DAVID BOWIE: CULTURE AND THE CHURCH

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In which I suggest that David Bowie provides a good model for the church's cultural engagement.
Category: Observations

It was a Friday morning in 1972Â and Derek and I were walking to school doing what we always did on Fridays; talking about the previous night's Top of the Pops. "What about that David Bowie?". "Brilliant song, but what did he look like?".

That performance of Starman, which has since become iconic, was myÂ first exposure to a performer who was to provide much of the soundtrack to myÂ teenage years and who still crops up on my playlists over forty years later. However, I don't want to write about his music; many others will do that, better than I could, over the next few days. I'd like to pick up on a thought from a radio interview this morning.

https://twitter.com/lewis_louisa/status/686452434198249472

"People say he was a chameleon but he wasn't, chameleons change their colours to fit in".

The way in which Bowie changed his music and look was remarkable and apparently effortless. I well remember when he "killed off" the rocker Ziggy Stardust and re-emerged a few months later as the soul influenced "thin white duke". To be honest, I wasn't at all happy about it. I liked rock and I didn't like soul. But Bowie wasn't changing to please me and he certainly wasn't changing to fit fashion.

If Bowie had tried to fit in, he would have had far less impact. He went in his own direction, shifting focus and direction according to his own whim and whatever drove him and because of that he became a truly influential artist.

We are constantly hearing voices telling us that the Church has to adapt its beliefs and practices to suit the culture around us. We need to fit it, to reflect the norms of society. In a word, we should become chameleons.

In some ways, David Bowie is a good model for the church. Our role is not to fit in with current fashion, to reflect whatever is the flavour of the month (or decade), but to out,Â prophetically speaking to society and bringing about change by offering something better than what the culture has to offer.

Now before anyone gets too annoyed; I'm fully aware that there are many aspects of Bowie's life that wouldn't be a good role model for the church and for individual Christians. I'm also aware that not everyone likes his music (I don't like all of it either).

However, this remarkable ability of his to stand out in front of culture, to speak to people and to bring about change is important. This is our role; shaped by the Scriptures and an encounter with Christ we are called to challengeÂ the world, not simply to reflect its values and priorities. This means that sometimes we will seem strange or outrageous; but we should never be boring. It also means that sometimes we will upset people; they want us to be comfortable and familiar, not edgy and provocative.

For those who've not heard enough of David's music today, here is that performance from Top of the Pops in 1972.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v342TST9tFw

I hope he found peace.