

Liturgy In Lent

This is the first meeting of our Lent Course, and I would like to offer you a broad outline of what we're hoping it might accomplish. Lent is nothing else but the directing of our lives towards the Easter renewal of our Baptism. It must therefore treasure what Baptism gives us: the spirit of God's sons and daughters, the sharing in the divine life, the belonging to Christ's Body, the Church, as it is really incarnated in our local community.

In our longing to make the divine Liturgy the shared reality it ought to be, we commit all our religious energy. The Liturgy is like a door through which we can enter into that shared world which God wants us to inhabit. In what sense is it a *shared* world?

- We are to share the life, and especially the last days, of Jesus, as together we make our way towards Holy Week, and the renewal of Baptism in the Easter Vigil..
- We are to share the wealth of all the saints and the faithful who have celebrated this Liturgy in past centuries, becoming heirs with them to the Kingdom of heaven.
- We are to share the lives of all who now celebrate the Liturgy with us throughout the world: rich and poor, simple and wise; and especially
- we are to share the lives of those who make up our parish community.

Prayer

In our spiritual life, our prayer is always *shared*: whether we are kneeling before the Blessed Sacrament in the Church, or far away from others in a lonely place, or sitting amongst strangers who cannot know we are praying. Our prayers, even the most personal, come to God the Father "in the Holy Spirit", and "through Jesus Christ". We cannot pray except as Christians, and however "alone" we may look, our prayer is therefore *shared* by its nature. Little by little the destination and mode of our prayer - in the Spirit, and through Christ - changes us and our praying. We know more and more clearly that no prayer to the Father is possible that isn't in perfect accord with the prayer of Jesus and the moving of the Holy Spirit. This knowledge makes us able gradually to exclude from our praying heart those motives which do not make for peace, and which prevent us from sharing our life with those to whom we belong.

Almsgiving

Honest prayer like that always opens our practical life to generous works and words. As our hearts are given in loving prayer, our property too becomes available for the work of love. The experience of giving like the widow at the Treasury, not from what we have left over, but with *all we have to live on*, is unthinkable at first. But God is not God unless he makes happen what is unthinkable. If his deeds are proportioned by *our* powers and perceptions, he is an idol and not our Creator and Redeemer. Lent must result in radical change if it is the place where we meet Christ on his way to Calvary and Easter.

So the spirit of the time requires that we put everything we can into play.

- Our emotional life, our friendships and relationships,
- the open wounds and losses and failures, and the scars they have left, that we still carry, untreated and unhealed,
- our practical arrangements, the things we say we can't manage without,
- the assumptions we make about other people, especially where we have written them off or refused to relate,

- the compromises we have learned to live with, which may soften the sharpness of the world we face, but which actually anaesthetise us from feeling either pain or joy:

All of these must be re-examined, put to a new test, so that the hand of God, who brings the dead to life, may rest on them. Jesus often spoke of the Master's return. Let us think of our life and our Church, as a place that we have been responsible for. We've called it our life, our Church, our world. But it isn't ours. It is his. We have to come to say with Paul, *I live: not I, but Christ lives in me*. Lent means letting him in, and revisiting all that we've done, and knowing that now it is the gaze of the returning Christ which rests on our world.

Letting God See Our Church

One of the comments frequently made about the Catholic Church in our day is that it has lost its sense of mystery. I've been thinking about that quite a lot lately, and I've come to a sort of opinion about what is meant.

I think that the pre-conciliar Church in which I first drew breath was a fundamentally obedient one, in which you contemplated what the centuries had made of the Catholic Church, and you either took it or left it. Why was this?

After the Reformation, the Fathers of the Council of Trent led an energetic, if very belated, attempt to reform the Church from within. The achievements of men like Carlo Borromeo, Archbishop of Milan, who had been Secretary-General of the Council and very much involved in its deliberations, gave the Church an example of pastoral effort and rejuvenation which has never been forgotten, especially in Milan, where the body of St Charles now lies embalmed beneath the High Altar of the great Cathedral. But the Council was very far from having the immediate impact of Vatican Two. In those days the Council sat in a transept of the Cathedral of Trent, which is a space very much smaller than St Hugh's. When it began in 1545 it consisted of three papal legates, one cardinal, four archbishops, twenty-one bishops, and five generals of orders - a total of 34 persons.

The Council's troubled career lasted until 1563, and it did provide the Church with a basis for renewal. But this zeal did not last long. The strategy of the Church after the Council of Trent was profoundly conservative; the general experience was of sinking into a kind of Ice Age; the Church went into cryogenic deep-freeze. The idea of "change in the liturgy", after the Missal of Pius V, seemed like a contradiction in terms; its preface ends with a curse on anyone who might aspire to change it. Many people when I was a child felt that the Roman Missal had been composed by St Peter with, out of courtesy, a small input from one or two other Apostles; I frequently heard the Latin Mass we celebrated in 1955 called "the same Mass Saint Augustine celebrated". It may have been theologically true; although St Augustine certainly would have found many of the texts we used unfamiliar, would have been surprised by much that we did, and would have particularly found it strange that no-one in the congregation understood a word that was said by their priest. But *we* didn't find it strange at all. We knew no different. We took it for granted that the devout Catholic related to the Mass St Augustine celebrated by buying a comprehensive guide to the foreign language, and following at one (sacred) remove, quietly co-ordinating, via the translation, in our pew.

Now, if you want to build up a sense of mystery, there's nothing like whispering in foreign. Add to that arcane practices like incense-burning and the wearing of vestments of curious

complexity (remember the maniple? Augustine's was his hanky) and you're halfway there. Add music and sacred architecture, and the religion is nearly made up. But increasingly it wasn't liturgy. It was a clericurgy, and the people of God were there as largely silent spectators. Personally, especially because I was allowed to be a server, I must say that I felt that what we did was of significance to God. We all faced the same way, which we regarded in dramatic terms as Godwards. And we felt that God was listening, that He found what we did appropriate. That's why we did it: not for anything we got out of it (heaven knows that would have been hard to quantify) but because God wanted it and had decreed it.

Nowadays the Liturgy has been reformed around the dispositions of those who celebrate it - however tasteless or ignorant that may make it. People readily turn their noses up if they don't like the priest, or don't think he can preach properly, or if the music isn't much good, or even if the walls are painted the wrong colour. If people want their funerals to be adorned by Bob Dylan or Victor Sylvester, by Vera Lynn singing *We'll meet again, don't know how, don't know when*, or by Frank Sinatra *Doing It His Way*, or by the theme from *American Pie*, so be it.

What is missing from such liturgy is the sense that God may be turning his gaze on us.

I think that the mystery would return to our liturgy if we could regain the sense that we do what we do *because of God, in honour of God, and in the presence of God*. We had that sense in the previous dispensation, partly because no-one in their right minds would ever suggest we were doing it for ourselves. After all, the great majority of us had little idea what we *were* doing! We did it because it was laid down for us to do, and we did it out of obedience. I found myself hanging around holding things at the liturgy, I knew not what for. It was mysterious all right; I only trusted that *someone* knew what it all meant.

I recall that whenever the Bishop visited, we had specially strange things to do. Why did Bishop Ellis wear a purple train that was so long, that he had arrived at the sanctuary before the server holding the other end was well inside the West Door, so that the poor boy had to be "reeled in" by the Secretary, thrusting yards of purple walsey into an untidy heap behind the Bishop's chair? Why did he then immediately take off this unlikely garment in the Sanctuary, and get into a totally different set of vestments which had been spread over the altar, of all places? Why did I have to walk around after him holding a candle stuck on the middle of a little silver frying-pan? Why did three priests dress up in different clothes and stand behind each other on different steps in a queue in front of the altar? We didn't know; but we trusted that the heavens would fall if we did it wrong, let alone if it were not done at all. The choir in their loft did their very best to learn all the plainchant they could, and I wonder how people sat through the singing of it: no text, no music for us, just the obligation to sit and listen to people singing very monotonously words we could never decipher. The allegation that it all had great dignity and timeless mystery may have been true for Westminster Cathedral or Downside Abbey. But for St Mary's Hyson Green it was for most of the time really not true.

Having announced *participation for all*, we have erred in a contrary direction, assuming that Liturgy must now become a pleasing experience for those who come along, that it should be ordered to their taste. It is sometimes in danger of becoming a holy show, in which the rule is for everyone to feel fulfilled and involved. In schools this sometimes results in hugely-prolonged rituals in which every child has to be found a rôle - irrespective of whether or not there is anything specific to be done. The need for participation has taken over the liturgical action itself.

The task before us is to find the way, in a different liturgical world, where people have become involved in what the Liturgy is doing, to recreate that sense of *obedience*: to get over the missed mark that is liturgy *à la carte*, dictated by personal taste and ultimately a piece of

consumerism, and back to the Act of the People of God (the Church) gathered by Christ and going with Christ to the Father.

But we won't build that positive value by returning to an obscurantist liturgy in a foreign tongue which enhances the clerical and relegates the people. We must emphasise the growth of sharing that Vatican II has called for, and widen the active rôle of the congregation, until they possess what is done in the liturgy in a natural and unaffected way, which will free them to celebrate the Liturgy in God's sight, and regain the truly sacred realm which is created by the Holy Spirit's gift of *wonder and awe in God's presence*. There is something self-forgetful about good liturgy, and we do our best when we are not thinking how we're doing!