

Introduction

Thank you for coming to discuss our historical liturgy. As I thought about today's talk, I began with a question: for what do we rely on liturgy? I'm reminded that, unlike many of our Protestant brothers and sisters, we do not go to church primarily to hear a lot of scripture and a lot of preaching about it. We do hear scripture, and we do hear preaching about it, but all of it is in the context of an encounter with Christ.

To make that encounter real, it seems to me it has to have two dimensions. First, we have to feel near enough to God so that God will seem real to us. We accomplish that by meeting Him at a meal—the most elemental of human encounters.

But closeness itself is not enough. I'm reminded of a book I read, The Jew and the Lotus, which recounts, among other things, the experiences of a number of Jews who left Judaism behind and adopted Buddhism as their religion. When I discussed this with a Jewish friend, he told me, "One of the great losses of the Holocaust—beyond the sheer numbers of people murdered—was the loss of almost all Jewish mystics." No Jewish mystics means no Jewish mysticism, and with that loss came the loss of the second dimension of our liturgy: the sense of God as not only near but also distant, unfathomable, unutterably strange. We don't have to go to an Eastern religion to find God outside our everyday lives. Christianity, taken seriously, is strange and unearthly.

Rites I and II accomplish this near-and-far in similar but different ways. Rite II, I understand, returned us to the earliest church sources, knocking off medieval accretions and retrieving earlier understandings. Rite I's approach is different. We'll discuss that.

Personal Note

Before embarking on that, I'll take a moment to talk about my own approach. I'm not a scholar. I am a lay person of wide and idiosyncratic reading, trying to make sense of all this.

Often when a person speaks positively about our historic liturgy, there is a fear that person has another agenda: that when I embrace these ancient words, what I'm really doing is opposing the ordination of women, or stating a position on human sexuality. That's not me. I do regret the loss of many of those who left the Episcopal Church over these issues; with them they took not only elements of conservatism I found troubling, but also a useful and necessary liturgical conservatism. Now, when we discuss these issues, we sometimes seem to have only one side of the conversation present.

So what I want is just what I said in my essays: I want to preserve our own heritage, gather our own meaning from our own book, and bring the past forward into conversation with our lives today.

I say this as a cradle Episcopalian but one who has not attended church all his life. When I was ready to return to church as an adult, having left off most regular attendance when I went to college, I found a way into adult Christianity—both understanding and practice—through this familiar liturgical language: free of cliché, free of artifice, unlike anything else I was exposed to in any other dimension of my life, the near and the far of it. It resonates with my studies in English and History. I'll also mention that at one point, when I was younger, my

energy level higher, and my evenings longer, I worked my way through Diarmaid MacCulloch's definitive biography of Archbishop Thomas Cranmer. All of this has deepened my appreciation of our historic liturgy.

Rite I: Language

How does Rite I accomplish the encounter with Christ, the near and the far? I concentrate on the words. I love our gothic arches, our candles, vestments, incense, and music, but Anglican worship doesn't require them. At some times and in some places it has rejected them. What our worship requires, always, is the words.

Archbishop Cranmer wrote the Book of Common Prayer. (There was a committee to assist him, but we have no compositional notes as we do with the King James Version of the Bible, to attribute particular passages to particular contributors; thus, for purposes of basic understanding, it is Cranmer's book.) Cranmer valued precision in words, and Rite I says many very precise things. We should note that, to scholars, they don't all fit together perfectly. That may be explained by the fast developing understandings of the time in which the book was written.

I think it is true but also charitable to say that understandings were developing. Also true is that the language in Rite I arose from ongoing compromise, accommodation, and shadow-boxing between Catholic and Reformed-now known as Protestant, then known as Evangelical~ elements in the church, and the political power each exercised from time to time. Expression of any kind on these volatile issues was risky; people who stated the wrong understanding at the wrong time might find themselves hanging from a noose or being shoveled up as a pile of ashes.

But the words on the page transcend the people who made them. I don't want to overstate these contradictions and ambiguities-I can't identify most of them-but whatever they are, the meaning transcends them.

Rite I presents meaning conveyed with words of poetry: each word a pod bursting forth with meaning, some of those meanings unknown even to the writer. I think of them as the aroma in a room after a person spritzes it with perfume: the atoms of perfume are more than their chemical formula, they smell slightly different to each person; and no one person can go around the room inhaling all of them, to the exclusion of everyone else.

I read an objection to Rite I once: "I don't speak Elizabethan English." Neither did they, not like this, any more than we today speak in iambic pentameter. The words of Rite I are meaning, music, perfume; rhythm, flow, cadence, punctuation. They allow for different experiences: we can listen carefully one week, simply be washed along the next.

In appreciating this poetry, we can lose our sense of the nearness of Rite I:

We should remember that, for all the language's distance from the way we now speak, it was dramatically closer to those who first heard it. No longer was the service mumbled in Latin by the priest, with a couple of acolytes, on the far side of a rood screen. This was a central requirement of the Reformation.

For a sense of farness, listen to this:

O God heavenly father, which of thy tender mercie diddest geve thine only sonne Jesu Christ to suffre death upon the crosse for our redempcion, who made there (by his one oblacion once offered) a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblacion, and satysfaccyon, for the sinnes of the

whole worlde, and did institute, and in his holy Gospell commaund us, to celebrate a perpetuall memory of that his precious death, untill his comming again: Heare us (O merciful father) we besech thee; and with thy holy spirite and worde, vouchsafe to blesse and sanctifie these thy gyftes, and creatures of bread and wyne, that they maie be unto us the bodye and bloude of thy moste derely beloved sonne Jesus Christe.

This is as valuable for us as it was to those who heard it then, in a different way: for them it was newly familiar; for us, it is distant and more strangely evocative.

Better Christian Lives

Here are two more passages:

ALMIGHTY God, father of oure Lorde Jesus Christe, maker of all thynges, Judge of all menne, we acknowledge and bewaile oure manifolde synnes and wyckednesse, whiche we from tyme to tyme moste greuously have committed, by thoughte woorde and deede, against thy divine Majestie, provokynge mooste justlye thy wrathe and indignation againste us: we do earnestly repente, and bee hartely sorye for these oure misdoinges, the remembraunce of them is grevous unto us: the burthen of theim is intollerable: have mercy upon us, have mercye upon us, mooste mercyfull father, for thy sonne oure Lorde Jesus Christes sake, forgeve us all that is paste, and graunte that we may ever hereafter serve and please the, in newenes of lyfe, to the honour and glorie of thy name throughe Jesus Christ our Lorde. Amen.

And:

WE do not presume to come to this Thy Table, O merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness, but in thy manifold and great mercies. We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under Thy Table. But Thou art the same Lord, whose property is always to have mercy: Grant us therefore, gracious Lord, so to eat the flesh of thy dear Son us Christ, and to drink his blood, that our sinful bodies may be made clean by his body, and our souls washed through his most precious blood, and that we may evermore dwell in him, and he in us. Amen.

I do not think of us as being God fearing people, by which I mean Hell fearing people. We are God loving people. We may not fear hell, but there are things to fear: Blindness and dullness that can lead to a wasted life; self-satisfaction that allows us to avoid deeper truths; the hazard of responding with 1% of myself to God's love

and not with more. The danger of living functionally estranged from the love of the Creator of all creation. Rite I provides powerful assistance in this struggle. Its sense is inward, reflective, and penitent.

Let me emphasize: this is not an issue of self-esteem. We have worked hard to value ourselves for what God made us to be, not for what we've earned, or inherited, or the social station we occupy. Rite I is not piling on the traumatized, the betrayed, the ill, or the suffering. Elsewhere in the service, we ask God's mercy on those "who in this transitory life are in trouble, sorrow, need, sickness, or any other adversity."

What we are doing when we say these prayers is seeing what we have to see: our own weakness, our own error, all the ways we respond to God with 1% and not with more. And we do this ourselves. The priest doesn't stand in front of us and accuse us. We see our shortcomings and we say them, ourselves. And the response is immediate: Absolution and the Comfortable Words after Confession, Holy Communion after the Prayer of Humble Access.

What is Common Prayer

As I look through the Book of Common Prayer in its historic form, I see it as being complete and sufficient but, I think, not closed. Some elements have been changed over the centuries, and some have been added. And there are wonders in Anglican worship around the globe. All of it is prayer derived from a common source.

But I do want to preserve Common Prayer in the original sense: to pray in every place in the same words others use behind other red doors. I like going to churches elsewhere and, at at least one service, being able to read my service, with them, knowing that it is their service, too.

Summary and Conclusion

Here at St. John's, we have gothic arches, vestments, incense, candles, a pipe organ. Many early (and later) practices have been much more severe: no high altars; tables for Holy Communion oriented East and West, set in the middle of the church. In some churches in England one can see ruined statuary. Our Anglican Church has a complex and messy history. But as it was born and as it grew both in England and in this country, we brought along with us a lot of the old understandings, for some of us to embrace and some of us to resist: our Bishops with their Cathedral churches, our Daily Offices, our saints. We also brought along our Catholic cloud of witnesses. Even if the old language was designed as much to overthrow the existing order as to preserve it, now~467 years later~that same language connects us across the centuries.

The first passage I read came from the first Book of Common Prayer, published in 1549. The second came from the 1559 revision~Shakespeare's Book of Common Prayer. The third came from a copy of the 1892 book, owned by my grandfather, the first Episcopalian in our family.

I want to go to church with Shakespeare. With John Donne, who told us for whom the bell tolls. With Thomas Jefferson, who vandalized his Bible in an attempt to desacralize Christianity, yet who was nonetheless there in the pews struggling. I want to go to church with C.S. Lewis, with Dorothy Sayers, W.H. Auden, and T.S. Eliot. With my parents and grandparents. With all who have worshipped at St. John's for 180 years, and with all of you.

I close with a poem by George Herbert. George Herbert lived from 1593 to 1633, about the same time as John Donne but for a much shorter time. He was a scholar in Greek and Latin, an accomplished lutenist, a Member of

Parliament, who was ordained late in his too-short life. He is one of the most celebrated poets in the Anglican world. This is the third poem he wrote with the title, "Love."

Love (3)

Love bade me welcome; yet my soul drew back,
 Guilty of dust and sin.
But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack
 From my first entrance in,
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,
 If I lacked anything.

A guest, I answered, worthy to be here:
 Love said, You shall be he.
I the unkind, ungrateful? Ah my dear,
 I cannot look on thee.
Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,
 Who made the eyes but I?

Truth Lord, but I have marred them: let my shame
 Go where it doth deserve.
And know you not, says Love, who bore the blame?
 My dear, then I will serve.
You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat:
 So I did sit and eat.

Amen.

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