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The Language of Liturgy

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The human being is not only the rational animal (*animal rationale*) but – uniquely also – the animal that worships, the religious animal (*animal religiosum*). It appears that there is an essential element in the human experience that seeks religious experience, of one kind or another. In the seminal work of the psychologist William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), with the telling subtitle, *A Study in Human Nature*, a two-part common characteristic of the religious sensibility is identified: (1) an uneasiness – 'a sense that there is something wrong about us as we naturally stand'; and (2) a solution – 'a sense that we are saved from the wrongness by making proper connection with the higher powers'.[1] The primary way in which that 'connection' has been made – and continues to be made - is through the language of liturgy. From the beginning of the Church, Christians were meeting for worship, fellowship and study of the Scriptures at Rome as early as the 40s AD.[2] 'Liturgy', from the Greek for 'public service, worship of the gods', has been observed, through

1. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1902), Chapter 20, 'Conclusions'.
2. Sam O'Neal, 'Earliest Days of the Roman Christian Church', 25 June 2019, *Learn Religions*: https://www.learnreligions.com/the-early-church-at-rome-363409 (accessed 19 February 2023).

two millennia, in a variety of forms of public worship, but especially in the Mass or Eucharist, as an essential activity of the members of the Body of Christ.

The liturgical year, moreover, provides a structure for the Church's 'collective memory', 'a way of consecrating our human experience of time in the celebration of God's work – in Christ and in human beings being made holy through Christ – a work which is both unrepeatably in time and incomprehensibly beyond time'.[3]

Liturgical language should be both evocative of the eternal and intelligible within the discourse of the times and cultures in which it is used. An inevitable tension arises between the medium of human language and the striving to transcend its inherent mutability, to evoke and communicate transcendental truth. Accordingly, a special language of the liturgy began to be developed from the earliest days: 'The formal structure and language of the early liturgies of the Church were already, in their time, becoming more or less remote from the common language of the people.'[4]

The challenge for liturgists in all times, as indeed for biblical translators, has been to sustain the numinousness of the Word while renewing its ability to speak to successive generations, to make the timeless language of God incarnate in the ages of humankind. Verbiage of worldliness and demands for relevance to the present, and other distractions and illusions, may compromise, encompass and even overpower this aspiration.

The two matters of the eternal signification of liturgical language, on the one hand, and its requirement of comprehensibility (a very vexing term, in fact, the meaning of which is not nearly as straightforward as it sounds), on the other, are recognised by all who are concerned with the language of worship. The words 'that we utter in the Eucharist are both the language of our present life on earth and the language of heaven'.[5] Liturgical renewal, for Dobszay, should not be about accommodating the liturgy 'to the real or presumed demands of the people', but 'raising people up to the liturgy'.[6] For

3. 'Introduction: The Christian Year', in Church of England, *Common Worship: Times and Seasons: Services and Prayers for the Church of England* (Norwich: Church House Publishing, 2006), p. 1.
4. Jasper, *Language of Liturgy*, p. 50.
5. Ibid., p. 152.
6. Dobszay, *Restoration and Organic Development*, p. 15.

Hammond, this conflict of purpose or function is the fundamental dilemma of the Church's worship: 'It is pulled in one direction to be more clear and simple, attuned to divine immanence; and pulled in the other direction to be more sublime and expressive of divine transcendence.' So, 'finding any words that do God something like justice is so difficult'.[7]

As Patrick Arnold has written:

> Modern Christianity … is typically interested in the immanent and the incarnational, and finding God in the small things, the everyday, and the mundane. … As liberal religion stresses increasingly the immanent and 'horizontal' dimension of faith to the exclusion of the transcendental and 'vertical' reality, it inadvertently ignores the voracious appetite of man for the Great, a Wholly Other, and the Eternal.[8]

As this is generally true, a problem, identified by Stella Brook and specifically making an impact on the twofold function of the language of liturgy, in terms of immanence and transcendence, presents itself in our day, as a consequence of 'the divorce of spoken and written styles in twentieth-century English, to the detriment of both':

> Written style has deteriorated into a stylised and unnatural idiom, employing a vocabulary that had ceased to be a genuine part of living speech; while spoken style had also deteriorated, becoming slipshod, riddled with vague catch-words and limited in vocabulary. Such joint deterioration impeded the development of a good liturgical style; the former because liturgy needed to reach the hearts and minds of the worshipper, the latter because liturgy needed to express profundities in a decorous and comely language.[9]

7. Hammond, *Sound of the Liturgy*, pp. 78-79.
8. Patrick Arnold quoted in David Murrow, *Why Men Hate Going to Church* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2011), p. 74.
9. Stella Brook, *The Language of the Book of Common Prayer* (London: Deutsch, 1965), p. 286.

Brook was writing in 1965. The deterioration she identifies has worsened to such an extent in the intervening sixty years to the point at which one must sympathise with modernising liturgists struggling to craft a comprehensible, let alone decorous and comely language of worship out of this cacophonous linguistic sludge. We have seen: the elaboration of weasel-word gibberish in what passes for administrative and bureaucratic discourse, shot through with catchphrases of politically correct ideology (repeated, mantra-like and mindlessly, like a perpetually turning prayer wheel); a print and media culture with a widespread and increasing ignorance of the etymology, meaning and even the pronunciation of ordinary English words; and, in general, a spoken style of English, by the people, riddled with casual profanities, obscenities, blasphemy and various tics of speech, such as the moronic interrogative (whereby statements of plain fact are turned into questions, by rising inflexions at the end of sentences); meaningless filler words and phrases such as 'like', 'actually', 'kind of', 'sort of' and 'you know'; and a general inability, even in the cases of those with university degrees, when put on the spot, to construct a series of grammatically correct, lucid sentences. Jasper puts it mildly and characteristically optimistically when he urges, for liturgy, a regaining of 'that faith in language that has so often in recent years seemed thin and uncreative'.[10]

Contrariwise, Archbishop Thomas Cranmer, in the sixteenth century, was composing his liturgy at a unique time in the history of the development of English, when there was 'a vital sense' of it, amongst the literate and the educated, that 'was at once culturally alive, intellectually subtle and theologically braced'.[11] Could we be further removed from such a dispensation? In our day, our sense of the English language has become 'profoundly "literal" in a way that would have horrified Shakespeare as much as it would have bemused Cranmer'.[12] We see this in secular culture every day, where the literal sense of some word, which may have been used ironically or in jest, is automatically taken to be its only meaning and the only permissible interpretation of the speaker's or writer's intention. It is little wonder, in such a world, that poetry, with its verbal subtleties and nuances, has all but disappeared from the culture of literal-minded Western

10. Jasper, *Language of Liturgy*, p. 115.
11. Ibid., p. 72.
12. Ibid., p. 90.

societies. Accordingly, the implications for liturgical language, with its inevitable elements of mystery and strangeness, and those determined to make it fit for purpose in such a dispensation, are bleak.

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Further, with tradition, sacredness and reverence at a discount, generally, in an apparently irretrievably and combatively irreverent culture, a liturgical language capable of summoning these qualities is abjured, even suppressed in Churches anxious to conform themselves to the world in processes of 'inculturation'. Defending seriousness, for example, a vital prerequisite of reverence and for nurturing the sense of sacredness, in contemporary Western culture, with regard to matters that are worth being serious about, has become an adversarial act. Yet, what could be more serious than what the Church has to proclaim to the world, what the world has to learn from it and experience within it, and which it so profoundly needs? G.K. Chesterton reputedly warned that: 'When men choose not to believe in God, they do not thereafter believe in nothing, they then become capable of believing in anything.' The spiritual shallowness and vacuity of various elements of contemporary secular popular culture are surely destined to stir, for many, a yearning for a more profound interpretation, understanding, appreciation and expression of human life, beyond the chances and changes of diurnal and mortal existence – an experience which the Churches are called to offer, should be offering, but where its liturgies, and particularly the language of worship, have become, in most places, so impoverished that, in John Milton's phrase, 'the hungry sheep look up, and are not fed'.[13] Liturgy, and the language which accompanies it, should be a seeking for and discerning of the real presence of God, for intelligent and mature contemplation, and for adoration, centred at the still point of congregations' consciences and consciousness.

This is a serious matter and if 'church' is not a serious business, as the English poet, Philip Larkin noted – 'A serious house on serious earth it is' – what is the point of it? The agnostic captured this essence of churchgoing which, paradoxically, has been progressively diluted by the Churches themselves, and principally in their liturgies. A church is a place:

13. John Milton, 'Lycidas' (1637).

> In whose blent air all our compulsions meet,
> Are recognised, and robed as destinies.
> And that much never can be obsolete,
> Since someone will forever be surprising
> A hunger in himself to be more serious.

Seriousness and the getting of wisdom require protracted attention, concentration and patience, leading to reverence and worship. For the Christian, this is a lifetime's vocation. As Larkin affirms, 'this cross of ground':

> held unspilt
> So long and equably what since is found
> Only in separation – marriage, and birth,
> And death, and thoughts of these.

Church was the place it 'was proper to grow wise in'. That Larkin uses the adjective 'serious' three times in the poem is very much to the point he is making.[14]

Also pertinent to the practical problems which liturgists face, today, is the phenomenon (worryingly identified and documented by many educators, for example) of modern people's ever-decreasing concentration spans, and – concomitantly – their impatience with any mode of information-communication that is not readily and immediately accessible, instantly consumable and fully digestible (or, at least, imagined to have been so). It is 'an age that suffers from acute attention deficit … the superficial ethos of a "pop" culture'.[15] Greg Wrenn, Associate Professor of English at James Madison University, in an article, 'My undergrads struggle to read – I think I know why', identified 'a devastating crisis of attention':

> In an informal, anonymous class poll, just 13 per cent of my nearly 300 students this semester said they did not suffer from intense anxiety on a regular basis – that shocked me. A third reported that their anxiety keeps them from reading the assigned texts. Half said they have trouble

14. 'Church Going' (1954). The absence of a hyphen in the title signals the consequence of the disappearance of churchgoing.
15. Jasper, *Language of Liturgy*, p. 141.

> paying attention when reading, even when their phones are off. Reading and reflective time in nature – powerful anti-anxiety meds in themselves – simply can't compete with TikTok. And neither can easy-going, in-person conversation with sustained eye contact, or a 75-minute college lecture.[16]

Not to mention an hour-long (or longer) liturgy.

This is part of the reason for the decline of the study and appreciation of poetry, the least approachable, but the most profound, of the linguistic arts in contemporary literary culture, even in such as the experience of schoolchildren from which it has almost entirely disappeared. Similarly, words in liturgy, at their most worthy, as Hammond observes, 'work as signs in worship beyond their most basic function as conveyors of information'[17] and the appreciation of them takes protracted time and concentration.

Further, as churchgoing, as a weekly custom, has died out except for a core, tiny minority of the faithful in any of the Western Churches (regular attendance facilitating the accumulation and development of individuals' liturgical sensibility – the habits of worship), there is the understandable preoccupation of liturgical directors of any kind to get the message across, as simply and immediately as possible, while they have a captive audience, as it were, in this or that week's Sunday congregation. Yet, as Hammond importantly identifies, habitual attendance at liturgy is vital to worship achieving its purpose, as she recalls Anglican liturgical practice centred, as it was, on the Book of Common Prayer, for centuries:

> The power of the liturgy to ingrain in the worshipper the texts she or he hears week in week out is a crucial part of Christian formation. … Here the great exemplar must be the BCP 1662: generations of Anglicans have absorbed its

16. Greg Wrenn, 'My Undergrads Struggle to Read – I Think I know Why', Al Jazeera Media Network, 6 April 2023. Available online at: https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2023/4/6/my-undergrads-struggle-to-read-i-think-i-know-why (accessed 11 April 2023).
17. Hammond, *Sound of the Liturgy*, p. 2.

> theology and spirituality through coming to know its texts by heart.[18]

Moreover, this was a text that was susceptible to and worthy of knowing by heart (it was customary, for example, for children to memorise each week's Sunday collect) because of the superb quality of its poetic prose. James Fallows notes that, having heard Cranmer's liturgy 'read aloud, for thousands of hours in my childhood, permanently shaped my idea of how an English sentence should sound' and 'even now I can recite very long passages by rote'.[19] What Hammond terms 'imprintability' is the quality 'every liturgical text ought to aim for … it cannot be too strongly stressed that liturgical texts are designed to be read aloud'.[20]

The more general and lamentable decline in protracted textual study and absorption of profound meaning of complex texts, and the invaluable experience of learning by heart of material that is worth taking to heart, is directly related to the erosion of the liturgical sense and experience, in its linguistic dimension, in contemporary Christianity.

The sense of the necessity for a growing familiarity and ever-deepening understanding of routinely and ritually encountered texts has been eroded by these formidable circumstances and pressures. Today, Hammond observes: 'it has become commonplace to associate fixed and traditional texts with insincerity, parroting by rote, and disengagement. … Freely composed words have come to be associated with simplicity and veracity. This is a fallacy, and a dangerous, damaging one.'[21]

The tensions inherent in the desire of the fathers of the Second Vatican Council, discerned by Cardinal Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict XVI) between 'liturgical beauty on the one hand, and liturgical simplicity on the other' appear to have resolved themselves, unsatisfactorily, in a decided preference for the latter.[22] Translation

18. Ibid., p. 8.
19. James Fallows, 'Rhythm, Repetition, and the "Book of Common Prayer"', *The Atlantic*, 25 August 2012.
20. Hammond, *Sound of the Liturgy*, p. 99.
21. Ibid., p. 69.
22. Preface in Rutherford (ed.), *Benedict XVI and Beauty in Sacred Music*, p. 11.