SERMON SERIES: WHAT IS THE DIVINE LITURGY?

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What could be better than to begin our series of sermons on the liturgy on the Feast of Candlemas, when the Holy Family come to the Temple to present ritually both mother and child. The thought of this series came from you, the people at a Chapel gathering some time ago. The Sunday liturgy is the principle place where we are formed as Christians at the Chapel, yet, we live now in a culture where one cannot guarantee any background knowledge about why we worship in the way that we do, and everyone, whether new or old to the Chapel, can benefit from reflecting on in what and how we engage ourselves on a Sunday morning. “So tell us more, inform us, start the discussion!” was the popular call. The Series will have been a success, if it helps you to engage better, to understand further, and to worship more intently.

The Chapel itself lends itself to the Liturgy, because when you step into this place, you step out of the mundane world - yes bringing its concerns with you - and into a space that is a sacred stage for the Divine-human drama. At the east end is heaven, represented by the blue of the ceiling, with a dove, the Holy Spirit descending – telling us that this is a place of Divine action! The Rood Screen veils this space, where the consecrated bread is also to be found, Christ’s presence in this temple, reserved in a hanging pyx, surrounded by icons of the Archangels, the Virgin Mary and St George. The veiled, hiddenness of that space also represents the mystery and transcendence of God the Father.

In the Chapel, the biggest dramatic statement is the Rood Screen itself, with the Crucified Christ, reminding us who is the principle actor in this drama and what is the principle action. It towers above the Nave Altar, where Christ’s saving death and resurrection are made present to us again through the celebration of the Eucharist. We are to be caught up and formed in this Divine drama, which is not just an event of the past, but also very much of the present, and a foretaste of the fullness of the Kingdom to come. As Roger Grainger has written: “This is what is meant when it is said that liturgy ‘takes place in eternity’. The action of *seeing the future in the context of the past* has a transforming effect upon the present.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

The first sermon of our series is entitled: “What is the Divine Liturgy?” Our second reading, today from an article by Roger Taft, gloriously used Michelangelo’s God and Adam in the Sistine Chapel, to show that liturgy begins with that “life-giving finger of God stretched out” towards us. The Greek root of the word liturgy means “common work or action”. The ceremonial action and our own participation may make us think that liturgy is the people’s work provoking God to be present. On the contrary, our worship flows from the action of God in His revelation of Himself in the person of Jesus. The celebration of the Holy Meal of the Eucharist is instituted by Christ himself. It’s not just something his followers decided to do as a kind of fitting memorial. As we have already noted, it brings that Divine saving action of the past into the present from the future! So, we should be careful if we come to liturgy judging it just by what *we* do, *we* feel and what *we* get out of it. Yes, of course, liturgy is meant to be transformative, but it is not principally due to what *we do*, but what *God does*, and so the Liturgy is Divine, not only by being celebrated in God’s honour and commanded by Him, it provides the space and occasion for Him to act in our lives today. The beauty and power of Spirit-inspired Liturgy is this: feeble and undependable human agents – we may all think of under par preachers, celebrants and choirs – cannot stand between God’s people and His blessings. That is a point which is difficult for us to grasp, driven as our culture is by consumerism and immediate gratification, centred around what *I,* or the group *I’m* influenced by, like, want and feel.

If Liturgy is a common work or action, in which God is the principle actor, what is our part, as co-workers? For a start to worship God is the end for which we were created, it is our duty and act of loving service. As such, it is right and good to give God thanks and praise in the best way that we can: offering ourselves in prayer and praise wholeheartedly. Liturgy is a kind of Divine-human “Gesamtkunstwerk”, communicating through all the senses and arts. So, we bring Christ the best of our music, we read God’s word in Scripture and reflect upon it, we pray for the Church and for the world, we offer each other Christ’s peace, we decorate the church with flowers and colour that invoke the liturgical season, gold today for Candlemas, we use incense to engage our senses of smell and sight, we offer bread and wine at the altar for the Holy Meal. We do all these things because they have Scriptural warrant, grounded in the tradition of Christ’s Church. These are all things that *we do* and are *our* act of service.

Much is, quite appropriately, specific to who we are, culturally, as a community. For example, our music here reflects the fact that we stand within the Western tradition of English church music. If I was worshipping in the largest Anglican country in the world, Nigeria, I might recognise some of the hymns, but sung and accompanied in quite a different way, embraced as they are by the musical traditions of West Africa. Our Offertory Gifts are solemnly processed down the aisle. In Africa, they are danced down the aisle. With the Liturgy, there must be a living dynamic between what is passed down from former generations and the contribution of our own generation. If, for example, the hymns we sing are only culled from the 18th, 19th, and early 20th centuries, then our musical tradition, in which we invest so much, will be stuck in a moment of time, and not living and still unfolding. Part of our Service is to express the Gospel afresh in our generation, as the Diocese of London’s *Capital Vision* says repeatedly, in a way in which only we can, relying on the tradition in which we stand. So, there is a dynamic interdependence between the primacy of what we receive, both from God and our fellow Christians down the ages, what is passed on, and the modest contribution we may make to that living tradition. In other words, as the liturgist George Guiver, CR writes: “what is received is always changed in the receiving – this is real creativity.” And he is wary of a vision of worship, which believes that it creates in a vacuum. “Worship which is created on the spot by ourselves”, he warns, “will only reflect us back to ourselves – it will lack the element of the Other which is different from us and calling forth things from us that we didn’t know were in us. True worship is always bigger than us, and is formative of us rather than we of it.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

So, the Holy Family come to the Temple to stand within its tradition and liturgy. Only Christ Jesus himself is bigger than any of the forms of our worship, for He is at its centre. Simeon, a man of stature within the Jewish tradition, just and devout, is released at the sight of the Christ child, having seen living and breathing salvation. The old man’s name means in Hebrew, “God has heard” and as he takes Jesus up in his arms, he proclaims a prayer that has entered our liturgy as the “Nunc Dimittis.” Thus, the Liturgy in the Temple, in the Church, does what it does today: it takes our living spiritual heritage, our own individual and corporate lives, and filled with the Holy Spirit, is transformed by the presence of Christ, the One who has brought eternity into time, releasing us into praise and worship. That is the Divine Liturgy and it is why we come each Sunday, ready, waiting, open to be transformed and sent out again to love and serve the Lord. +

1. R. Grainger, *The Drama of the Rite. Worship, Liturgy and Theatre Performance* (Sussex Academic Press, 2009), p.5. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. George Guiver CR, “True Prayer and the 21st Century Church”, Ken Leech Lecture at Hope University, Diocese of Liverpool: http://www.liverpool.anglican.org/userfiles/files/Events/2017/Ken%20Leech%20talk%20george%20guiver%20(2).docx

See also George Guiver’s in-depth study: *Vision upon Vision. Processes of change and renewal in Christian worship* (Canterbury Press, 2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)