

THE PARADOX OF LITURGY

By KEVIN DONOVAN

WHAT does the Liturgy Reveal? 'Sir, we would see Jesus'. Thus the Greeks to Philip (Jn 12,21). And thus, in effect, the young people of London's East End to their Bishop. 'Tell us about Jesus: better still, give us an experience of him'. This was their plea when representatives from all walks of life met last year to discern priorities in their local church. To tell people about Christ was the first: and after that, along with urgent problems like race relations, to 'do something about the liturgy'. And so this preparatory exercise for the National Pastoral Congress led to an Advent campaign, in which the liturgy of the word for the four Sundays centred on Christ: as Healer, Teacher, Prophet and Saviour. The young people were right. Christ must be the centre of our preaching. But merely telling people about him is not enough. They were also right to ask for an experience. Yet all too often — and not just in East London — the official liturgy on a Sunday fails to provide what people are searching for. At times it is downright alienating, and they stop coming. The Good News is muffled, the joy of resurrection muted, transmuted into stale routine. No revelation there. Was it always thus? Did not our hearts burn within us? Can we not recapture something of the Emmaus experience? 'You have sorrow now, but I will see you again and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you' (Jn 16,22).

Given, then, a hunger for the experience of Christ in the liturgy, it is not surprising that joyful celebration should have been so advocated in recent years. This, we are told, is the category we should be exploring in our worship. Creativity, spontaneity, exuberance and the affirmation of life. After *homo faber* comes *homo ludens*, sporting before his Creator (cf Prov 8,30-31). On with the Feast of Fools. Let David dance before the Ark (cf 2 Sam 6,16), and the Elders fall in adoration before the Throne. 'Hallelujah, cries the multitude no man could number' (Apoc 5,14). 'Praise him with

read more at www.theway.org.uk

timbrel and with strings and pipe' (Ps 150,4). 'No, these men are not drunk' (Acts 2,15). It is the promised outpouring of the Spirit . . . and yet, 'Let all things be done for edification: decently and in order' (1 Cor 14,26.40). There is still a more excellent way than tongues and prophecy (12,31). Throughout his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul is concerned with building up the Body of Christ in love, whether in its worship or in the everyday life of the community. There *is* folly — but it is the folly of the Cross, with Paul as the fool for Christ's sake. Of course he can be full of joy, as in his prayer for the Philippians, bidding them have the mind of Christ crucified, yet rejoice always in the Lord (cf Phil 1,4;2,5;4,4). And he groans in sympathy with the whole of creation, despite having received the first fruits of the Spirit (Rom 8,23). If there was effervescence at Corinth, there were tears at Miletus. Celebration is not all bubbles: what when the golden bowl is broken? 'Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come, and the years draw nigh, when you will say, "I have no pleasure in them". . . . Man goes to his eternal home, and mourners go about the streets' (Qoh 12,6.1-2.5). Yet in the city of new Jerusalem God will dwell with man. 'He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away' (Apoc 21,1-4).

The early preacher could find no other meaning to life than Vanity of Vanities (Qoh 1,2). How nearly true. 'If Christ be not raised from the dead, then our preaching is in vain, and your faith is in vain' (1 Cor 15,14). We preach Christ crucified: stumbling block and folly, and at the same time, the power and wisdom of God. Here is the first and greatest of the paradoxes of our worship: God's triumph through seeming defeat, celebrated in an atmosphere of already but not yet. How arrange for an experience of that? Only to the eye and heart of faith.

The next paradox of our worship is the sheer range of achievement that we celebrate. The whole of life, not excluding death itself. The range of themes in the sober latin Collects is surely too narrow — even when turned into resounding elizabethan English. A Shakespeare would be needed to do full justice to the plot. And who should we ask to provide a musical score? What about choreography, décor, lighting? All our highest creative gifts celebrating their Creator. Let us leave the casting for a moment. What setting would be worthy of such a pageant? *Hagia Sophia* in

Istanbul? Chartres Cathedral? The roman basilica of St Peter? The rebuilt Coventry Cathedral? . . . This pleasing fantasy is interrupted by the voice of the Seer: 'And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty, and the Lamb' (Apoc 21,22). The same relativizing of liturgy is made in different ways by other New Testament writers. The earthly sanctuary, the Letter to the Hebrews tells us, is only a copy of the heavenly sanctuary: and Christ our high priest has entered the tent not made with hands . . . there to offer once for all the perfect worship to the Father in the Spirit (Heb 9,11-14). Not only does Christ enter the sanctuary: he is the sanctuary. 'Destroy this sanctuary, and in three days, I will raise it up . . . he was speaking of the sanctuary of his body' (Jn 2,19-21). And for Paul, 'You are the body of Christ . . . you are the Temple of the Holy Spirit' (1 Cor 3,16; cf 12,22). We are liable to forget that we are the Temple — we need no sanctuary made by hands. It was no less than a Minucius Felix who boasted on behalf of early Christians that we have no temples. Centuries later, a Suger could strive to translate the Apocalypse into stone in the great Abbey church of St Denis in Paris. It was now the turn of proud naves and lofty spires to proclaim that God dwells with men. One is tempted to borrow from the Maréchal Bosquet: 'c'est magnifique, mais ce n'est pas la liturgie'. Yet however enriched with lustrations, ash-strewn alphabets and fragrant pyrotechnics the liturgy of dedication became, it never quite forgot that it is the living stones which make up the christian sanctuary. The glory of christian worship lies not in sumptuous ceremonies but in the hearts of worshippers, in what Schmemmann called internal as opposed to external solemnity.¹

In re-discovering this insight, we may sometimes be tempted to undervalue ceremonies: to prefer the liturgy of life to that of the cult. 'Offer yourselves as a living sacrifice' (Rom 12,1). 'Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have: for such sacrifices are pleasing to God' (Heb 13,16). Militant Christians, sensitive to the need for Christ's liberating presence in the world of politics and the multi-nationals, have at times succumbed to this temptation. 'He hath put the mighty down from their thrones, the rich he hath sent empty away'; Mary in the *Magnificat* (Lk 1,52-53). And any worship which encouraged us, or even allowed us, to forget this subversive message would indeed be an opiate inducing that sacramental intoxication denounced by Segundo.² A balance must be found. When the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church referred to the liturgy of life, it was careful to link it with the Eucharist. Work,

leisure, marriage, joy and even suffering become sacrifices most lovingly offered to the Father along with the Body of the Lord (*Lumen Gentium*, 34). A further paradox, then: the whole of life is worship; the whole of life, not excluding political action for a better world. But such generalized and implicit worship needs the explicit focus of the assembled body of Christ. The task is to provide this sacred focus without thereby profaning the rest of ordinary life. 'Sir, we would see Jesus'. Can we point to him on the road and in the tavern? Or do we only recognize him in the breaking of the bread? Does the liturgy help to reveal Christ in the squalid as well as the sublime?

Surely here, if anywhere, we need the skill of the creative artist. Yet it will never be enough. At times, it may even be too much. 'How shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?' (Ps 137,4). I have several times said Mass in London's Wormwood Scrubs Prison. Judged by aesthetic standards, it was. . . . But that is so obviously the wrong criterion. Yet in a great city church, with hired musicians and hushed congregation, we can be tempted to confuse the aesthetic with the pastoral. Is the pursuit of beauty (unlike social justice) part of christian worship? Augustine, the old Manichee, had trouble with the siren power of song; somewhat reluctantly recognizing that it can increase prayer. Aquinas was more direct. We use music to help us pray — not because God likes his Sunday concert. We must beware of Pelagianism in our offertory music as much as in our offertory processions.

Does that mean we would see Jesus more clearly without music? Hardly that, surely. What then does the artist contribute? What does he or she reveal to us? A record, an illumination, an interpretation of our world and our human experience. Whatever the medium and the message, some insight is given us of God's creation, and thus, however indirectly, of God himself. Wise with God's wisdom, the artist reflects God's creative power:

There was I before him like a master workman
and I was daily his delight,
rejoicing before him always,
rejoicing in his inhabited world,
and delighting in the sons of men (Prov 8,30-31).

God is the Creator, the artist re-creates. Art is a kind of worship, for it ascribes and restores worth to creation; and at times — say, with

a Hopkins — directly to the Creator. Comparisons, we know, are odious, and we ought not to quarrel over tastes. But much of what is perpetrated in our churches (and the churches themselves) is banal, trite, threadbare, alongside what is offered in theatre, art gallery or concert hall. Yet if the liturgy is often less moving, stimulating, arresting or even beautiful, it claims to achieve something to which the arts do not aspire. The work of our redemption is there proclaimed and continued. *Poiesis* indeed. It is the same world which is revealed to us, but now, explicitly as revealed. And we are revealed as actors in the drama where Christ himself takes the principal part. 'Sir, we would see Jesus'. Here he is in your midst. Yes, but give us an experience. . . .

Are we being asked for the impossible? Is the peak liturgical experience available on tap — just like that? What sort of a God would we be worshipping then? The God of Abraham or the God of Abraham Maslow? Even Maslow, as anonymous a Christian as you are likely to meet on a dark night, ends by warning his readers of the dangers of over-valuing peak-experiences, and of coming to need ever more and stronger stimuli to trigger them off.³ This makes sense. But so do his criticisms, echoing Jung, of certain religious organizations and rituals. These can certainly act as a barrier to first-hand religious experience. The liturgical nadir is to be avoided at all costs. We have had enough already. So perhaps in the long run we should be happy, as I suspect that most of us are, with the liturgical plateau. Be grateful for that, while cherishing and valuing liturgical peaks when these are granted us. 'Granted' is surely the operative word.

In the liturgy, at any rate, we cannot command the experience; although there may be occasions — Easter, perhaps, and for many people, Christmas — when we can reasonably expect it. Maslow, on the other hand, gives the impression that peak-experiences are available for the asking. 'Perhaps we can produce a private personal peak-experience under observation and whenever we wish under religious or non-religious circumstances' (p 27). With a little practice or the right drugs, instant ecstasy, do-it-yourself mysticism! Alas, this has not been my experience, either of personal prayer or of the liturgy. None of my friends seem to have this facility either: plateau, may be. I remember the words of a fellow Jesuit who spent a year in the desert at Tamanrasset with the Little Brothers of Jesus. His conclusion was profound and illuminating. 'There is only one absolute — God. Everything else is relative — the Church, its

liturgy, the Jesuit Order, whatever. And in the desert you discover how close God is to you, and how far you are from God'.

This rings true. We may indeed carry within us the created image of God, and no doubt, with practice, can get in touch with our deepest self relatively easily. God himself we do not manipulate — whether by ourselves, in a prayer group or in the Eucharist. No doubt with practice we learn how to get in touch with, and put others in touch with, the created extension, reflection, local incarnation of the Body of Christ which is the worshipping community. And in that sense, we do have an answer in the plea to give us an experience of Jesus. But it is Jesus himself who gives it, because he wishes to. The rest of us, rubricists, liturgists, musicians, writers, architects and people with dramatic flair can only draw back the veil and switch on the spot-light.

'Seek and you shall find'. Perhaps the trouble is that we have taken the presence of Jesus in the liturgy too much for granted, and have not been seeking hard enough. In this joint search, we need the help of creative artists imbued with the christian message. We need the timely reminders of anthropologists, like Victor Turner and Mary Douglas, about the Flow of Ritual Action or the colour-blindness of liturgical signal-men. But more important even than the creative people and the critical people are the people of God. No amount of inventiveness, learning or good taste will make up for living faith expressing itself in christian living. 'Why seek the living among the dead?' (Lk 24,5). Fortunately, the faith of the christian community is seldom that dead, although none of us can dispense with the humble prayer, 'Lord, I believe, help my unbelief'. One of the things we must believe is that the liturgy can reveal to us the face of Jesus in our world, provided we allow the faith of his people a chance to find adequate expression; for like love between two people, faith only grows when it is expressed. That must be the answer to those who cry, 'Sir, we would see Jesus'. Our answer is a praxis, a programme, not just a piece of theory. He is in your midst: together let us discover him.

NOTES

¹ Alexander Schmemmann, *An introduction to liturgical theology* (New York, 1966).

² Juan Luis Segundo, *The Sacraments Today* (New York, 1974).

³ Abraham Maslow, *Religions, Values and Peak-experience* (London, 1976).