down the high street on its way to the abbey grounds. What belonged inside had come outside – as inappropriate as Miss Haversham taking a stroll round an amusement arcade. It took getting used to, this juxtaposition of rich embroidery and tarmac, the pomp among Saturday afternoon shoppers. But I forgave them when I saw the linings: deep apricot, rose pink and primrose yellow fanned out on either side of the priest by boys holding the edges of the cope up to their chins. And hands held just so, eyes focused on middle distance. I was beholding great wardrobes indicating the fantastic potential of Narnia. And after the final blessing, the careful folding away of it all in tissue paper and garment bags. Until the next time.

'You're not going to church dressed like that!'

I was staying in Jamaica, it was Sunday morning and there was to be some churchgoing. I had a holiday wardrobe of tee-shirts and shorts so I wasn't dressed up, but I was dressed, although evidently not to the required standard. These had been my clothes the previous week and no one seemed to mind, although I realized that in spite of the heat and the humidity the dress code meant tights for women and suits for men.

Jackson didn't think he'd come: his new teeth pained him and he couldn't be seen without them. Doreen had been last week, but the container with her other hats was still held in Montego Bay. She couldn't come to church this week in last week's hat, so she dropped me off in the pick-up and I had to walk the last bit so she wouldn't be seen not going to church.

On the Sunday mornings when we didn't have to be so covert about our arrival it was amazing to watch people, especially the women, on the way to church. Hats and high heels, although the roads were bad. An exotic fashion parade in jewel colours made its way past the fields of sugar cane to the church gates. A society wedding every Sunday of the year. We speak of space as a component of liturgy: holy space and holy places. Liturgical observance is not contained by the walls of the church – liturgy makes its mark on the wider community, we carry the prayers of our neighbours with us. The colourful mark of God upon the whole community was very evident in Jamaica as a gorgeously apparelled laity shut their front doors behind them and set off for church.

Liturgy is the work of the people. How great, then, the significance of the clothes of the people – and should we suggest robing prayers to laity to say as they get dressed on a Sunday morning, even for those of us who have long since discarded 'Sunday best'? 'Lord, you have said "My yoke is easy and my burden is light"; make me so to bear it that I may enjoy it for ever.'

There is great variety in my work. I take a baptism and try not to look startled when the parents and godparents leave the congregation and come and stand with me round the font. The women are dressed to the nines in black chiffon, sequins and strappy sandals, with wristfuls of jewellery. Not what we're used to at 10 a.m. Parish Communion, but they have dressed for the feast – in this case not the Eucharist but the party afterwards. I hope any of their neighbours watching on as they left for church got the message that when we have a baptism – naming a new child of God and welcoming a new member of the body of Christ – we can all have a ball. And that the Gospel really might be good news, even if we think we're on the way somewhere else at the time.

Theatrum sacrum: *allowing God's action to proceed*

One dark November evening in northern Spain I step off the street into a church. The ceiling is high and ornate with gilded rococo curls of plaster, the sanctuary where the lighting is strongest seems an age away

up there in front, the chapels either side of the side aisles are lost in semi-darkness. Incense hangs in the air. I am only here to see what might be going on, not to join in. I stand at the back, some figures are kneeling nearer the front. We wait, there is a great stillness, an expectation of something important just about to start. A first note from the orchestra pit? The curtain rising? Here the signal is given by the ringing of bells, an elderly man in a black cassock and white cotta enters from the right, walks into the centre of the pool of light. Following him is a second, equally elderly man dressed in geranium red. Now it can begin. Black and white and scarlet in the November gloom, all eyes drawn to where the action is. The unfolding of the drama of Christ who has died, Christ who is risen, Christ who will come again. Visually it is stunning, and speaks of dimensions of God I come to church to be reminded of. Though I do not know what the priest thought of himself as he put on the scarlet robes, nor the thoughts of the server, or if they collected themselves at all before they stepped out into the work of the people. And the becoming of it all.

The Church of England report, *Faith in the city* (1985) reminds us of the importance of the non-verbal in worship, how holy places and liturgy must allow people to dream their dreams. Worship needs to hold good dreams alongside what is sometimes a very harsh reality. There are parallels with the theatre and insights from that world that we can bring to our experience of church. The man is looking at himself in the mirror, he will shortly put on his brocade and velvet, his white lace and his black shoes. We discuss the process of robing, he tells me he sometimes looks at himself ready, dressed for the part and wonders who he has become and where the real him is. He is an actor about to go on stage. Peter Brooks writes, 'The notion that the stage is a place where the invisible can appear has a deeper hold on our thoughts. We are all aware that most of life escapes our senses.' If we can somehow take our place in the liturgy other than purely in our heads, we may find ourselves entering more fully with the angels and archangels and with all the company of heaven to proclaim God's great and glorious name.

> Occasion, Event, Happening – the words are interchangeable. The structures are different – the opera is constructed and repeated according to traditional principles, a light-show unfolds for the first and last time according to accident and environment; but both are deliberately constructed social gatherings that seek for an invisibility to inter-penetrate and animate the ordinary.[3]

The inter-penetration and animation of the ordinary. Not that there is anything ordinary about gilded rococo plaster, but every day liturgy is constructed and repeated in that church in Northern Spain. And perhaps every day the faithful are caught up with the angels, as the colour and texture of liturgy gathers us in and holds us.

The foreword of an exhibition catalogue of contemporary vestment designs describes the chasuble as an extension of baptismal dress.[4] This is not exclusive dressing, it argues, but vicarious dressing. These are not costumes that separate members of the body of Christ, for we are all baptized. Thus vestments are worn by the few as a reminder to the many that 'As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ' (Gal 3:27). They are a celebration of the joy of creation: splodges of gold and black and red sing out cheerfully, disobeying the liturgical seasons. An indigo circle on rough-weave ivory looks as if it's been flicked on with a loaded brush and left to drip. Great swirls of plum and red and burnt orange all but cover the banana yellow base fabric. The theatre of colour and sounds, of music, and movement. Very uplifting and a natural introduction to the Sursum corda ('Lift up your hearts'), and witness to the truth that

> we do not leave in the natural world the glories of creation, but delight ourselves and honour the creator by employing them in his worship. They are his gift and they give him glory.[5]

Concluding thoughts

The delight and honouring of the creator in worship. The Provost of Sheffield Cathedral writes:

> Worship is one of the best tools of evangelism we have. Cathedrals invest so heavily in this because there is a 'converting' quality to liturgy when words, silence, music, ritual actions and architecture combine to create a theatre of the soul that speaks of the holiness and love of God.[6]

Ritual actions, movement, posture and gesture are all made distinctive and given colour through dress. Copes in procession, chasubles opened to their full width when the priest's hands are raised in prayer and in the breaking of bread. Stoles, narrow bands of colour against white; altar frontals and hangings woven into this theatre of the soul. Vestments that speak of the ancient needs of ritual, and communicate the nature of the occasion. That make present the actions of the liturgy and allow us to be

touched by transcendence, majesty, mystery and revelation. That point us to the wider communion that is beyond and yet part of the everyday.

In the last years of his life Matisse accepted a commission to design the interior of the chapel, Notre Dame du Rosaire at Vence. He saw the space as a symbiosis between the luminosity of the stained-glass windows and the meditative simplicity of the pure white interior. It is all his own work, from the designs for the murals and windows to the scrolls of metal that hold up the sanctuary light.

Integral to this created space with its cycle of light are his designs for vestments, designed with intentional simplicity. They are 'sumptuous harmonies of violets, greens, lemon yellows, poppy reds and perhaps even more luminous black'. Decorated with symbols of the liturgy, they were designed with the use of paper cut-outs. Thus palms, haloes, fish, stars, butterflies, ears of corn, and the cross appear freed from sedate decorative forms and familiar colour variations. Matisse considered this project for the chapel to be his best piece of work, 'the result of a lifetime devoted to the search for the truth'.[7]

The truth made plain before us in violet, green, lemon yellow, poppy red and luminous black – how wonderful! And how fitting for the theatre of the soul wherein we worship and encounter the holiness and love of God.

Katharine Rumens trained to teach art and later took a fashion course. She ran a design studio in London for ten years, selling at the top end of the market. She was ordained deacon in the Church of England in 1992 and priest in 1994. At present she is a priest at St John's, Waterloo, London, and chaplain to the South Bank Centre, London Weekend Television and the Old Vic Theatre.

NOTES

1 John Pridmore in the *Church Times*, 8 January 1999.
2 Renate Melinsky, *Lively symbols, church embroidery*, pamphlet for an exhibition at the Bar Convent Museum, York, 1991.
3 Peter Brook, *The empty space* (Penguin, 1990).
4 Kunst-Station Sankt Peter Koln, *Casula* (1992).
5 Michael Perham, *Lively sacrifice* (SPCK, 1992).
6 Michael Sadgrove, 'The mission of cathedrals today', *Bible Society magazine* (Spring 1998).
7 Jean Gichard-Meili, *Matisse* (Thames and Hudson, 1967).