

LEAD INTO GOLD

Twenty Years of Liturgical Alchemy

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One of our church-people, hearing that I had been asked to write an article on liturgical change, volunteered a short comment which I have found remarkably useful. Describing himself as a Rip Van Winkle, in that he had not attended church for over 25 years, and knew only the old Prayer Book, he continues: *"When I came for communion for the first time this year I was full of trepidation. Would I remember what to do? Would it all be different? Would I get lost in the new form of service? How comforting and reassuring it was to find that the service remained very much in its time-honoured form, but the words, phrases, and prayers were freshly 'modern'. I am now quite at ease with the new style, but occasionally find myself wanting to slip into the traditional phraseology. No matter! The words are alive, relevant, and meaningful."*

He draws attention to stability of liturgical form even though it is clothed with fresh language and style. Other lay-people commented similarly on the importance of changes in language. One, after rereading the Prayer Book for the first time in 19 years, was *"amazed how little of it made sense despite the rolling language and some of the thoughts it embodied, many now 'out of line'. And one wonders what it ever did for people for whom English is a second language!"* He hints that perhaps the thinking behind our liturgy has changed. Another expresses satisfaction that liturgical reform has dealt with some of her "doubts about the old Prayer Book theology", while she remains critical of the introduction of some pious mediaevalisms into the 1984 liturgy!

The same person, reflecting on the changes we have experienced in the last 20 years, considers that we have benefited greatly by being ready to change. "Spiritual growth can be accelerated by grappling with change; and I hope that the publication of the new Prayer Book will not be regarded as an end to the questioning, re-phrasing, and testing, over periods of time, to which we have become accustomed. I hope I never again become contented with the 'it's in the book' mentality, which I feel inhibited religious progress in the Anglican Church in the past." Another woman, in her comment on the variations in the present liturgy, feels that its adaptability increases her "concentration on what is happening rather than what is being said."

These comments suggest the topics which I am interested to look at in the course of this article -

1. The theology of liturgy
2. The theology conveyed by liturgy
3. Changes in language
4. Changes in style
5. The way we approach liturgy.

I have spent 17 years in this parish of St Peter, Onehunga, and therefore have experienced with the parish the movement from a standard worship based on the 1662 Prayer Book to the development of a flexible local "use" distinctive to this congregation, in the style with which they feel comfortable, related to their needs and yet extending them. I have been able to observe how the changes have affected their attitudes and ministries over these formative years.

THE THEOLOGY OF LITURGY

Of course, the recapture of the significance of the liturgy as the work of the whole *laos* dates back to the Reformation, when, for the first time for hundreds of years, the laity were given a significant and essential part in the Church's worship. They were no longer to be spectators, but participants, using the language they understood, with printed books some of them could read, and with allotted responses and actions. In spite of this advance, it was still a shock to the Church of 30 years ago to rediscover the deeper truths of what the ministry of the laity really meant. Many were excited by the new understanding of the importance of the *laos*, and wanted to see this understanding incorporated into our liturgies. But action always seems to trail well behind theory; and although the newly appearing liturgies of that period put a stronger emphasis on lay participation, the actual participation of the whole *laos* remained minimal. The clergy still decided and controlled everything. This remains true even today - visiting some parishes both I and our parishioners have experienced services taken out of the new liturgy books but conducted in 1662 style!

In many other parishes the theology of the laity, and therefore the theology of the liturgy, has been taken much more seriously. Many parishes have worship committees, with responsibility to plan and foster ordinary and special liturgies. Many churches have a plainly visible lay sharing in the conduct of worship. However, this outward sharing does not necessarily (I believe) indicate a full ministry of the *laos*. In the words of the theologian, this kind of participation may be that of a "clericalised laity". Firmly established liturgical committees, lay assistants, and lay celebrants may be as much clericalised as the older style servers, robed choirs, and sanctuary

guilds. What we have developed here at Onehunga is less formal. We have at times, for particular need, or for particular services, or when our worship seemed somewhat stale, formed entirely ad hoc liturgical committees, which have met for a period, done their work, and then disbanded. This has encouraged the ideas and enthusiasm and interest of a wider range of people, who have felt able to shape our liturgies to our needs.

For instance, we have been one of the few parishes to resist the introduction of the Peace into the middle of the Liturgy, many of us finding it intrusive to the flow of the service, and basically in the wrong place; long after the absolution, the reconciliation between members of the *laos*, had been proclaimed. Yet we were aware of the value of this custom, and we experienced it wherever else we went to church. After a long time, a committee looking at aspects of our worship suggested tentatively that we might try to include the Peace, but not at the Offertory instead, right at the beginning, after the opening sentences, before the first hymn. The practice was received fairly coolly at first; but it is now recognised as a splendid dedication of ourselves to be reconciled before we receive God's Word, and not just before we receive the Sacrament. My point is not that this idea is a brilliant insight that everyone ought to adopt, but that it is an indication of a way in which we might listen and act more creatively on the insights of the *laos*. In a similar movement, we have replaced the Kyrie between the confession and the absolution, where it seems to sit comfortably. That is, we no longer say that we are sorry before the officiant bids us to make our confession.

We have discovered a great sense of excitement through our practical realisation of the theology of the *laos* within our liturgy.

THE THEOLOGY CONVEYED BY LITURGY

Liturgy not only has its own theology, but it is also a vehicle of teaching. The careful reading of a liturgy, or experiencing of it, tells the reader or the viewer what the theology of the worshippers is. So St Paul can speak of visitors exclaiming that "God is certainly among you"; or St Vladimir, returning from his visit to the orthodox liturgy in Constantinople, was able to exclaim: "I have been in heaven!" The content and style of our liturgies say a great deal about what we believe.

Now I recognise that the liturgical reformers in Aotearoa have been exceedingly careful to claim that the new liturgies are not intended to differ in doctrine from the old. "No change in eucharistic doctrine from that

implied by the *Book of Common Prayer* is intended by the changes in structure or language of this rite." But, as one of our study-groups did this year, you only have to go through the two liturgies and list the words used on any subject to find that the two lists will be radically different. The new liturgies shift the emphasis from God as King and Judge to God as Creator and Redeemer; from the crucifixion of Christ to the resurrection. This kind of shift of emphasis occurs at many levels. A number of people here have noted the change, and see it, for all the Liturgical Commission's protestation, as a change in the theology we proclaim. Some of them feel liberated from the legalism of atonement theology, and certainly from the hard emphases on original sin and predestination. Others, recognising that a shift in emphasis is really something more than that, discuss and press for more radical reform especially of the Creed.

Certainly, here in Onehunga, there are a number of people who are convinced that there has been a change in the teachings of the Church, through the content of the new liturgies, and also in the style in which these are conducted - furthermore they welcome the change! Undoubtedly there will be some who read these words and feel that we are woolly about the difference between doctrine, the unchangeable truths of our religion, and theology, interpretation, or opinion. We consider, on the contrary, that our lifetime is the first period in the Church's history in which it has become essential to recognise and accept that doctrine itself must change, in response to the new perceptions of the scientific and pluralistic world. The plea: "Is it not time for a rewording of the Creed?" coming from one of our people, is not simply a suggestion that words could be modernised, but implies an acceptance of inclusive language and ideas, and the rejection of mediaeval cosmology and metaphysics from the belief-statements of the twentieth century Christian. We preach about the Word made flesh, but the living faith has been turned into many words. Our new liturgies attempt to be incarnational.

CHANGES IN LANGUAGE

The last 20 years have certainly seen some amazing changes in our liturgical language. Not only has there been the reform towards modern language and ideas, but also there has been the movement from the inclusion of Maori words to its recognition as of equal status, and also we have seen a change from exclusively male-centred language towards inclusiveness. Here in Onehunga, we have experienced a difficulty in using Maori because of the proportion of other worshippers for whom even English is a second language. We have also needed to use Samoan and Tongan languages. The breakthrough in the removal of sexist language came long before the official

liturgies were changed. A discussion of parishioners at our Parish Communion felt very strongly that we should immediately remove the worst occurrences of male-focused words; and a significant number of people would have been happy to go even further and amend exclusively male images of God. We still find it difficult to avoid all occurrences of sexist language, particularly in the hymns and Bible readings.

Surely more important than the improvement of liturgical language is our awareness that language is itself a changing creature, and that the better the communications we have with other peoples and cultures the more we are going to experience changes in both words and concepts. For a couple of centuries we had the illusion that language would not change much once we had freely available books and universal education. But in the last 50 years the change of language has accelerated, a trend which looks like continuing. This is part of the reason why, at Onhunga, we are somewhat unenthusiastic about the production of a new Prayer Book. The last one creaked into its 300th year of use; at the present rate of change, the new Prayer Book could seem archaic in 20 years time! In a multi-cultural parish like this, practically every day brings new words or new uses of language. We are very aware of and respectful towards this fluidity of expression.

CHANGES IN STYLE

There can be scarcely any parish that has not experienced some change in style over the last 20 years. And much of the credit for the liberation that has occurred must be given to the evangelical and pentecostal revivals. It is through them that we have opened up to uses of music, song, and movement that would have been unthinkable in the past. Pipe organs have not only priced themselves out of most parish's plans; but their power, controlled by one person, now seems unappealing; and we are all into more participatory music in the hands or voices of groups, and in electronics. In even the most conservative parishes new songs have become part of normal worship. Onhunga has tended to the conservative, with many of our people finding the new choruses sometimes rather empty of ideas and music, and dully repetitive. However, we do have our own setting of the liturgy, which is singable, memorable, and calls for percussion accompaniment. And we have had many moving contributions to the liturgy by individuals and groups, instrumental or vocal, volunteered for specific occasions.

Our youth have increasingly offered contributions in movement, and we have included drama and dance within our liturgy. The drama that has appealed to older members has been the revival and revitalising of long-established

rituals, like Candlemas and Tenebrae. Probably the main thing that gave us an openness to new styles was having to move our worship out of the pew-crammed old church into the parish hall for a year while the church was being reconstructed. The shape of the hall, and its transitoriness, gave us a feeling of freedom that we held onto when we moved into the new church. There, a movable altar platform, more open and comfortable seating, and plenty of spaces, have kept us open to an element of movement in our services.

One of our insights has been that, when we started to have people reading Lessons regularly, to give them confidence and to avoid "clericalisation" we asked them to read from the translation of their choice, and from their own seats. Thus we found something unexpected and exciting - that the words of prophecy might come from behind you or before you. You never know the direction from which the letters of Paul might come! The sound of the Gospel might be heard right beside you! We have found this unpredictability very helpful. As time went on, we decided to use one translation for the Gospel, so that the server could take the Gospel Book from the altar to the reader - who might still be anywhere in the congregation. A further custom in Onehunga, also learnt from the pentecostalists, and deeply appreciated, is the opening up of the intercession to the ideas and words of its leaders, and also to considerable input from members of the congregation. A number of the intercession leaders make considerable efforts to tie their work in with the theme and sermon of the day. Sometimes dialogue intercessions have been presented.

From time to time we have changed our style by focusing on "themes" - not those suggested in the calendar, but ideas developed and expressed by the congregation itself. One that immediately springs to mind was part of a series of Sundays when we focused on colours, not the liturgical colours, but those of creation. For Blue Sunday people were asked to wear something blue, a specially made frontal was blue, vestments were blue, and we thought about the blue of the sky and the blue of the ocean, as well as quizzing people about the various blues they experienced. We found this linked up brilliantly and memorably with the Sunday theme, which was God's Love. On another theme Sunday (Palm Sunday) we focused on Crowns. A huge crown hung over the centre of the congregation. The children made crowns at the beginning of the service, left them at the altar at the confession, and knelt with the communicants later in the service to receive a solemn crowning - the earthly crown surrendered, the Christ-given crown received. In addition, everyone was given a crown-shaped bookmark to remind them of the day. Once again, it is not so much the individual ideas that are important as that the whole style

of liturgy has changed. St Gregory Nazianzen says: "The Logos on high plays, stirring the whole cosmos back and forth, as he wills, into shapes of every kind." The shape of our worship suggests an element of play and fun that gives it a new life and immediacy and reality.

More recently, with many of our people critical of the pious wordiness introduced into the 1984 liturgy, a reaction has been to note the options given of keeping silence at various points. A huge crashing chord on the organ at the end of the Eucharistic Prayer is followed by a "great silence", which is observed even by the smallest children mostly! It's a silence about which most of our people feel very positive. And recently, after a sermon on recollection, we paused after the words "The Lord is here. God's Spirit is with us"; a number of people are asking for a great silence at that point too! This welcoming of silence has probably reached its ultimate with an early morning weekday congregation that has asked for, and now experienced a number of times, a "silent liturgy". This liturgy dispenses almost entirely with the spoken word, and instead uses actions, personal prayer and thanksgiving, while a reminding Sanctus bell keeps us worshipping together. All participants in this have found themselves deeply moved, much more aware of "what is happening rather than what is being said."

THE APPROACH TO LITURGY

20 years ago, entering our church, you were given a hymn book and prayer book, sat or knelt or stood rigidly in a pew throughout the service except when going up to receive Communion. The priest stood at the altar at least half the length of the church away, with his back to you. You mumbled a few responses with the rest of the congregation; and if there were hymns you sang quietly so as not to offend the musical perfection of the choir. The sermon, except at "family services", was entirely in the voice and gestures of the priest. Mostly he (yes, always "he") read the lessons too, because lay-people were so inclined to make mistakes if he let them read. The service would have been almost identical in any church you went to, which you thought was a wonderful expression of unity. After church perhaps the priest stood at the door to shake your hand, and perhaps you lingered a few moments to chat with an acquaintance.

This description reads almost like a parody, it is so unbelievable! How immensely our whole approach to liturgy has changed. These days, at St Peter's, when you are greeted at the door you are given a service book and a newsheet. The service book is unique to our parish, including the options that we are using at present, and the music of the liturgy; it is light and easy to

follow. The newsheet not only has details of events for the coming week, and other news, but also includes the Propers for the day, the Bible reference, the Collect (so that you can join in saying it), and the hymns for the day (including the melody line). You sit in a comfortably padded seat, arranged in a semicircle around the altar platform. People talk to you freely - if you are not saying your prayers! When the service begins you find that the priest and assistants are in the midst, facing you at all the important parts. The people join in a very large portion of the service, either as rostered individuals, or in the people's parts. There is no choir; if you do not sing maybe no one else will! People you know read the scriptures from here and there around the church. Children wander freely, and at times have special opportunities to express themselves. They all come to the communion rail either to receive a blessing or Communion. After the service, there is morning tea, in the worship space, and there may be a small or large meeting going on for some purpose. People expect you to stay, and they offer you support and encouragement.

The question remains, given the liturgical development and adventure that we have experienced here, how we are likely to respond to the publication of the new Prayer Book. As my introduction pointed out, through the words of one of the people, we anticipate that there will continue to be a need for questioning, rephrasing, and testing. Having grown accustomed to the open-endedness of the "experimental" liturgies we are not going to sink readily back into the "it's in the Book" mentality. Fortunately, our most recent explorations have had something of an *imprimatur* through the wide open opportunity given by the do-it-yourself liturgy on page 69 of the 1984 Liturgy. We are thankful at St Peter's that there is a similar provision in the new Prayer Book.

Also we have no desire to go back to the placing of more material in people's hands than they are going to need in any particular service. The fumbling for page numbers is not the loveliest part of our heritage. For this reason the vestry here has chosen to buy only a few Prayer Books, for use as a resource by those with the responsibility of conducting our services, and a few others to be available on loan to parishioners, so that they also can explore the resources provided. Other parishioners have ordered their own copies, fully aware that they are not likely to be used in our services in the immediate future. There is a sadness in my mind that Onehunga is electing not to have pew copies of the new Prayer Book in line with many other parishes; but there is also a sadness that the Church of the Province has not recognised the

full impact of the years of experiment on the thinking of our church people, and on the patterns of worship that have developed.

It seems very likely to me that, with the rapid evolution of computer and video technology, it will not be very long before the whole idea of book-based liturgy will disappear, and we shall find ourselves equipping our churches with far more versatile and custom-made liquid crystal screens that will make books an unwieldy and expensive indulgence. To some readers these thoughts may seem like a sci-fi fantasy! In fact, a couple of years ago I challenged the Bible Society as to why biblical passages were not being produced on hand-sized LCD screens, far less expensive and far more convenient than printed books, and I was told it was out of the question. Yet within weeks of this rejection there was a news item telling us that the whole Bible had been made available in this form!

The above comment is relevant to the whole article, in that it illustrates vividly our member's observation that "spiritual growth can be accelerated by grappling with change". Having in the last 20 years practised the transmutation of liturgical lead into gold, this parish is reluctant to abandon an alchemy which has been found life-giving and exhilarating.

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