

They shall not grow old

I was greatly moved watching the Peter Jackson documentary film 'They shall not grow old' on television on Remembrance Sunday.

For those who have not seen it (and it is available in iPlayer) Peter Jackson, the director of Lord of the Rings and the Hobbit, has produced a new version of all the old WW1 newsreel footage of which we are so familiar.

He has turned the black and white footage into colour by use of modern digital techniques. He then added modern sound effects and a script read by actors based on lip-reading the soldiers on film.

Finally, he over-dubbed it by real voices of old soldiers recorded by the Imperial War Museum. The result is remarkable: what was a nostalgic, distanced historic event becomes as up-to-date as conflicts in Syria and Afghanistan. We can relate and empathise with the truth and horror of the 'Great War'.

I think there is a parallel situation in our church services. To the outsider many of our 'traditional' church services are as quaint and distant as those old films. They know they exist, know they were important but they have no relevance to their day-to-day lives. Is it possible to 'add colour' to make them meaningful, without entering into the territory of Fresh Expressions and New Wine?

I believe the answer can be yes, but it takes as much effort, time and care as Peter Jackson took over his project.

Our 'colour' is the Holy Spirit; our 'sound' is faith; our 'recorded voices' are a vibrant community. A so-called 'traditional' congregation, full of faith, seeking the power of the Holy Spirit and loving one another is a revelation to the surrounding people. The old liturgy comes to life; the old hymns have meaning; the Eucharist takes on a holy mystery.

Why is it then that it appears so difficult for this to happen? I suspect it is because, in our "traditional" churches, we, as much as the outside world, have been fooled into thinking that "black and white" is normal. Normal can mean a difficult music director, a concentration on fund-raising and a desperation to keep activities going: even to ourselves this can seem normal. But what happens when there is a genuine desire to seek the Holy Spirit in faith and sacrifice? Then the music director sees music as a servant of Christ, we trust God for finances for his work and we give up old activities to see new life.

I have seen this in some places in the diocese. In these churches who wait on the Lord 'they do not grow old' but they 'mount up on wings like eagles'.

Rev. John Chitham (Chaplain to the Bishop of Blackburn)