

Λειτουργία

MINISTRY

Talk on the third morning, after breakfast

Today's scriptural word is the Greek word from which we derive "liturgy". I shall start by translating it as *ministry*, and we shall fill out the meaning more exactly as we go. Perhaps we could begin by noticing how closely λειτουργία relates with yesterday's word, διακονία, and how interdependent these concepts are, and how necessary they are to the life the Church proposes for deacons.

In Greek secular life λειτουργία was the term for any work that was done on behalf of the body politic – just as we refer to a politician's *ministry* – meaning, not the building he works in, nor the institutional structure (the Ministry of Public Building and Works), but his personal contribution to the well-being of the Government, and thus of the people.

It also referred to all kinds of compulsory services or official tasks: we speak of *National Service* in this context, and that exactly catches the tone of the Greek word.

In general chat the word would refer to any service rendered within a relationship – the λειτουργία of mother to child, slave to master, even tarts to clients (you can tell that there is nothing necessarily sacred about the word!). But you can see that it instantly invokes the relationship conferred by the kind of service performed: once you are a priest, you have a λειτουργία that is proper to you, and which you are obliged to offer; a deacon's or a bishop's λειτουργία is different. Your λειτουργία is what defines your place in the body of Christ.

Finally, it is used in religious circles, as a general term for all honours paid by the votary to the god: a prayer, a sacrifice, a gesture of worship.

In the Greek Old Testament (the Septuagint) a certain self-discipline is observable: the word is used principally to refer to the work of priests and Levites in the Tent of Meeting or the Temple. It seems that the translators kept the word apart for this usage, so as to give to descriptions of the official worship of Israel a sense that it was carried out on behalf of the whole people (λαός).

Perhaps the most surprising fact about this word is that, whilst it occurs 100 times in the Old Testament, it only comes three times in the New Testament as a verb, and six times as a noun: there are six uses of the word λειτουργία or λειτουργειν, three of them in the Letter to the Hebrews. From this we can perceive that the New Testament is not interested in a specific *priesthood*, in the sense the modern Church uses; the priesthood referred to is still either the Old Testament priesthood, or the priesthood of Jesus Christ which fulfils and surpasses it: this *surpassing* is the theme of the Letter to the Hebrews. That sets the tone for our meditation on the proper concept of liturgy and of priesthood. Like yesterday's meditation on διακονία, today's

meditation will lead us to think of Christ rather than ourselves: Christ the servant sets the tone for deacons, Christ the priest sets the agenda for ministers.

The work of those who have a ministerial role in the Church's worship is to bring people to God the Father through Christ.

A strict Protestant would find those words intolerable, fearing that we offend the principle that *there is only one Mediator between God and men, the man Jesus Christ*. We do not share the conclusion, but the point is well-made; our intervention mustn't attempt to be *instrumental* in accomplishing salvation, which is the task of Christ alone. We are *merely servants* of what Christ perfectly accomplishes. The condition for our participation is that we should cleanse ourselves of all that contradicts or impedes this ministry, and particularly anything which abrogates to ourselves the centrality which belongs to Jesus Christ alone.

The tasks of the liturgy may, in practical terms, be many: a parish priest who slaves over a hot altar for three hours every sabbath day may feel that he has had plenty to do. Also, he can easily make a dog's breakfast of this work by his own inadequacies. We all know priests who come to the sanctuary late, unprepared, or preoccupied; badly-dressed, ill-washed, or unshaven; we know their lousy choices in music, their formalistic performance of what should be heartfelt and eloquent prayers, their preaching which is a mockery of the ministry it claims to fulfil. That is par for the course, and every profession can do something similar, *mutatis mutandis*: how many doctors have an unfortunate bedside manner, or a day when they manage to devastate patients with careless and unfeeling talk, and even betray their trust by casual misdiagnosis or surgical accident? How many teachers come to work as ill-prepared and negative as any inadequate priest, and finally extinguish the wavering flame with a few smart cynical cracks, raising a cheap laugh at some child's expense? That is human nature, and I don't say it is acceptable, but priests have their own weaknesses, and must fight them just as everyone must.

But it is not only in falling short that we become dangerous people. Our problem is that, if we have *misunderstand* our role, we can wreck our hope of fulfilling our ministry just as effectively by our devotion and industry, as by carelessness and lack of integrity. Just because being *humanly careless* is a way we can ruin our ministry doesn't mean that by being *humanly dutiful* we can fulfil it. Industrious priestcraft is as lethal to ministry, in its way, as laxity, because it is using selfishness as a fuel, and it ends in ministering the powers and gifts of the minister rather than the grace of God. I am not talking about blatant personality-cults, the sit-com character of the heart-throb curate working the susceptible females of the parish, and so on. I'm talking about the ability we have to step into the professional behaviour of formal religion, and to present an accomplished performance which is built on our own competence, our own need to succeed, and not on the love of God. In the end, we have to translate the word *διακονος* not just as *minister*, but as *servant* too. The Letter to the Hebrews has no Christian priests called *ιερευς* except Christ: the new community the Letter describes *consists* of priests, for all can enter the sanctuary through the blood of Christ. This is a good starting-point for our search for the demeanour that is proper for ordained people in the liturgy.

What does the Letter to the Hebrews say about the sacrifices of the Old Testament? That they were many, and that they were finally ineffectual. Augustine says that the only thing these sacrifices accomplished was to bear witness to the fact of human sin; they expressed the self-condemnation of the people, but they did not eliminate the sins that inspired them; thus their very presence testified against those who offered them. Then comes Christ. This is where the New Testament begins to speak

of priests and priesthood, referring to Jesus as “the apostle and high priest (αποστολος και αρχιερεια) of our religion”. His offering is unique for several reasons.

- Firstly, he is the Son of God, and his vocation as Son is that he should become the leader of many sons and daughters into the glory of God.
- For this reason (secondly) he is sent to share in our flesh and blood – in other words, our nature – so that he can act as a true representative of all humanity.
- Thirdly, his offering is not of some possession, which is a mere symbol of self-gift to God: it is his own self that he offers, and this self-sacrifice is the gift which turns the key between God the Father and the human family.

As we meditate on this mystery, we can see that it is a work of the love of God, which is eternal and almighty and always totally given to us; but its manifestation in the live body of Jesus is also a work performed by a human being who says: *not my will, but your will be done*. This is the λείτουργιά of Jesus Christ, replacing and surpassing that of the Temple priesthood.

If this is the pattern of sacrifice, expressed in the priesthood of Christ, which fulfils the human need for salvation, there are immediate consequences for the Church.

I have already said that we must model our liturgy, our sacred service, on that of Jesus. His liturgy, his high-priestly service, is the *immolation* of his human flesh and blood, his human nature. Therefore our liturgy must religiously observe the same *selflessness*: the last quality it should evoke is the kind of self-expression, attention-seeking, which is such a distressing feature of some modern worship. The flamboyance of personal display, the spotlight performance, the quirky or individualistic gimmickry which so charms the more lightweight religionist speaks directly against the true spirit of the liturgy.

There was a time, before the liturgy was translated into the vernacular, when the Mass was rigorously standardized. Priests in the seminary were trained, sitting at the feet of Frs Fortescue and O’Connell, to celebrate according to a strict and measured standard: the hands were to be held at such a height, at such a distance apart, with finger- and thumb-tips held together from the moment the host had been consecrated until the rinsing of the fingers after communion. The voice was pitched at the same tone, the body disposed in identical posture, and so on. It all represented a kind of obedience which *eliminated the individual* in the name of an eternal and transcendent symbolism, which took as little as possible from the personality of its ministers.

The corresponding attitude of the layfolk to this was a superb indifference to the quality of the experience. Tin hut or patriarchal archbasilica, saint, scholar, or village idiot, perfect Palestrina or caterwaul was all irrelevant: the Mass was the Mass, and that was all that mattered.

How different the Church we inhabit! The music is vitally important. The priest’s personality has become central to the very adherence of the parishioner. When a priest is transferred, people protest to the Bishop, and his successor is removed as unsuitable (can’t preach, can’t sing, is no good at youth-work, doesn’t like the Parish Council). The quality of preaching has taken a decisive place in people’s minds. Perhaps the most surprising element is the longing for variety and creativity within the rubrics themselves. A priest walks up and down the aisle during the homily, and

people claim to be enchanted or revolted by the experience. Children are summoned to stand around the altar, and people levitate in the aisles or leave the district. A new rite is inserted involving lighting and extinguishing of candles, or burning of sins written on pieces of paper, and conversion-experiences are verified or people complain to the Vatican. Funerals have to be celebrated with jokes, and weddings have to be a riot of hilarity. It is easy for a minister to come to think that the church is a pier pavilion, and that he is obliged to offer a creative variety-act for every congregation.

If we recall the aim of the liturgy stated at the beginning, that it is intended *to bring people to God the Father through Jesus Christ*, we have the place for our meditation this morning. We should try to find the way in which the liturgy does this thing, and then ask what part our own *λειτουργία* plays in the process. How should people see us, exposed as we are by the rites and their demands? How can we become, not the obliterated individual of the pre-conciliar liturgy, but a person, as it were, *transparent* to the mystery of God? We are not called, thank goodness, to *embody* the God we proclaim; none of us would ever be fit to celebrate the liturgy if we were. But our acceptance of the functions of the liturgy commits us *to seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at God's right hand*. Our deportment and mode of address should bear witness to our humility, and our openness to the God we proclaim. There must be no trace of that obtrusive grandstanding which is the perennial substance of the broadcast media. There is no place in our churches for commercially performed music – the solo singer in the centre of the sanctuary, using the congregation as an audience, is not a cantor, and the demagogue deacon, telling jokes or anecdotes about his wonderful life, is not an appropriate liturgist. I would suggest that these words of Paul should be in the back of our mind whenever we are privileged to preach or preside:

Such by God's mercy is our *διακονία*; and therefore we do not waver, but have renounced all shameful secrecy. It is not our way to be devious, or to falsify the word of God; instead, in God's sight we commend ourselves to every human being with a conscience by showing the truth openly. If our Gospel seems to be veiled at all, it is so to those who are on the way to destruction, unbelievers who are blinded by the god of this world, so that they cannot see shining the Gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. It is not ourselves that we are proclaiming, but Christ Jesus as the Lord, and ourselves as your *(οὔλοι* for Jesus' sake. It is God, who said, Let light shine out of darkness, who has shone into our hearts to enlighten them with the knowledge of God's glory, the glory on the face of Christ.