

## Liturgy as a Meditation on Scripture *A personal view*

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*Liturgy is the work of the people of God in worship, so we are told. It may be further contended that Anglican liturgy, as we see it in the Eucharistic liturgies of the New Zealand Prayer Book, is an extended meditation upon the scriptures by the gathered assembly of God's people. If one takes the image of the creative wisdom of God from the Hebrew Scriptures<sup>1</sup> as a model, in the writing of liturgy we can detect people of prayer at play, like God is at play in creation. As such, Liturgy is the literary fruit of prayer and meditation, even contemplation, and, if approached with a spirit of openness and a willingness to be surprised, one may discover much to nurture one's own prayer and inform one's relationship with the world as a child of God. In liturgy we find not only direct quotations from scripture<sup>2</sup>, but also allusions where the thought is captured and is unmistakable, but no direct quote is discerned. In Christian liturgy the allusions require dedicated imagination and knowledge of the scriptural witness to yield their treasure.*

Allusions to scripture arise in liturgy because the authors of historic liturgies were deeply steeped in the literature of the Bible. Liturgy is not only a dynamic drama, but is also a literary form, and many of the criteria of literary analysis may be applied to it, to make it reveal its history and its context as a document of prayer. The purpose of liturgy is to be a vehicle for the worship of God, and also to nurture and encourage Christians in their daily life.

Yet it is true to say that many Anglicans when confronted with a liturgy, find it off-putting, boring and far removed from their experience. At the risk of giving offence I suggest at this point we have two options. The first is to throw liturgy away and begin once more, in either a base community or in some discussion circle which may have the tendency to become unhooked from the Jesus story. My suspicion is that a ritual of sorts would soon emerge, but would it have the connections to the scripture and the tradition of Christian spirituality that the historic liturgies supply? Our second option is to give liturgy a chance. Explore it as one would a foreign land, take a tour guide and discover how to be deeply connected with the Jesus story and the community of Christ, which persists to this day. Liturgy, I would argue has a healing and connecting function which is linked to dance, to ritual and to mystery. These we should prize above all for they help create and maintain distinctive communities.

It is probably because I have an incurably antiquarian interest in such things that nothing amuses me more than sitting down with a liturgy and reading it with an eye to discern the texts and the theological ideas that underlie it. I like to ask myself, what sort of God is being worshipped here? From where have these ideas so expressed come? Where in the scriptures might I find similar ideas? If they have not come from scripture, where have they come from? Could these ideas and thoughts have been in the mind and heart of those who wrote these prayers, in the first place? Does this describe the God I relate to or would like to relate to? What of ancient culture does this express that I am not in tune with? What no longer fits for our contem-

porary community? Do we need to change or is this a matter we can ignore because it is expressed in an anachronistic cultural package? How might I express the same ideas, hopes and prayers in a modern guise? Such prayerful inquiries might enable a community or a person to engage deeply with the truths which undergird and surround the symbols of the liturgy.

For me the structure of the individual prayers is important, and their relationship to the scriptures of our faith. It is my contention that this is so, not just for any curiosity value, but in order that the community of Christ might hear God's word, be confronted, admonished, encouraged and enabled to be effective in the world. Liturgy exists to help us to live in the spirit of Christ. Let's analyze one of the prayers of "The Thanksgiving of the People of God"<sup>3</sup> with a view to discovering some of its antecedents.

Almighty God  
To whom all hearts are open  
All desires known and from whom no secrets are hidden.  
Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit  
so that we may truly love you  
And worthily praise your holy name  
Through our Saviour Jesus Christ.  
Amen<sup>4</sup>

This prayer did not arrive full grown like Melchizedek, from nowhere, it has a history. Its roots lie deep within another, older liturgical tradition, that of the Psalter of the First Testament.

The opening sentence is redolent with the imagery of Psalm 139 where the psalmist declares that God knows all thoughts even before they are formed, and that God observed and participated in the creation of the psalmist in the womb, and that there is no place in creation where God is not. In the midst of this awesome knowledge God is portrayed as protector and guardian. A benevolent and protective presence, yet inscrutable and unfathomable. God is not far distant in this psalm, but immanent. The God of the psalmist is present to protect, and the anthropomorphic personalization of the deity includes the attributes of a body, God has protecting hands. God is personal and is addressed in the second person.

The second part of the prayer uses imagery gathered from another psalm, which extols God's mercy, Psalm 51. It is verses 10-13 which I think particularly apply here. What sort of God is this? An all seeing and all knowing God; one who exercises mercy and creates anew within penitent people, that which was intended from the beginning. This exposure to the knowledge of God is either very comforting or very frightening, depending upon one's mindset. For myself, I find it a very comforting thing to know that God knows all about me at my worst, and when I consider myself least loveable, God loves me. This ancient prayer, with its links to the psalms is a constant reminder of grace.

I struggle for images that have meaning in the modern world, but perhaps one should think of the liturgy as an internet web page, which is hot-linked by allusion, quote and reference to other documents, other web pages of greater antiquity and deep experience.

Another little exercise well worth the time is to look at Cranmer's prayer of humble access<sup>5</sup> with new eyes. This prayer has often been criticized in

the 20th century as one which seeks to make the worshipper grovel and wallow in self pity and revulsion. This is probably more a comment on its placement in the liturgy than a defect in the structure of the prayer itself.

If one counts the words, "grace" or "gracious" for example, and over translates them into an English phrase, such as "unearned free gift" one ends up with the impression that the God being addressed is a supremely generous God, who despite our nature, the same nature as the Canaanite woman in the story in Matthew<sup>6</sup> about the crumbs under the table and the child who needed healing, offers the free gift of liberating love in communion with Christ. There is more in this prayer about the gracious nature of God than the miserable deformities of the human spirit. How we read the prayer might actually indicate unaddressed personal issues which hinder our transformation. Thus the liturgy becomes an occasion for personal growth and the development of a mature spirituality. I like the phrase, is it a chiasmus?<sup>7</sup> "That we may evermore dwell in him and he in us." This is reminiscent of the vine image in John 14, and also of the close relationship with God expressed by Jesus in the High Priestly Prayer of John 17. Phrases, time worn, yes, but not yet threadbare, which lead us, as was intended, to consider the nature of God and our relationship with that God. This is the purpose of Liturgy. In this sense it acts like a crystal to concentrate light and increase the potency of faith. If the desultory users of liturgy remain ignorant of its background, then certainly it becomes an empty ritual no better than any other. Perhaps one of our tasks might be to help people uncover the riches of the liturgy and its links to scripture and to life, and then to help worshippers to have the same faith as the creators of the liturgy had, namely, a living relationship with a dynamic God who demands justice, mercy and humility in all relationships. Liturgy is a dramatic conversation between the President and the congregation in the presence of God. For liturgy to yield its full harvest of stored truth it requires that worshippers bring the text of their own lives to the liturgy; their own questions. This is surely the stuff of life, and is of daily value.

How, in my daily life, am I like the God revealed in Scripture, whose mirror I am called to be and whose image I bear as a human being? This is a basic religio-philosophic question, which our engagement with liturgy might prompt. If I am not like this God, then what is it I wish to have happen about that? Am I willing to enter into transformative relationships? Or am I content with the status quo, a worship which does not engage my life but which is irrelevant and barren? Am I content with fractured relationships where power plies and resentments rule the day<sup>9</sup>?

The central motif of forgiveness expressed by the general confession or the penitential rite reminds us that relationships are sacred, and that we must attend to relationships with the same care we would give to a prize plant in our garden. This truth is a precious possession, the pearl of great price, the treasure hidden in a field. The call to forgive and be forgiven is a reminder and a message to the suffering hurting world of which we are always a part. It is a call to a lifestyle, which if practised, will transform the relationships of the communities where the church is at work. As the liturgy "Thanksgiving and Praise" <sup>10</sup> says, it is a call to suffer, for this path is not easy, the broad way which leads to destruction, but is narrow and stony. This concept is central to Christian liturgy and to Christian identity.

Recently I conducted a series of studies for people in preparation for ministry, on apocalyptic literature, using as an example, the Revelation of St John. In the course of the study people were able to discover how very liturgical the book was and how much of its imagery has found its way into Christian worship. Indeed, if one looks at "Thanksgiving and Praise" and the "Thanksgiving for Creation and Redemption" one can see how many of the Johannine images, from the Gospel and from the Revelation have been used in the poetry and prayer of these liturgies. It is worth taking a Bible and a concordance and following the clues in the Liturgy to discover the scriptural images which shaped the prayers. The "Thanksgiving of the People of God" (404) liturgy also uses images from the Revelation and quotes directly from this magnificent but neglected book. Once one is aware of the links, it is surprising how many one discovers. I am mindful also of the Eucharistic prayer in "Thanksgiving and Praise" (476), where elements of Genesis and the letter to the Hebrews 12 are combined with the traditional elements of the preface, where the great acts of God in creation and redemption are recited. This is liturgy, ancient yet modern, which sets the scene for worshippers as members of the community of light; calls the community to its true destiny.

The Eucharistic prayer, in its recalling of the Christ event in Jesus of Nazareth, reminds the community that like Jesus, we are to be servants and ministers from below, rather than managers and leaders from above.

There is for me a grass roots quality about the recitation at this point which invites reflection on the place of ministry in our church today, and our participation as members of the baptised, in that enterprise. It is a call to the whole community. The institution narrative is very much about the self emptying love of Christ<sup>13</sup> although the Philippian context is not overtly stated in the prayer. What might this recitation invite the community of faith to consider about its own ministry and the service of its members in the wider community, where God walks unknown, unheralded?

One of the more graceful notes of this liturgy is the people's part of the liturgical conversation where the strident call to reconcile and unite, to suffer and to have hope, sounds forth.

**Called to follow Christ,  
Help us to reconcile and unite.  
Called to suffer Give us hope in our calling.**

I like the poetry of the Maori version of this acclamation, which uses the image of weaving, "**tui tui tuia**", as if reconciliation in living memory of Christ, weaves back together the broken strands of human relationships. This seems to me to be liturgy at its most potent and transformative. This obviously does not fit Dorothy McRae-McMahon's excellent phrase "royal doxology"<sup>14</sup> as a description of an other-world centred liturgy, but rightly the community of faith is directed into its life context, this world. Liturgy is pregnant with scripture, a filter through which God's people are formed in spirituality and given a call to service and to prayer.

I'm a lost cause when it comes to liturgical worship, because it seems to me, not boring and distant, but embellished and embroidered with the challenge and truth of God. For me therefore, liturgy is a living con-

versation which can form our life and identity as Christians, our social action, our commitment for peace with justice, and should send us encouraged into the world, having touched deeply the lodestone of the foundations of our faith, and been energized by the encounter. None of this transformation is automatic of course, and just as the celebration of a liturgy on Sunday is not something rightly done casually and unrehearsed, so the exploration of the formative power of the liturgy is something done carefully, prayerfully and with scholarly attention to detail.

**Published in *Journeyings*, v. 10, no.3 (October 1998): 24-29**

## **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> Proverbs 8

<sup>2</sup> "Hear what the Spirit is saying to the Church" - Revelation 2.7; quoted as a versicle after scripture reading in the New Zealand Prayer Book liturgies.

<sup>3</sup> Thanksgiving of the People of God, pp 404 - 455. *A New Zealand Prayer Book, He Karakia Mihinare O Aotearoa*, Auckland, Collins, 1989

<sup>4</sup> *ibid*, p 404

<sup>5</sup> *ibid*, p425

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 15:21-28

<sup>7</sup> A literary structure where parts of a phrase or sentence refer back to another forming the image of the Greek letter Chi (*X*)

<sup>8</sup> John 15:1-17

<sup>9</sup> There is an assumption in the liturgy from p. 404 that the "Christic" community will be characterised by forgiveness. Note the versicle and response on p. 408, quoted from Colossians 3:15,16, and the context of these verses in the letter. The direction is toward a faith which makes a behavioural difference in the community.

<sup>10</sup> A New Zealand Prayer Book pp 476  
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<sup>11</sup> Genesis 1:3

<sup>12</sup> Hebrews 12:1

<sup>13</sup> Philippians 2:5b-11

<sup>14</sup> See article by Dorothy McRae  
McMahon in October 1998 issue of *Journeyings*