

Scripture In The Liturgy

The Shape of the Liturgy

First, a reminder about the Liturgy.

There are two halves or movements in the central Catholic liturgy - the Eucharist. Together they make up the classical shape of the liturgy from the beginning.

The first half is the liturgy of the Word.

The second half is the liturgy of the Eucharist.

Both of these relate us to Jesus:

the first half is modelled on Jesus' experience in the Synagogue.

The second half is modelled on the Last Supper of Jesus in the Upper Room.

If we want to do the liturgy justice, we must make sure that we do exactly what the Lord wants us to do. Notice the terms of that principle:

- we must do
- what the Lord wants us to.

The liturgy demands the fulfilment of both these terms. "Liturgy" means "action of the people"; therefore it embodies "the full, active participation of all the people" before it is what it should be. *We* should do it, not just watch it being done.

But that doesn't mean the people does what it feels like. The soul of the Liturgy is a soul of *service* to the Lord. We meet to be obedient to his commands.

The first half responds to commands that are embodied in the Scripture: *Listen, Israel and Go and tell my people this and thus speaks the Lord, the God of Israel and Let these words be fastened on your wrists as a bracelet, and on your forehead as a headband: you must tell them to your children, and keep on telling them and Go therefore, make disciples of all the nations, and teach them to observe all the commands I gave you.* The liturgy of the Word is given to the transmitting and receiving of Revelation.

The second half responds simply to Jesus' express command, *Do this in memory of me.* The liturgy of the Eucharist is given to the receiving of Salvation.

When we meet as we are meeting tonight to meditate on the correct performance of the Liturgy, we are therefore cultivating the virtue of obedience within ourselves. We shouldn't think of this as a *rubrical* obedience, like people who are consulting a book of rules for filling in official forms or following instructions for using a tin of paint. The obedience of the Liturgy is a direct imitating of Jesus' religion. Our doing of these two liturgical acts will form Christ in us.

This short series of three meetings is really a meditative journey into the mystery of Scripture, into which the first half of our Liturgy invites us.

Hear The Word Of The Lord

The habit of the believer who listens to Scripture is something that is modelled by the Scripture itself. Properly understood, the Bible itself tells us how it should be read.

The Title of Scripture

The first thing a reader in Church does is to inform us what it is that we are to hear. This is not at all insignificant, and should be received reverently by us. I don't mean that we should come over all pious when the name of a prophet or apostle or Evangelist is announced to us. But understanding the Word means first of all understanding its human author. Here is our first activity, the activity of the people. What does it mean to listen to the name of the author *actively*?

Obviously the *active* way of hearing such a name can't be done by simple listening. It requires that we do a bit of research, so that the name of the sacred author is already known to us. This holy learning isn't something special, restricted to those who have to preach or teach. It is, instead, appropriate to every Christian. The more we know about the person who wrote the Scripture, the quicker we shall be attuned to the Word of God that it is. We shouldn't listen for the same things in Mark that we listen for in John. We know we can't hear the same things in Hosea that we hear in Paul. But to know what Hosea is really saying, it will help us if we know whom he was addressing in his own time, what their condition was, and how he wished to convey to them the Word of God. That's why the reader always tells us the name of the author before a single word is read.

Study

In this way it will always help us to celebrate the Liturgy of the Word, if we have studied at least such broad lines as we can find out about the author and his times. This is the true reverence for the miracle of the Scripture, which it deserves. Such active reverence will always be repaid quickly and with interest, with a marvellous sense of understanding, an ease of response which encourages us to read more. When we have once heard the Scriptures like that, we will never want to hear them in any way that falls short of it. Words work by conveying understanding. It's important to know who is writing, and how he expresses what he wants to say.

The Word in Time

Scripture is literature, and it is formed in time. This "fixes" it, as Jesus was "fixed" by his birth (in Palestine, under the Roman occupation, before the Jewish War). That is where, as we say, "the Word was made flesh", and it made God's Word into the sort of fact that human beings need, in order to exercise their senses, in order to know. But simultaneously it also means that we are travelling away from that historic fact at increasing speed, as our world changes from his world. Time destroys the immediacy of the Word, and we become more and more prone to misunderstanding it.

The Word Eternal

Against this is set the overwhelming fact that the Resurrection liberates Jesus of Nazareth from the first century, and makes him as instantly present to all time as God the Creator has always been - for those who believe that the risen Christ and Jesus of Nazareth are one and the same. And when we read the Scripture, the Holy Spirit who has been poured out upon us liberates the Scripture from its moorings in time, and makes it a live word to us, as the Spirit teaches us to listen to it in our time and place. But this listening must in its turn be an *active* listening, prepared for like every other sort of learning, with all that we can bring of intelligence and reflection, research and expertise.

The Cultural Distance

For all that, the historical facts remain, with their difficulties. We find it hard enough to read sixteenth-century Shakespeare, even harder to read fourteenth-century Chaucer, and nearly impossible to read eighth-century Beowulf. But even Beowulf is eighteen hundred years younger than King David, and twenty-five centuries nearer to us than Abraham is.

Moreover, we live four thousand miles away from where David lived, and on another continent. Jesus himself was an Asian Semite, and to assume we know what he meant, when he said the things the Gospel tells us he said, probably owes more to our sense that the Founder of Christianity was *one of us* than it ought.

It takes my breath away to think that some little chap in a tin tabernacle in the heart of Wales, who could never claim any competence to interpret the Code of Hammurabi or the Egyptian Book of the Dead, is still prepared to stand up in a pulpit and say for sure what the Ten Commandments in the Book of Exodus is all about. With every respect to his good intentions, *how dare he?* What does he know of ancient civilisation or about Middle Eastern culture three thousand years back? He *thinks* he knows what it means because he heard it read out when he was a child, and he heard the minister expound it as a buttress to early Twentieth-Century Welsh Baptist morals. But he doesn't know a word of Greek or Hebrew, and he knows nothing of anything that was said about the Bible before 1700, and very little that was said even then, before 1890. The notion that everyone who is a Christian has the ability to interpret Scripture is getting more and more difficult to believe as the space between us and the Scriptural authors gets longer and longer.

What Does Translation Mean?

This brings me to the ticklish question of Translation. People accept almost unquestioningly the version of the Bible that they are offered. In our Catholic 2008 liturgical arrangements, it is the first edition of the Jerusalem Bible, a translation first published in 1966. This began as a French translation from the Hebrew and Greek texts from the famous Dominican Biblical School in Jerusalem (thus the name), which was then done into English by a rather motley group of people, not all of them either Scriptural scholars or literary giants. But I already know enough, from my few years of study, to tell you how misleading this English translation can sometimes be. Its own publishers decided that it needed tightening up, and issued a "New Jerusalem Bible" twenty-one years after their first effort.

This happening alerted most of us to the need to reflect on what translation can - and can't - achieve. Anyone who has had to argue against a fundamentalist or a Jehovah's Witness will know the horrors that lurk within the pages of *The Good News Bible* or the curious document that passes for the Scriptures amongst the Witnesses of Jehovah.

A Language Is Not A Perfect System

Even prescinding from these dreadful travesties, we like to think of our language as a perfectly flawless tool for the carrying of meaning between persons. If we find it sometimes hard to choose what to say, we feel the fault is ours, rather than that of the language. Heavens above: Shakespeare used it effectively, and we all know that Shakespeare is the greatest writer in any language anywhere. Teacher said so!

Our habit, inherited from the British Empire, of setting off into foreign parts armed only with the English language, is rightly a cause for mirth in the minds of our European partners. Regrettably it is underscored today by the same attitude prevailing in the present Imperial power, America. We expect that those honoured by our visit will make the minimal effort of

learning to speak to us in our own language. (It is the least that they can do, considering how rich and powerful and good we are.)

Maybe it is partly this sense of the universal value of our English tongue that gives us so dangerous a confidence about our grasp of Scripture. For many English people, and especially for some Anglicans, the definitive text of Scripture is the Authorised, or King James Version published in the seventeenth century. It was the Bible of the English Renaissance, and the Bible of the British Empire. People almost forgot it was a translation, which led to the quaintly satirical sentence *God Is An Englishman*.

Equivalence Between Languages Is Never Guaranteed

But if you have ever been in the trade of translation, you know that the world is a much more complicated place. I think of the splendid way in which Italian inherits directly from Latin, giving us lovely Italian words which have no English equivalent. There is a word in Italian, of which I'm specially fond: the word is *precisare*. It means literally "to make precise", but it effortlessly conveys dozens of English phrases, like "fix the date", "confirm the number", "identify the names", "resolve the confusion", "get down to brass tacks" and so on. A near offer to some of the above translations would be "specify", but that doesn't come near to translating all of the meanings. Knowing and loving the word in its Italian form, I often feel the lack of it when I'm speaking English.

Whole Concepts Can be Untranslatable

It's a great shock, the first time you come upon an untranslatable word in the Scripture, which can't be rendered into English by any known word or phrase, and is yet *vital* for understanding. The important word St Paul uses for our salvation, for instance, is untranslatable. The language has no equivalent form of thought. Translators usually say that God has "made sinners righteous" by his own free act. How do you do that? The verb is there in the Greek, but there's no way the translation "made righteous" conveys it. "Justify" won't do either, since that implies that something has been changed in our behaviour, or the law has been found after all to cover what we've done. One scholar invents a new verb "to *righteous* someone" so that the untranslatable can just be *referred to*. God doesn't "make us just" by altering the Law. Nor does he decide to ignore sins. Paul isn't saying these things. God doesn't excuse us, he doesn't "let us off", he communicates *his* righteousness to *us* by a free act of grace which overwhelms all the real evil we had done, which would have damned us before his terrible and eternal justice. There isn't an English word for it, it's untranslatable.

When we come to translating the oracles of the prophets in Hebrew, we are on a different planet. The language is so different in structure, there are no easy links between Hebrew and English. The smooth translations we are offered between leather covers at W H Smith bear little resemblance to the rough fragments the prophets have left us, coming as they do from situations and for purposes long lost from view.

Can We Trust Our Bibles?

Now, this may give us a growing feeling that the Scripture on our shelves is far from reliable: the monumental and inexorable Word of God suddenly seems vulnerable, all too human. (Keep hold of this feeling: it's salutary in the end!) But first there's something even more upsetting to notice.

Jesus Is Already Translated

There are editions of the Bible where the print goes red every time God or Jesus are speaking. We know the reverence we give to Christ's actual words, often taking them up into prayer, and letting them form our innermost hearts. When we realise that, *even in the New Testament itself*, we only have them in translation, and in a translation which has been forced to cross the cultural divide between Asia and Europe, we may well be worried. Jesus thought, prayed, and spoke in an Asian language - Aramaic; and of what he actually said in that language, we

have a pitifully small collection of 26 words: some are reported by rabbinic sources. The only ones I can remember in the Gospels are *Abba*, *amen*, *Eloi*, *ephphatha*, *kumi*, *lama*, *sabacthani*, *talitha*, *rabbi*, *raca*.

Everything else, including all of Jesus' parables, teachings, and oracular statements have been translated across the notoriously wide gulf between Palestine and the Greek of the ancient world. Armies and Emperors, diplomats and politicians have come unstuck in this area. How is it that humanity's only universal religion should have been generated in this groove where so many good causes have perished, and are still perishing as we speak?

We Are Not A Religion Of The Book

It is as if the Holy Spirit is warning us against the attitude that the Word of God can ever be reduced to human formulae. This is a very salutary warning, because Christians have notoriously attempted to do this. We are the ones who have consistently impaled one another on various forms of words. We have insisted on credal statements, and condemned one another to death for not accepting them. The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, formerly known as the Inquisition, has record of some 50,000 people it burned at the stake over its history. The Pope apologised for this rather persistent accident five years ago.

Jesus Did Not Elect To Produce Scriptures

If God had sent his Son in the form of a tablet of stone, or if Jesus had spent his earthly life on a desert island writing books, we might have been justified in our creating of formulae. But Jesus is only remembered as writing once - as if to show us that he could write, and could have written; but his writing was in sand on the street, and has long since blown away, and we are not even able to say what it was he wrote. Ironically, he wrote whatever it was to stop religious people from stoning one of their number to death.

The truth is that the words of Christ have *only* come to us orally, by the reportage of those who heard him say them. And in this God has taken what looks like a massive risk. He has entrusted his ultimate message to fragile human beings, and to the shifting stream of their language. He has risked everything to the Chinese Whispers that makes up the real history of humanity. Language, notwithstanding the invention of writing and printing, is *not* a fixed entity. It is a living thing, and living things change. There is good reason to suggest that language is changed in *every* use it receives, and *every* user who transmits it. We actually need to translate one another's language before it can be understood. Even two English-speakers from the same family need an imaginative leap in order truly to hear one another. That's why families so often fall out when they fail to make this leap of generosity. It isn't that they design to offend each other. It is that we need to work so hard to interpret one another's language. Arguments break out when we choose the wrong word, when someone else has an objection to the way we think, as expressed in our language. We call it "saying the wrong thing". But we rightly suspect when it happens that the "misunderstanding" is exactly that - it takes two to make such a thing happen; often two who are good-hearted, well-meaning people, but who manage to inflict pain by their words.

Humpty Dumpty

Humpty Dumpty it was who said in a scornful tone, "When *I* use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean - neither more, nor less." "The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean different things." "The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master - that's all.". What I mean by a word depends entirely on the use of the word I've picked up from others, both written and spoken, read and heard (you notice that the word that was *written* is not always identical with the word that's *read*, and the word that's *spoken* is not always identical with the word that's *heard*). What *you* understand may be subtly different from what *I* said; but then subtlety is the difference between acceptable and unacceptable. When we want to convey facts as baldly as possible, these things may not matter much. When we want to convey emotion or commitment we have to be more careful.

Now, suppose you want to use our language, built as it is for these human relationships, to convey truths about God, who is infinite, eternal, and formally inexpressible in human terms. Suppose you have to translate the words of someone who did this thirty centuries ago in another continent, and produce expressions which accurately convey whatever was in his mind so long ago and so far away. Do you feel confident? I suppose not. But that is exactly where we stand in our Christian faith today. We have little to guide us except the traditional way in which the Scripture has been interpreted by celebrated preachers and church leaders in the past. But there is no way of reaching a pure, pristine knowledge of Jesus, unfingered by the Church's tradition; even in the Gospel itself we are not offered a record devoid of interpretation. That is both a problem, and an opportunity.

Divine And Human In Scripture

People sometimes believe that the Scripture is the Word of God in the sense that God has somehow kept it clean of human interference. The Catholic position is that the Scripture contains that which God wanted revealed, but that this was definitely entrusted to human beings, and it will always bear the marks of their literary choices. If we go back to the divine origin of the Word, we will recall that this origin is quite different from the coming to birth of human discourse. Human beings think logically, and come to express themselves when they have imposed logic on their feelings or impressions. We think, in fact, in sentences.

God Does Not Talk Sense

God does not think in sentences, nor even in vocabulary of any kind. God does not need mental processes, and would *not have the time* to engage in them; God, after all, is not temporal but eternal; his life is unchanging. This is not because he is frozen in one attitude, which would be the same as saying he is dead. Rather, all possible variety, all change, all potential achievement, is already fully present in him and to him. He has nothing more to acquire, no errand to accomplish, no place to visit, no question to ask, no process to perfect. John's Gospel tells us that the mind of God contemplates one overwhelming Word, in which are contained all possibilities, visible and invisible (*all things were made in him, without him nothing came into being*). This is obviously no human term, but a single act of understanding which comprehends all things in one act of recognition, far above all human experience or imagining. It is because God understands everything *together* that he is the source of our ultimate meaning, the one who can give us our true place in what we feebly think of as "the scheme of things". And it is because we have such a very limited idea of this divine understanding, that we sometimes doubt whether there *is* any way of making sense of the world, and our life in the world. Most people live in total chaos, desperately trying to connect up what scattered bits of understanding they've assembled. Even spending a little time in the presence of God would calm them down immensely. We may not have the vision or the scale of understanding to share the mind of God; but to believe that there is such a thing, and that he can see all things in one harmony, is enough for us to believe in, perhaps to find our way to, his peace.

The distance between the single Word of God and the many human words of Scripture is the distance between God's eternity and our time. That, after all, is the great gulf, and we believe that God crossed it in the making of the Scriptures. Our small cultural problems pale into insignificance besides this great divine gift.

The Rôle Of The Reader

Clearly, when we walk up to the Lectern to read out the Word of God, we are taking our place in an awesome process, Reading properly means doing everything we can to read with understanding, and to enhance with our intonation the work of the translators and scholars who have helped us. A careless reader, like a careless priest, can ruin the liturgy with a few well-placed mistakes. As the reader, you stand at the growing-point of the liturgy. Through you the Word of God will reach the ears of his people, the Word of which God says *It will*

not return to me unfulfilled, or without carrying out my good pleasure, and having achieved what it was sent to do. But it is still true that God's mind is not mapped out for us in the Bible; that would not be possible for human language.

When the First Commandment forbids us to worship any image of God, we are wrong-footed from the start. We are human, and we only know through our five senses, and the imagination that works from them. Our whole mental activity is the making of images. All our books are crammed with images, perhaps most markedly the Bible itself. This means that the whole of Scripture is, as we say, *anthropomorphic*: man-shaped. If it were not so, God would not be communicated to us at all. There is good reason to trust this communication: Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, is also man-shaped. We are forbidden to make an image to worship it. But In Jesus Christ God gives us his own uncreated image: *he is the image of the unseen God*.

This is what gives us courage to read the human words of Scripture, believing that in their very humanity we can discern something of God.