

THE PLACE OF LITURGY  
IN THE CHURCH

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LITURGY AND CHURCH

To talk of "The Place of Liturgy in the Church" seems as pointless as talking of "The Place of Sugar in Sweets". You cannot, as I understand it, have sweets without sugar: they are virtually the same thing. And so it is with the Church and Liturgy: you cannot have the Church without Liturgy; they are virtually the same thing; from one point of view, at least, the Church IS Liturgy. The deliberate exclusion of all worship in principle and in practice would, as Karl Rahner suggests, "*dissolve the Christian life as such and its ecclesiastical character*" - no Liturgy, no Church !

The first historic definition of our own Reformed Church of Scotland is expressed in unmistakeable liturgical terms. The Scots Confession, 1560, says:

*"The notes of the true Kirk we beleeve, confesse, and avow to be, first, the true preaching of the Word of God, into the which God has revealed himselfe*

unto us. Secondly, the right administration of the sacraments of Christ Jesus, which may be annexed unto the word of promise of God, to seal and confirme the same in our hearts. Last, Ecclesiastical discipline uprightly ministered, as God's Word prescribes".<sup>2</sup> If that is not Liturgy being the Church and the Church being Liturgy, it is difficult to imagine what is.

But essential and integral though the relationship of the two is, there is always the danger that it is possible to overestimate the importance and significance of liturgy in the life of the Church. To glorify liturgy to the point of apotheosis is obviously wrong. But even to imply that salvation comes only within the Church and within the liturgy of the Church, is to limit the sovereign power of the Holy Spirit, whose work it is to bring men and women to a saving knowledge of God; this work is not always and not necessarily done in worship. Liturgy may have a privileged place in the life of the Church and in the experience of individual Christians, but there must be no false claims made for it, no exclusive rights reserved for it.

#### THE SCOPE OF THE LITURGY

Liturgy, then, is not the all-embracing thing some would wish it and think it to be. Just how wide it is, and how far do its claims reach? For the Orthodox Churches, the word liturgy is reserved for the celebration of the Eucharist, and three forms are used: The Liturgies of St John Chrysostom and St Basil the Great, and the Divine Office of the Presanctified Gifts. In most of the Churches of the West, liturgy applies to all Divine Service, and is concerned with the shape and structure, as well as the language and ceremony of any ritual happening in church. Liturgy is understood to be both the offering we make at formal worship and the way we offer it. The pity is that much of what we do in church reflects the conclusion of the Devil in The Brothers Karamazov when he said,

*"Everything would be transformed into a religious service:  
it would be holy but a little dull."*<sup>A</sup>

Liturgy is surely more dynamic than that, more exciting than that, and it is a measure of how far we have failed if it be seen in terms of insipid mediocrity and uninspiring monotony.

Liturgy, on a wider stage, is not just our formal worship: it is all we do as Christians. C. S. Lewis among others has persuasively argued that all work

done and all life lived for God's sake is, in essence, worship.<sup>5</sup> There is ultimately no distinction between worship and work, or for that matter between worship and any other aspect of life. If there appears to be a distinction, it is only because we are unable to concentrate on more than one thing at one time. We move successively from one activity to another; we turn from work to worship. We set aside specific times for rendering God articulate praise and for the conscious dedication to him of our whole life and work, and we come together all in one place, as the New Testament insists we should. But these conscious, deliberate acts of worship, however finely ordered and imaginatively presented, do not constitute liturgy. Liturgy means service, not just in church service, but all service, all life offered in God's service, all life poured out as an offering to him. Liturgy is the dedicated<sup>6</sup> service of entire Christian lives; it is in fact the whole business of life.<sup>6</sup> As St Paul says,

*"Let every word and action, everything you do, be in the name of the Lord Jesus, and give thanks through him to God the Father".<sup>7</sup>*

The nature of our present earthly lives means that we are compelled to work and worship alternately. But this is only a concession to our human limitations, and it must not be allowed to obscure the fundamental reality, namely, that the whole aim of life is worship, and that beyond the limits of this human world, worship and work are one. The pattern of withdrawing from the world into a church building to worship, and returning to the world after worship, should not be seen as a dividing barrier but as a bridge, as a unifier. The "counter-coloured pattern of purposes"<sup>8</sup> that comprises our life is a rhythmical unity. As Dean Milner-White prayed:

*Go thou with us, O Lord, as we enter thy holy house;  
and go thou with us as we return to take up the common duties  
of life.*

*In worship and work alike let us know thy presence near us;  
till work itself be worship, and every thought to be thy praise;  
through Jesus Christ our Saviour."<sup>9</sup>*

Jan Tellini forcefully supports this view of the meaning of liturgy when he writes,

*"Christ's sacrifice takes the form of obedience and willingness to do God's will. Christians are expected to do the same and offer the concreteness of their lives on earth: it is their spiritual sacrifice, their sacrifice of praise, their liturgy."<sup>10</sup>*



But in this same article, he also deals with a narrower, more technical view of liturgy when he discusses the meaning of what is happening in church worship. (These technical aspects of liturgy are further developed in the book he wrote with Professor Forrester and Dr McDonald, Encounter with God.<sup>11</sup>) You will notice that I say "*what is happening* in church worship" rather than what we do in church worship. For here is a vital distinction: worship is not something we do at all.

"When we gather in a church building", Tellini argues, "the system of liturgical signs is the means through which both the announcement and the reality of salvation are re-presented to us, re-offered to us. It is not propositions that come to us, but God himself, through the Word and in the power of the Spirit. He meets us; he calls us; he challenges us; he empowers us to respond; he shows us what kind of answer is required."<sup>12</sup> This emphasis on the action of God in worship finds an echo in the Panel on Worship's latest Order for Holy Baptism where, in the introduction to the baptism, the minister declares,

"It is Jesus Christ himself who baptizes us by the Spirit of Pentecost into the one Church."<sup>13</sup>

Worship on this understanding of God's saving action becomes a "fundamentally transforming encounter with the power of the Word in the power of the Spirit", and that "encounter is directed towards making of us, both individually and corporately, an alter Christus: a concrete sacrifice of praise."<sup>14</sup> Worship is encounter with God, and liturgy becomes the vehicle whereby God comes to us in Christ and comforts and addresses us and reveals and gives himself to us. It is not what we do, but what he does that counts, and all our legitimate concerns about order and structure, language and symbol, word and gesture, should not be allowed to obscure the basic fact that an exchange is taking place, God is meeting with us, and it is he who sets the agenda, and, yes, prescribes the liturgy. The liturgies we devise should be designed to facilitate this process and to enable it to work. With this corrective in mind, it is perhaps time to turn to the meaning of the word liturgy with which we are most familiar and at home, liturgy in the sense of the way we order our services of worship.

It is perhaps a pity that the way we order public worship has become a party matter, or at least is reckoned to be an indicator of churchmanship. It was not always so, at least not in the Church of Scotland. John Knox had his Book of Common Order, Alexander Henderson his Government and Order of the Church

of Scotland,<sup>15</sup> James Guthrie ("that short man that could not bow", as Oliver Cromwell called him) said,

"I die in the faith of the Apostles and primitive Christians, and Protestant Reformed Churches, particularly of the Church of Scotland",<sup>16</sup> Robert Murray McCheyne quoted with approval the Greek Orthodox Liturgy in his sermons,<sup>17</sup> and Rabbi Duncan claimed to be

"first a Christian, next a Catholic,<sup>18</sup> then a Calvinist, fourthly a Paedo-Baptist, and fifth a Presbyterian." Would that a similar breadth of experience and catholicity could be found everywhere today ! All these men were evangelicals (in the modern party sense), or are claimed by evangelicals: yet they were all catholic and were familiar with either ancient or contemporary liturgies, or both.

#### THE LITURGICAL MOVEMENT

The modern interest in liturgies, and in liturgy in the Church has a fascinating history. It has passed through several phases, beginning in the 1830's with the work of Dom Prosper Gueranger who refounded the Benedictine abbey at Solesmes and devoted his energies to the restoration of the Gregorian Chant and a rediscovery of the liturgical inheritance of the church.<sup>19</sup> For all that his work inspired and initiated a new and a serious interest in liturgy, it was seen by some to be somewhat quixotic and peripheral, and was dismissed as regressive and romantic. But in fact, as Max Thurian<sup>20</sup> points out, it was deadly serious both in its intent and in its results.

Gueranger's work was partly a response to the dead hand of the prevailing contemporary rationalism in theology. The faith had become over-intellectualised in an attempt to harmonise it with the discoveries of science which were then in a process of rapid development. The religion of the day had no sense of the mystery of God in it; it made no allowance for the transcendence of God. All could be explained and accounted for, if only the right questions were asked, the relevant hypothesis tested, and the proper experiments done. To counter this rigid, sterile orthodoxy in dogma, pietism with its over-emphasis on the individual, had become a powerful force in the Church. The liturgical movement then appeared as a new solution, opposed both to cold rationalism on the one hand, and to over-heated personal piety on the other. Rationalism tends to turn the faith into a religious philosophy; pietism tends to remove people from the corporate and sacramental life of the Church. The liturgical movement offered again the idea of mystery, a mystery

which is apprehended through the intelligence of the heart and encountered through the symbols and sacraments of the liturgy. Of course, the danger is that the liturgy itself, especially in the early enthusiastic stages of its recovery and use, may be seen to be somewhat individualistic, not to say idiosyncratic. It may even appear to be an aesthetic form of piety which appeals to the senses rather than to the intelligence. That certainly was the criticism levelled at the early liturgical reformers; and we can understand it, confronting as it did a vigorous insistence on such things as Gregorian chanting, vestments, and ornaments, almost always to excess.

But the movement matured. Biblical and patristic studies began to stress the value of the liturgical sources and to explain them. The different elements in the liturgy were examined and co-ordinated, and it became clear that worship was not only important in the life of God's people, but was primary over personal piety and personal witness. The first phase of liturgical renewal brought an emphasis on aesthetics; this second stage reinforced a sense of corporateness, of belonging, and indeed may be said to have re-discovered the catholicity of the Church in both its universality and community.

The third strand in the development of liturgy in the Church relates to liturgical studies themselves. New documents were discovered, ancient liturgies were subjected to scientific methods of study to determine what was good and bad in Christian worship, appreciation of the basic structures of the liturgy were extricated from the accretions superimposed upon them during periods when liturgical life was less genuine and authentic.

This third stage continues still. Though the movement began in the Roman Catholic Church, spreading from France to Rome to Belgium, and supported at critical moments by the Papacy and the Vatican<sup>21</sup>, the Reformed Churches also played their part. In Neuchatel in Switzerland, Pastor Jen Frederic Ostervald produced what was really the first Reformed Prayer Book in the 1740's. His use of the Christian Year, and of such liturgical elements as *Sursum Corda*, *Sanctus*, *Gloria in Excelsis* in the Communion Service was much in advance of his time, and in due course had an influence on the liturgical revival in reformed worship in both America and Scotland. In Paris, Eugene Bersier, Pastor of the French Reformed l'Eglise d'Etoile produced a new liturgy in 1876 which stressed the celebrating of the Eucharist, followed the Christian Year, and emphasised the need to hold Word and Sacrament in balance. His work was not in practice adopted by the French Reformed Church of the time, but it influenced later scholars such as Otto, Heiler, Brilioth, Cullmann, and Max



Thurian of Taize. In England, the Tractarians and their followers set a pattern of worship which, in spite of occasional excesses, moulded the liturgies in use today.

Scotland, too, in the 19th century saw a renewed interest in liturgy, beginning with Dr Harry Robertson of Kiltearn's Scotch Minister's Assistant, published anonymously in Inverness in 1802. In 1857 Dr Robert Lee of Greyfriars produced Prayers for Public Worship, and in the following year Andrew R Bonar of Canongate's Presbyterian Liturgies appeared. In 1865 The Church Service Society was formed, taking as its aim the study of the liturgies, ancient and modern, of the Christian Church, with a view to the preparation and ultimately the publication of certain forms of prayer for public worship, and services for the administration of the sacraments. In 1867 Euchologion was published, paving the way in due time for the appearance of the present books of the Church of Scotland.

#### LITURGY FOR TODAY

All of this activity brings us to today, and to the fourth stage or phase in liturgical renewal, namely the liturgies which we ourselves use in worship. It is when we consider this stage that we see that liturgies have no life of their own. Liturgy by itself can have no independent existence. Liturgies, even in the narrowest sense of Orders of Service, are part of the total life of the whole Church. That means that liturgy and liturgies cannot be regarded as a sphere reserved for specialists, as an interest preserved for initiates. The book, Encounter with God, opens with the splendid story of an old woman asking Dean Inge "Are you interested in Liturgy?" "No, madam", he replied, "neither do I collect butterflies!"<sup>22</sup> Not everyone is so dismissive of liturgy, for liturgy is the function and the province of the whole Church, and we should all have an interest in it; and the more informed the interest is, the better.

What then is the nature of a liturgy, of an admissible liturgy, that is, of a liturgy that allows the engagement between God and His people to take place? Details will differ from place to place, but we may accept Max Thurian's four notes as providing a harmonious quartet.<sup>23</sup>

The main direction of this worship is God-ward, not man-ward. The thrust of it is to glorify God rather than to edify his people. Not everyone, however, would accept that the distinction is so clear-cut. Luther, for example, could

not entirely move away from a didactic purpose and intention in the liturgy. In the Preface to the German Mass of 1526 he writes,

"In short, if we establish liturgical orders, it is not at all for those who are already Christians for the latter have no need of them. Such orders, in fact, have no intrinsic justification; their justification is in us: we are yet not all Christians, and they are there to make Christians of us. Those who are Christians perform their worship in spirit ... If such orders are necessary, it is especially because of simple-minded and young people, who need to be and must be daily educated and trained in Scripture and the Word of God, so that they may become accustomed to it, skilled and fluent in it, and in time be able to teach others and to help further the reign of Christ." <sup>24</sup>

The intention here is plain, but it provokes the question whether or not worship should be addressed to God rather than directed to others, however laudable the reason.

Calvin, too, sees prayers at worship as a means of edification. *"It is plain,"* he writes, *"that the public prayers are not to be couched in Greek among the Latins, nor in Latin among the French or English (as hitherto has been everywhere practised), but in the vulgar tongue, so that all present may understand them, since they ought to be used for the edification of the whole church."* <sup>25</sup> Such didactically motivated worship may obscure, if not entirely defeat, the proper doxological purpose of worship. It may serve to muffle the announcement of the Gospel that God is the Father of eternal love who wishes all to be saved in the Son; to mask the presence of Christ the Incarnate Word, bearing and himself being the Good News of the Gospel; and to divert the power of the Holy Spirit as he seeks to strengthen and sanctify and establish those whom God in Christ has chosen as his dear children.

If an emphasis on doxology rather than on didacticism means that there may be some parts of a liturgy that are not understood by everyone, is that necessarily a bad thing? A form of liturgy which conformed to the criterion of being immediately understood would probably have to be emptied of all biblical and traditional content, and would very soon become obsolete. Of course, we must make every effort to ensure that any liturgy we use is intelligible, (and here questions of language and other related topics might well detain us, but this is not the time for them). A balance must be struck between liturgical fundamentalism on the one hand, the use of forms and orders



for their own sakes or because they have always been used; and the exclusive passion for contemporary, and perhaps passion, fashions on the other, which soon pass their "sell-by" date.

The second note Max Thurian sounds is that liturgies should provide for sacramental forms of worship. Nowadays, in liturgical circles, this goes without saying, but it still needs to be said loudly and frequently in the circles in which most of us move. If the Incarnation is at the heart of our theology, then it must be at the heart of our liturgy - the physical and temporal representing and conveying the spiritual and eternal. Of course, the Sacraments can never be separated from the Word, and indeed in our Church of Scotland tradition, they seal the Word. But we have allowed the Word to become separated off from the Sacraments, as though we had no need to apprehend God's love to us in Christ through any sense other than hearing. It can be argued that the reason why so many people are absent from our churches is because the worship is far too verbal, far too cerebral, far too aural. What is missing <sup>27</sup> is sight, touch, smell, taste - colour, movement, gesture, art of all kinds.

Perhaps we have been too ready to play the part of Judas Iscariot (St John 12: 1 - 7) who thought it <sup>27</sup> a waste of time and money to consecrate things of beauty to Jesus Christ. Liturgy is a kind of play, theatre, a spectacle: we have too often reduced it to a monologue.

There are large problems in this area, not least the relationship of inward, spiritual worship, to outward observance. Some have been so nervous about this minefield that they have abandoned the outward ceremonies altogether, and insisted on nothing but the inward components of worship. Their liturgies become austere, simple, concise, innocent of all adornment and action not necessary to their performance. And there is some point in this bareness: at least it offers the opportunity of avoiding the perils of idolatry, ritualism and formalism. But while this hostility to, or suspicion of, outward forms is understandable, it could produce an impoverished, distorted, and unbiblical worship. Furthermore, worship which is exclusively verbal and addressed largely to the understanding, is always in danger of becoming verbose, abstract, intellectualistic, and merely notional. The use of all the senses, in a constrained and responsible way, can help to keep the balance right.

The sacraments, then, have their place, perhaps the place in the liturgy, though it is always right to insist on the indissoluble relation between Word and Sacrament, and to remember first and foremost that the proclamation and preaching of the Word is also a mystery whereby God feeds His church.

Max Thurian's third note is that liturgies should provide opportunities for worship to be ecumenical. Worship really is, from the human standpoint, an activity of God's people - all of God's people. Liturgy is the one place where we should be united with the whole Church at all times and in all places. To a certain extent, we demonstrate this unity in our so-called denominational hymn books, which in fact are rarely denominational and which scour the whole of Christendom for contributions. But if we use hymns in this practical expression of the communion of the saints, one generation speaking to another, and one community inspiring another, why should we not use other components of worship - prayers, affirmations, acclamations, and even practices foreign (if not alien) to our own tradition? We are Christians first; then catholic Christians: can this catholicity not be reflected more in the way we worship Sunday by Sunday? Will we ever have a truly ecumenical liturgy, one which could be used week after week by every Church in Christendom, with local variations of course? Perhaps that is not even a desirable aim, but it is worth considering that the Eucharist at least may be seen to have a basic ecumenical structure, moving forward from point to point in the Order on agreed authentic elements, and uniting the whole of the Church on earth in common, catholic worship.

Max Thurian's final note is that liturgy should be missionary. Our liturgies should be accessible to contemporary people, all the people. God's love is for the world, and our worship should make that plain. In framing our liturgies, we cannot overstep or obscure the Biblical or theological realities the Church seeks to proclaim, and we will always preserve a full place for Scripture and preaching, for sacraments and ceremonies. But we will seek to do it in such a way as to show modern people the reality of worship and the relevance of prayer. How this is done will vary from place to place, and indeed from country to country, but it must be done with rigorous integrity and with an eye to simplicity and authenticity. Thurian had in mind what he called *"non-occidental cultural areas, for instance in Africa and Asia"*. He argued that, if the classical liturgies are used in these continents, they should at least be integrated with valid contributions from the different religious traditions and the customs of the countries.<sup>28</sup> Nowadays we see the sense in this, and we recognise just how incongruous Huguenot or Scottish or Roman or Lutheran practices are in the heart of Africa or Asia.

But this is a principle that applies not only to the cultures and countries abroad: it applies equally to our own post-Christian multi-racial culture. The practices of the early Church need to be reassessed and introduced afresh, imaginatively, sensitively, intelligently. By carefully constructed liturgies

we can do much to express to people who are seeking for direction and enlightenment and comfort that this is God's world and that his Presence is on earth.

Liturgy that is missionary in its outlook and expression would not, of course, be confined to the formal liturgical activity of worship in Church on Sunday. It would find a place in smaller, informal gatherings, in "house churches", where the group can be more intimately involved in the formation of the structures by which they encounter God and offer their worship. In such small gatherings, the tone is perhaps as important as the content of the liturgy. The atmosphere in which people meet, the sense of fellowship and love that pervades everything, the relaxed informality that is made possible only because trouble has been taken to ensure that the agreed liturgy will work - all these can help the encounter between God and his people to take place.

It is perhaps worth remembering that in the Jewish Seder, which after all takes place in the home, round the family table, with the father officiating as priest, the children have a special part to play, and their contribution affects the nature of the whole gathering, making it more friendly and human. What they may do with the Aphikoman for example, adds a touch of fun to the proceedings. The Aphikoman, a piece of the Mazzah, is reserved in readiness for any unexpected guest who should arrive. It is eaten only at the end of the meal, and it seems that the children can and do get hold of it and hide it away somewhere, exacting a ransom for revealing its whereabouts. Then also, there is appended to the text of the Seder for the children's sake a madrigal of numbers, rather like our *I have a song to sing, O. Sing me your Song, O. I'll sing you One-O, etc.* The Jewish madrigal of numbers is: 13 are the Attributes of God; 12 are the Tribes; 11 the Stars; 10 the Commandments; 9 the months of carrying; 8 the days of the Covenant; 7 the days of the week; 6 the Orders of the Mishnah; 5 the Books of the Law; 4 the Mothers (are these Eve, Sarah, Rachel, Ruth ?); 3 the Fathers (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob ?); 2 the Tables of the Covenant; 1 our God in heaven and on earth. After the madrigal comes a nursery-rhyme, which builds itself up line by line rather like *There was an old woman who swallowed a fly*. It begins: "*One only kid, one only kid, that father bought for two zuzim, one only kid, one only kid.*" Then: *the Cat that ate the kid; the Dog that bit the Cat; the Stick that beat the Dog; the Fire that burnt the Stick; the Water that quenched the Fire; the Ox that drank up the Water; the Man who slaughtered the Ox; the Angel of death that slew the Man; and the Holy One, blessed be he, who smote the Angel of Death.*<sup>29</sup> By such means, liturgy is both rooted in the revelation of God's glory, and made relevant to the aptitudes and needs of God's

children. Should not these two principles inspire and inform every liturgy?



CONCLUSION

These, then, are some of the ways we can give liturgy its due place in the Church - theological, sacramental, ecumenical and missionary. In the Reformed Church we hold ourselves to be "*ecclesia reformata semper reformanda*". Possibly we should extend that to say "*liturgica reformata semper reformanda*" remembering always that we are in constant dependence on the guidance of the Holy Spirit and must ever be in agreement with the Word of God and the fundamental doctrines of the Christian Faith.

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NOTES

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Mediator Dei et hominum, the first encyclical to be devoted entirely to the liturgy, issued by Pope Pius XII in 1947;  
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