

Ecumenical Liturgy

MANY years ago the famous liturgical scholar, Dr W. H. Frere, noted that liturgy is like the waves of the sea. There is a constant flow and ebb clearly discernible throughout the history of the Church. Periods of variety are followed by periods of uniformity: and these movements towards variety or uniformity have corresponded with the practical needs, impulses and spirit of time and place. We see a typical example of this in Europe during the 8th and 9th centuries. A period when a wide variety of rites was in use throughout the Empire was followed by a period when uniformity became important, largely through the influence of Charlemagne. The Empire conformed to Roman customs, but at the same time profoundly modified them: then in turn Rome herself admitted many of the modifications from across the Alps. However, we must not run away with the misconception that the desire for variety must correspond with a period of intense activity in the Church, and the desire for stability with a period of inertia. On the contrary, the desire for stability may be accompanied by considerable activity in the theological and pastoral fields. Our own age provides us with a striking example of this.

Most of us are aware of the valuable work in biblical theology which has been done in recent years and still continues. We are, moreover, all children of the Ecumenical Movement. We know that the Church is trying to come to grips with itself and with the world; and the spirit of self-criticism is very much alive. The Vatican Council affords us with an example of this, and we see Rome shaking herself free of the rigid shackles of the Counter-Reformation. The Reformed Churches, too, are very ready to investigate their own traditions and judge them by external standards. Again, the Church of England no longer refers to the Book of Common Prayer as her "incomparable liturgy": she realizes that it does not in fact reflect primitive usage, as scholars in the 16th and 17th centuries thought it did; nor does it measure up to the needs of the present day. And all of us are becoming increasingly aware that in most parts of the world the Church of today resembles the primitive Church in that it is not so much a large and powerful organization more or less coterminous with a nation as a whole,

as it is a small group, needing to shape its life in a way that can not only be understood by its own members, but also have an impact on people outside it.

Amid this stimulus and activity we have surmounted the crest of a liturgical wave and we see on all sides a desire for stabilization and uniformity. The phrase "ecumenical liturgy" is heard with increasing frequency. This is reflected in the comment of a young English Roman Catholic scholar, Charles Davis, Professor of Dogmatic Theology at Ware. "One of the results of the Liturgical Movement has been to bring Christians of different communions closer together, because the new understanding of the Liturgy is over-coming various distorting prejudices and defective ideas which all the communions of the West have inherited from the Middle Ages and which explain, in part, their divisions. In the Roman Church (and this is, of course, true of other Churches too) the movement has been strongly pastoral in character, and it is the strongest force now working for the renewal of the Christian life among ordinary people".⁽¹⁾ When, therefore, we look at the Papal Encyclical *Mediator Dei* of 1947 and the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy of December 1963, we find there little with which to disagree and a great deal of which we can approve wholeheartedly. Both documents recognize that worship is a corporate activity and that congregations are priestly people; there must be lay participation, more frequent communion and the use of the vernacular. There must be greater flexibility and simplicity in worship, and an avoidance of "liturgical archaeologisms". There is, too, a renewed emphasis on the reading and preaching of the Word of God, and a recognition that the Daily Office, as something for lay people as well as for clergy and religious, needs modification. Finally there is evidence of a far more liberal approach in liturgical theology, particularly towards conceptions of the Eucharist.

Now when we turn to the Reformed Churches, we also see their desire for change—and change that will bring them very much into line with the Roman position. They, too, strive after what a Baptist scholar has called "embodied worship", an active sharing of minister and people in rites which have a definite shape. There is a new consciousness of the Church and all that it implies. There is an increasing use of the ecclesiastical year and a return to restraint and

(1) "Church Architecture and Liturgy" in *Towards a Church Architecture*: edited Peter Hammond, 1962, p. 112.

discipline. These things are indicated in a variety of ways—a willingness to use a set lectionary ; an increasing desire to have some common form of daily service for clergy and laity ; a recognition that set prayer and free prayer must go hand in hand ; and a rediscovery of the Eucharist. Let me give two examples. In *A Book of Services and Prayers* put out by the Congregational Union in 1959, we find the Lectionary of the Church of South India ; a two-yearly course of psalmody and bible-reading based on the full Christian calendar ; a demand to “stick to the text” in classic prayers ; and an emphasis on the centrality of Holy Communion in public worship. Again, the *Orders and Prayers for Church Worship* compiled by members of the Baptist Union in 1960 follows the same lines, and a few sentences from its Introduction deserve quotation. “It is a departure from apostolic worship to celebrate the Lord’s Supper infrequently, or to regard it as a brief appendage following another complete service. Christian worship is essentially eucharistic . . . Even when the Lord’s Supper is not celebrated, the service of the Word should retain the pattern of the Ante-Communion . . . It is a mistake to set freedom and tradition, spontaneity and form in violent antithesis. The highest freedom is the fruit of discipline and creative spontaneity the result of an adequate rooting in scripture and tradition”,⁽¹⁾

Forgive me if I go further and quote Neville Clark, a brilliant young Baptist scholar who has already done valuable work in the liturgical field. “What, in practice, will liturgical reformation involve? If we are to begin to answer such questions we must be aware of the weaknesses which beset current theory and practice. To complain of irreverence in worship is to criticize fairly but superficially. To expound the necessity of beauty in worship may be desirable, but the fatal ease with which beauty is purchased at the expense of truth—and holiness—may serve to qualify our approval. The real cancer lies deeper. The unbalanced exaltation of preaching, with its familiar corollaries ; the treatment of the Eucharist as an infrequent addendum ; the continuance of a sub-Christian individualistic temper and outlook which, however fiercely it may be repudiated on the conscious level, still governs the basic assumptions that mould our liturgical practice ; the depreciation of the idea of ‘making an offering’ in favour of that of ‘receiving a

⁽¹⁾ *Orders and Prayers for Church Worship* compiled by E. A. Payne and S. F. Winward, 1960, pp. xii-xiv.

blessing ' ; the formal and (to a large and inevitable extent) factual divorce of worship from life, resulting from the conception of the purpose of worship as the edification of a group rather than the carrying out of a representative action on behalf of a world for which Christ lived and died—such are among the many and varied dangers to be faced and problems to be resolved . . . If we are to advance, we must first look to the past and seek to learn from it".⁽¹⁾ There is nothing in that statement which we—and enlightened Roman Catholics—would not wholeheartedly endorse.

Here, then, we have the main liturgical questions to be faced ; and in some places a great deal has already been done towards answering them. We are moving into the era of " ecumenical liturgy ". There is, for example, the remarkable liturgy of the Church of South India, created by Christians of a number of persuasions, which has earned high praise. Fr. Bouyer, the Roman Catholic scholar, has said of it : " While it skilfully incorporates quite unexceptionable Protestant customs, still, from the point of view of even a conservative Catholic (or Orthodox) liturgist, this eucharistic liturgy seems much more satisfactory than those which emanated from the Reformation. Unquestionably, it is much superior to the Prayer Book of the Church of England both on account of its traditional character and its theological soundness ".⁽²⁾ It is also interesting to note the willingness of Free Churchmen in particular to borrow from the C.S.I. Service Book or to regard it as a reliable guide—its ecumenical influence is quite remarkable. Then there is the " Birmingham rite ", the product of an extra-mural class at Birmingham University, in 1956, composed of clergy and laity of the Anglican and Free Churches. This rite, drawing heavily on material from the Book of Common Prayer, has been regarded as a notable contribution to ecumenical liturgical study. Mention should also be made of the liturgy of the French Reformed community of Taizé and of your own new edition of the *Ordinal and Service Book*.⁽³⁾ Or again there has been the recent call by Dr Massey Shepherd, a leading Episcopalian liturgical scholar in America, for the American Episcopalian, Lutheran, Presbyterian and Methodist Churches to explore the possibilities of producing a common liturgy. Finally the prospects of ecumenical

⁽¹⁾ N. Clark, *Call to Worship*, 1960, pp. 12-3.

⁽²⁾ L. Bouyer, " A Roman Catholic View of the C.S.I. ", *Theology*, Jan. 1956, p. 4.

⁽³⁾ *Ordinal and Service Book* : Church of Scotland. Third Edition 1962. Oxford University Press.

liturgy in Great Britain have been brought much nearer by the formation in 1963 of a Joint Liturgical Group composed of Anglicans, Methodists, Presbyterians, Congregationalists and Baptists. This group only came into existence after prolonged correspondence and discussion had made it clear that co-operation *was* possible, and the work done so far augurs well for the future.

Now in work of this type Massey Shepherd has pointed out that complete agreement on questions of doctrine is not necessary. Divergences in doctrine, he argues, are not so much implicit in formularies themselves as they are in the interpretations imposed on them by theological confessions external to the rite. Let us therefore look for a moment at the Roman rite, which is a notable instance of this. The Roman Canon is still substantially as it was in the Gelasian Sacramentary of the 7th and 8th centuries, and it is party to neither of the medieval errors of transubstantiation or the renewal of the sacrifice of Calvary. The Canon is actually impatient of the interpretation which the theology of transubstantiation requires: for, after the words of Institution have been recited, the Canon still speaks of the elements as offerings of an earthly sort. Transubstantiation has to be read into the Roman Canon; it cannot be read out of it. Again, the Canon is not explicit as to a moment of consecration; nor is there any specific assertion of the eucharistic sacrifice.

In this connection I can only quote the judgement of two very different authorities. The first is that of the eminent Roman Catholic liturgist, Professor J. A. Jungmann. He says: "Remember, it is not necessary that the details of eucharistic theology appear in the rite. Even in the developed Mass-liturgy of today many pertinent points of dogma are entirely omitted . . . Such, in fact, is our conduct whenever we present a gift that is due; we do not talk much about the gift we are tendering, preferring instead to concentrate on the labours and merits that occasioned the gift".⁽¹⁾ The second is that of a revered Anglican theologian and leader of the last generation, Bishop Charles Gore. Gore believed that most of the eucharistic theology written between the 6th and 19th centuries was tainted—tainted perhaps by excessive intellectual definition or perhaps by the movement of violently negative Protestantism. Most of this, he believes, was of doubtful value; and he went so

(1) J. A. Jungmann, *The Mass of the Roman Rite*, (abridged English edition) 1959, p.16.

far as to say that if all that had been written about the Eucharist during that period were obliterated, there would be little serious loss, while a great deal that was a serious hindrance to peace and a cause of division would disappear. It was in the early Church that men would discover the right temper of mind with which to approach the Eucharist.

What was involved in this right temper of mind? Gore claimed that in the Bible men approached God as One to be worshipped and served, and not as a subject of intellectual definition; and also as One who had provided a real revelation of Himself and of His purposes for mankind. The human spirit which responded to this gracious divine act was one which was essentially practical and devotional. The revelation of God was by no means given simply to satisfy man's intellectual curiosity. The Gospel was given to save and redeem him; and just as it was this practical and devotional spirit which controlled the whole account of God's revelation of Himself in the Bible, so Gore believed that the same spirit controlled the early Church's approach to the Eucharist and should control ours today. We should approach it, not so much as a subject of precise intellectual definition, but as the divine help afforded us for union with God in Christ by His Spirit. ⁽¹⁾

Inevitably this view was open to criticism. The doctrine of the Eucharist in the early Church was undeveloped: and simply to remain content with this situation would leave the lines of Catholic belief permanently hazy and dim. But Gore had his reply. It was not that he disapproved of any intellectual consideration of the Eucharist: indeed, he applied himself to such consideration in more than one of his books. But he believed that there was a danger to be avoided at all costs. "There is a kind of clearness of statement which suits material objects but which simply does not apply to spiritual things, and it is plain that such clearness is, both in the Bible and in the Fathers, avoided as a danger. Nothing is in fact more striking than the constant anxiety of the Fathers to make men feel that human language can but dimly adumbrate, and not fully or precisely define, divine mysteries. They continually appear to shrink from being too clear-cut in their explanations. In our days we seem greatly to need the reminder of Hooker (applicable to other parts of the revealed truth besides the Incarnation) that 'because this

(1) For all this see C. Gore, *The Body of Christ* (3rd edition) 1902, esp. pp. 217f also *The Holy Communion*, 1928, pp. 4-6.

divine mystery is more true than plain, divers having framed the same to their own conceits or fancies are found in their expositions thereof more plain than true' . . . It is shallow rationalism and intellectual indolence, rather than the simple faith of the poor (or poor in spirit), which crave for clearness of statement beyond the measure allowed for us who 'see through a glass, darkly'; and the craving must be gratified only with great reserves". (1) Gore therefore pleaded for a measure of healthy agnosticism about questions which were exciting a great deal of fury, were really quite secondary, and perhaps did not admit of any certain answer. At the same time he believed that the early Church could also give valuable guidance as to the form the eucharistic rite should take: and the points he made were remarkably interesting and even prophetic, when considered in the light of liturgical studies during the past sixty years.

It is also interesting to notice in passing that this appeal to the early Church, with its lack of precise formulae, was echoed a short while ago by Professor Hans Küng, in his book *The Living Church* when he suggested that a rite modelled on the rite of the Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus, the earliest known form, would be far more intelligible and meaningful than the existing rite, and would make a much greater impact on the worshipping Church. (2)

This problem of imprecision—we might at times call it studied ambiguity—is certainly important in the Church of England, which is now engaged in liturgical revision and experiment. The limits of the Church of England are wide—indeed so wide that I have heard a Free Church leader say that in many respects one might include almost the whole of Nonconformity between its two extremes. This Anglican comprehensiveness has been described as a synthesis rather than a compromise, a uniting of opposites rather than a balancing of opinions. So, at one extreme, we have those who take their stand on the Reformation, accepting a belief in the presence of Christ in the eucharistic rite as a whole, but not accepting a particular presence tied to the elements, and not accepting any conception of sacrifice other than that of their own selves. At the other extreme we have those who believe in an objective real presence of Christ in the elements and in a propitiatory sacrifice for the living and the departed. For all these people and for all others with various intervening shades of belief, the Book of Common Prayer

(1) *The Body of Christ* (3rd edition), pp. 155-6.

(2) H. Küng, *The Living Church*, 1962, p. 189.

provides the official rite. Some are content to use it ; others modify it. But if a new rite is to be created which takes account of the theological and liturgical insights of our time, is relevant to the conditions and needs of the world in which we live, and also commands general acceptance by the Church of England as a whole, it must be on the lines which Gore, Jungmann and others have suggested.

There is, however, another problem involved—perhaps not entirely peculiar to the Church of England ; but the Anglican situation serves to highlight it. Liturgical history teaches us that the worshipping community is a conservative community. This conservatism serves as an effective brake on the demands for change and reform, and in the past has sometimes left the Church with remarkable anomalies. It is, however, by no means a bad thing ; for it provides a safeguard against cults of the passing moment and is instrumental in preserving well-trying and traditional phrases and forms of prayer. A revised rite completely shorn of familiar language would cause distress and exasperation and would certainly stand little chance of general acceptance. This conservatism, however, presents a problem in England which is not experienced in other parts of the Anglican Communion. It is something of a tragedy that there has been no official revision of the Book of Common Prayer for three hundred years ; for many people have tended to place it on a false pedestal and regard it in its present form as a permanent element in the life of the Church.

The Prayer Book contains the forms by which the Church of England approaches God and expresses its various relationships with what is eternal. As such it is an instrument ; and to talk of “ Prayer Book religion ” is to put the cart before the horse. It is not for the living and growing soul of the Church to keep close to a static Prayer Book, but for the Prayer Book to keep close to the living and growing soul of the Church. It is foolish to equate the Bible with the Prayer Book : the one enshrines God’s revelation in history, the other is but a part of the domestic apparatus of the household of faith. The body is more than the raiment, and so is living religion more than the forms in which it is expressed.

These forms must change. St Thomas à Kempis has told us that institutional religion has two eyes—one which looks on Time and one which looks on Eternity. We have the association of the unchanging Majesty of God with the changing insights and desires of men. We can rightly sing

the *Sanctus* and the *Gloria* with the early Church ; we can continue to do what Our Lord commanded in remembrance of Him ; but at the same time we must bring our current problems, institutions and activities within the sphere of divine action. One of the many reasons why efforts at revision in England between 1906 and 1928 failed was the inability of so many people to regard the Prayer Book as an instrument which could be subjected quite legitimately to periodic change. People tended to regard a revision as something which should last for a very long time—perhaps for a century or even more. What we want to do—and it is not entirely easy—is to create an attitude of mind in the Church which is prepared to accept the fact that liturgical reform is not some rare phenomenon which might or might not appear during one's own lifetime, but is an element which is always likely to be present in one field or another in the life of a Church which is really dynamic. As such, there will be the inevitable tension between it and the innate conservatism of the worshipper ; but it is a tension which can be healthy and productive of good results, and can be a valuable safeguard against change simply for the sake of change.

Finally, let us consider another fundamental question which affects us all. What are we to do about the language of worship ? Are we to adopt the principle whereby our approach to God is permanently couched in the language of the Tudors and the Stuarts ? Must God always be addressed as *Thou* ? Or should we really be up-to-date, expressing our forms of worship in terms so contemporary, so simple and so clear, that they are intelligible to all and sundry ?

Now it is interesting to note the reactions of the Roman Catholic Church on this subject. The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, which came into force on the 16th February 1964, provides in quite a revolutionary way for the use of the vernacular to heighten lay understanding of and participation in worship : and some translations, prepared and approved by local ecclesiastical authorities, are already in use. This question has exercised English Roman Catholics to a considerable degree. A small minority would be prepared to be thoroughly radical and produce services in contemporary English. But the majority are more cautious. Faced with a situation of which they admit frankly they have no experience, they have shown not only a remarkable readiness to seek advice from those who *have* experience of the vernacular, but they have indicated their preference for a traditional approach ; and in drafts and experiments they

have been content to borrow extensively from the Book of Common Prayer.

Now we speak of a rite being intelligible. But intelligible to whom? To the least intelligible of our people? Let us consider the Lord's Prayer. Its style and language is by no means contemporary and the meaning of some of its phrases is far from being simple and straightforward: yet our conservative instinct and our common sense warn us to leave such a time-honoured prayer as it is. The fact that its meaning is not entirely crystal-clear may well be not a disadvantage but an asset, for it will provide an opportunity for instruction. Liturgy is something which will always need explanation, and all the modernization and simplification in the world will not remove the need for it.

Furthermore the plea for intelligibility often loses sight of the function of language. We are beset today by the idea of communication: yet communication is not the sole function of language—particularly in worship. Language is not simply a code to facilitate intercourse between human beings; it is also a means of expression. It serves not only to communicate thoughts but it makes possible thoughts which could not exist without it. In the relations of man with man, communication is all important and we strive for intelligibility; but in the relation of man with God, the dominant element is not so much communication as expression: where the divine mysteries are concerned, "human language can but dimly adumbrate and not fully or precisely define".

There has, moreover, been an interesting point about the history of the language of worship. It has always remained remarkably aloof from current speech—and this phenomenon is not peculiar to the Christian religion. The language of the Greek epic, for example, was not a spoken language. It was a stylized language, which went on being used by poets for centuries, unlike the language of everyday life. Every generation steeped itself in this idiom and so preserved a great artistic form. The same phenomenon is peculiar to the language of liturgy. Its vocabulary tends to be dissociated from that of colloquial speech. Contact with God draws man out of his ordinary life, and this is reflected in the language he uses. A vocabulary peculiar to worship grows up and defies the changes in the world around it; and we find expressed, even in the earliest Christian prayers, a desire for something different from ordinary spoken language, both in style and expression. There is a conscious striving after hieratic language.

When we turn to prayer forms in English, it is not therefore surprising that we should find the same phenomenon occurring, with the style and the vocabulary of the first vernacular Prayer Book tending to remain. Here we are indebted to the genius of Cranmer, who could write in simple and restrained language. The Latin collect, for example, is short and austere, expressing with great force and economy the deepest aspirations of the worshipper's heart. Translation was a difficult and dangerous task to undertake ; and here, for the most part, Cranmer's work was superlative. Think, for example, of the Collect for the nineteenth Sunday after Trinity :

“ O God, forasmuch as without thee we are not able to please thee ; Mercifully grant that thy Holy Spirit may in all things direct and rule our hearts ; through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

It is simple, superb, and timeless. Cranmer's liturgical writing has never been equalled in this country, save possibly by Bishop John Cosin : and certainly no-one in modern times has given any indication of being a worthy successor. We shall be wise to rely on the devotional language of our present Prayer Book as a quarry for material, bearing in mind certain principles.

1. Cranmer was a master of the art of classical rhetoric. This has become part and parcel of our unique English liturgical style and vocabulary. It is all there—alliteration, assonance, chiasmus, climax, anaphora, parallelism, asyndeton and inversion—and it must receive serious consideration in future liturgical writing.

2. The aim should be directness and simplicity. By all means use some archaisms if they are there, ready made. But the deliberate use of obsolete words or phrases for their own sakes would only result in a third-rate, thoroughly uninspired imitation of the Prayer Book.

3. We should aim therefore at a style and language which is simple and restrained ; it will be an English which will not strike us as unduly quaint or old-fashioned, but it will not be “ modern ” or colloquial. We might describe it as grave and formal English, and I think we should be wise to retain our “ Thou's ” and “ Thy's ”. If we are to retain them in the Lord's Prayer, it would be unwise to reject them elsewhere. Moreover, it does indicate our acknowledgement of the “ otherness ” of God ; and I personally would find it almost repugnant to address Him in any other way.

Something would go wrong with my relationship with Him if I were to address Him as I would any other individual.

But it is high time for me to draw to a close. I hope that I have indicated some of the exciting prospects which liturgical revision holds out for us. Problems inevitably abound ; but if they are approached with wisdom, tolerance, and charity, the contribution which the liturgist can make to Christian unity can be of tremendous importance. Let me conclude by referring to the comments of two notable but very different people.

The first is to emphasize what the present Archbishop of Canterbury said so ably some years ago, in his book *The Gospel and the Catholic Church*, about the fundamental essentials in the Eucharist which would secure general acceptance. Despite differences, it is as possible to speak of "the Liturgy" underlying its many presentations as it is to speak of "the Gospel" underlying the four Gospels. In all there is thanksgiving ; in all there is commemoration ; in all there is Christ giving Himself in sacrifice ; and in all there is the note of mystery, since Christ is present to feed his people. This presence of Christ is not the result of the individual's faith, but of Christ's faithfulness. It is a presence which faith may receive and appropriate ; it is likewise a presence which un-faith may reject. The gift is *there*, by Christ's act in His Church. The early Church was content to hold several explanations of this mystery within its tolerant embrace. ⁽¹⁾ We should not be lacking in wisdom if we were willing to do likewise.

Secondly, I should like to quote some words of Dr Darwell Stone, who, though Anglo-Catholic controversialist though he could be, nevertheless displayed abounding courtesy and charity. Here is the closing passage in his monumental *History of the Doctrine of the Eucharist* :

"There is great need of a generous temper and an ungrudging way of viewing the opinions and expressions which are least congenial. Rough methods of controversy have done little to promote real understanding of the questions with which they have dealt . . . Whole series of volumes of controversial theology leave the student wondering over the want of insight and imagination and candour and justice which led to their being penned . . . The rejection of a particular method of the presence of Christ has too often been understood as if it were the rejection of the presence of Christ altogether. The separation of His special presence

(1) A. M. Ramsay, *The Gospel and the Catholic Church*, 1936 pp. 110-1.

from the elements has been too often thought to mean the assertion of His absence from the rite. The repudiation of particular notions of sacrifice has often been regarded as the denial of sacrifice in any true sense. Because many have avowed less than others would desire, they have often been supposed to acknowledge nothing at all . . . ”

“ It is a reasonable conclusion that the official language and the official ceremonial of great Christian bodies call for a liberal and a considerate interpretation. The practical ecclesiastic no less than the theological student will do well to pause before he binds any such language or any such ceremonial to the narrowest interpretation of which it is capable, and to be quite sure of his ground before he says that a document or an action has closed a door. In the mystery of the Eucharist, where human thought is so apt to go astray, and human language is so inadequate to express even human thought, the interpreter will be most likely to be right who is patient of a wide latitude of interpretation and gentle towards what seem to him offending expressions . . . Among all sections of Christians there is need of the remembrance that it is the positive and not the negative, the devotion and not the denunciation which helps the soul ”. ⁽¹⁾

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(1) Darwell Stone, *A History of the Doctrine of the Eucharist*, 1909, vol. 2, pp. 650-1.