

THE WORD AT HOLY COMMUNION

An outline for a short address on an occasion when children are present.
(Ref. II Kings 4, 1-7)

"What does it mean?" said the old lady. "It's a sign that God loves you," they told her. "A sign? Well, it certainly works. "She went back into the house where her sons were waiting for their meal. A man she didn't know had come to her when she was in despair over a debt. She knew she could never pay it - she was left alone after her husband died, with the two boys - and now they had threatened to take them away from her 'to work off the money'. That would be the end. Just then, the man came and seemed to have a gift of oil : she had to beg and borrow jars from all her neighbours. They all had plenty of empty jars around her home. When they were filled, there was enough to clear the debt - and the man left. Yes, it had to mean that God loved her. God had saved her life, and everything about it.

What does it mean for people coming out of this old church today, after a 'Supper' where we take so little off the plate, from the cups. The minister says, "It's a sign that God loves you". Ask the people and see if they think it works. Some will say that they had debts that they could never 'forgive' for themselves. Some were under threat. All will say they have found a gift of life quite beyond their own resources, a feeling of being treated generously. But more than that: one says, "You know, you want to go out and do something special for other people now - and you find you can, though you couldn't before. You don't have to go and pay them back in there. You suddenly feel free to spend yourself on others."

It's a sign that God loves us. It certainly works. It has Jesus as the man who comes; and saves life by giving life; and comes again.

A. W. M.

WASTING TIME WITH GOD.

"...for busy people time is often the most precious thing they have to give... We only deliberately waste time with those we love - it is the purest sign that we love someone if we choose to spend time idly in their presence when we could be doing something more "constructive". And so it is with prayer... It is the purest sign of our love for God that we are prepared to "waste" our time with him ; and it is only by wasting time in this way that we shall learn that it is not God who needs us but we who cannot live without him."

from 'Prayer for Pilgrims' by Sheila Cassidy (Fount Paperbacks: Collins £1.50)

CONGREGATIONAL RESPONSES

A PHILOSOPHICAL OVER-VIEW

Over the past three years we have witnessed the proliferation of Eucharistic Rites incorporating congregational responses. This is, of course, most obvious in the Reformed Churches of Britain. The Alternative Services Book has simplified and clarified responses for congregations in the Church of England. Strangely, one controversy which raged last year in certain circles involved the lack of responses in the services of the Iona Community.

The desire has been to increase the participation of the congregations in the significant services of the church. It is fairly obvious that this desire in the case of the Church of Scotland has often been frustrated, or ignored, but it is there.

We are asking what is the amount of freedom of expression in their responses. It is not the meaning of the responses in isolation that matter, but their contextual meaning. "Meaning is more than a matter of intention - it is also a matter of convention".¹ We wish to argue that, whilst participation in the Reformed Churches has increased, the clergy have in response to this adopted a more priestly function. It is for the reader to make a value judgement as to whether this movement is good or bad.

The problem is framed in terms of the Canon. It appears plausible to argue that a Eucharistic Rite, punctuated by responses in the reformed tradition requires a "Canon" just as in other traditions there is a Canon for the Anaphora. As freedom grows in the Roman Church in the extension of its Canon, the nature of freedom in the reformed tradition is changing.

A definition of priestly function will be needed as a guideline.

- a) That he is offering prayer on behalf of others. He is in a unique position and, whilst participation has increased, so has the emphasis on his uniqueness.
- b) We take ordination for granted and the setting aside of the celebrant for the ministry of Word and Sacrament. Ordination is recognition by the community of the celebrant being set apart.
- c) We assume that the celebrant is theologically informed.

If the Rite is to be shared there must be criteria laid down for the sharing and it is with regard to the priestly function that we find the structure under which sharing may take place.

For the purposes of this article we shall take the Eucharistic Rite of the United Reformed Church in A Book of Services. The congregational responses which concern us are Sursum Corda, the Sanctus, The Lord's Prayer, The Acclamation, and, we really ought to add, Agnus Dei. Obviously the first difference we note is that the words of the responses are biblically based. Secondly, they appear at strategic moments in the Eucharistic Rite, and, thirdly, they "punctuate" the flow of the Eucharistic Prayer. The Sanctus, for example, is the culmination of the adoration and thanksgiving for creation and the on-going creative activity of God before the remembrance of Christ.

The Biblical tradition is of interest if it is subjected to the unique analysis of Religious Language. We find, for example, they are expressive of one or more types of language which are outlined by John Macquarrie. These include myth, symbolism, and the use of analogies. These categories aforementioned are understood in the context of the analysis by a writer who expounds existentialist theology whilst trying to draw together in 'marriage' logical positivism and existential use of language: "... there are areas where logical analysis and existential analysis converge and where each of these can help from the other".²

Taking the Acclamation alone, let us pursue the analysis. In response to the celebrant saying, "Let us praise the Lord", the congregation responds -

"Christ has died,
Christ is risen,
In Christ shall all be made alive".

This acclamation is succinct and seems to be absolutely free of ambiguities. However, the interesting thing is that this is not so. There are many views of the resurrection, and nature of Christ's death, and certainly different interpretations of his coming again. Yet this Acclamation can be used by a "broad church", to use a much vaunted political phrase. It is known that some celebrants, and some communicants, have doubts about the resurrection, and certainly of the second coming, but in good faith this Acclamation poses no problems.

To examine how this comes about we must return to the different types of Religious Language. It is insufficient to say that they are mythological. Macquarrie's argument must be pursued. The early Wittgenstein analysed language very much in terms of pictures and claimed that the clarity of the picture lay in man's ability to name the symbols, i.e., the constituent words. The later Wittgenstein was less nominalist but still maintained that Religious Language was hard to comprehend because there was no neat way in which the words could be named.

Wittgenstein would argue that these sentences, and the other responses mentioned, are picturesque in nature, and, because of this cannot be contradicted. In an interesting compilation on "Religious Belief", he says of the word "God" amongst the earliest learnt - pictures and catechisms, etc. But not the same consequences as with pictures of aunts. I wasn't shown (that which the picture pictured)."

He then argues that God must be described in pictures and makes rather heavy weather of comparing those pictures of religious art with those of Michelangelo. The passage is very far from his best writing, but he is reflecting the general ethos of the Vienna Circle. In fact, A.J. Ayer's principle of verification, is much more pointed. However, granted that we have an image, it is one built up by our upbringing and the various influences on our lives.

Your pictures may not be my pictures. And in the same compilation Wittgenstein is dismissive of the sense of religious discourse. He casts doubts on whether sensible debate can be had about God. It is obvious that this is an extreme view and theologians who are interested in the linguistics of theology show that he is manifestly wrong. The trouble is that we are dealing, not with theology, but with prayer, and the expressive nature of the Acclamation is emotional, full of praise, and a high point in a service. It is a "speech act", not an argument.

In paragraph 432 of Philosophical Investigation Wittgenstein asks a series of questions as a result of a statement. "Every sign by itself seems dead. What gives it life? - In use it is alive. Is life breathed into it there? - Or is the use its life?". The position in prayer gives it its life and the difficulty in analysing it creates the problems. Macquarrie is now trying to broaden linguistic analysis with the marriage aforementioned, although he more often quotes the Tractatus.⁵

Congregational responses are acts of great significance, but they are acts controlled by the celebrant: tone of voice, dramatic silences, emotional involvement, all bring life to our response. Many of us know the truth of Wittgenstein's statement when we repeat the Sanctus and the Agnes Dei with no response from the congregation.

The purpose is to elucidate God's purpose in creation, to explain Christ's life in remembrance, to invoke the Holy Spirit, and to consecrate the elements. It is in largely symbolic language and it is drawn out of one's theological understanding and distilled. Existentially it is perceived in a different manner from the responses a) by the celebrant who must have worked through every statement he is making, and b) by the congregation who may or may not be fully receptive of the prayer, and c) in the way it has a unity which is not found in the short responses which do not stand on their own.

The Latin Mass may not have been understood, but it was meaningful and the congregational responses in Latin, even to an illiterate congregation, were full of meaning. This extreme example illustrates the fundamental difference between an analytical understanding and an existential understanding.

How do we "liberate" congregations from the bondage of restricted responses? This is the useful question that should be asked as a result of this impractical article. To a certain extent they are liberated by a freedom of interpretation, but that is insufficient. What we require is a theological awareness of the whole prayer.

I return to the question of the services in Iona Abbey because they illustrate the point about liberation. The warden decided to alter some of the responses and to withdraw some of the familiar ones. Research rather defeated any criticism of the warden. However, what was significant was that informed lay people and clerics were questioning whether, in fact, the Eucharist had a prayer of consecration. Careful analysis showed that the elements were properly consecrated, but it also showed that congregations required the punctuation of familiar responses to understand the Eucharistic Prayer.

The Sanctus was most missed, but strangely, people appeared to point to the absence of the Acclamation as a sign that there was a lack of consecration. Nowhere has it been suggested that the Acclamation is part of this prayer, but in the Book of Services it comes after distribution. This surely points to a disturbing trend in people's capacity to analyse prayer and the necessity for them to indulge in a word-game which is familiar both in content and in placing.

Congregational responses must become more than a vehicle of participation, and also must become integrated with the prayerful words of the celebrant to make a unity. The solution lies in creating understanding and education alone will not achieve it.

The laity must be trained to understand the responses in the context of the prayer and not to isolate them by placing them in an artificial context. The question is one of life and here we refer back to Wittgenstein - "A response must come alive in its use and we must not make its use its life". 6

It may fall hard on Presbyterian ears, but the way to achieve awareness is through special use of the Eucharist. We have too long been afraid of the idea of special masses in the Roman Rite. We do not want Eucharists for every occasion, or a substitution for intercession. A mass for Chilean refugees, for instance, is indeed very meaningful, but it is too far from our tradition, but not for Eucharists for peace, or to go with wedding services. A communion at a funeral can be very appropriate at times. A communion for peace is being actively developed at the moment. Let us see more of this happening so that people may understand thanksgiving for the commission of Christ and in the gifts of God. And if they attract special congregations - so be it. The Church of Scotland must free itself from closed communions, statistics and communion cards. Communion tokens belong only to museums and we must trust our congregations to present their needs to the ministers. If he has a priestly function it is not to recite ossified words from Books of Common Order, but to reflect the awareness of his congregation.

If concerns for the congregation are present in the Eucharistic Prayer, responses take on a depth of meaning and enthusiasm which are otherwise lacking.

Lastly, are there any signs of hope? There are now many prayers published in modern language. From my bookshelf I can only quote and comment from the third prayer in A Book of Services - one section of the Eucharistic Prayer :-

We beseech you
 send among us your Holy Spirit
 and give a new face
 to this earth that is dear to us.
 Let there be peace
 wherever people live,
 the peace that we cannot make ourselves
 and that is more powerful than all violence,
 your peace like a bond,
 a new covenant between us all,
 the power of Jesus Christ
 here among us.

Would that the issues raised in that one section were to become live, interesting issues in response to the needs of people. In that one section we have references to environment, to peace, the inner peace, to power and violence. Why do we have to condense them so much that the section is said before the congregation has had time to reflect on their depth?

Notes

1. Searle, J. "What is a Speech Act" Language and Social Context P.145
 Ed. by Pier Paolo Giglioli Penguin, London 1972
2. Macquarrie, J. God-Talk P.122 S.C.M. Press, London, 1967
3. Wittgenstein, L. Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief. Ed. by Cyril Barrett. Basil Blackwell, Oxford. 1970
4. Ayer, A.J. Language, Truth and Logic Pelican Ed., London, 1936
5. Macquarrie, J. Ibid. P. 105
6. Wittgenstein, L. Philosophical Investigations Oxford, 1958 3rd Ed. Blackwell

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ON PREACHING

"We must all preach to our age, but woe to us if it is our age we preach, and only hold up the mirror to the time. Biblical preaching preaches the Gospel and uses the Bible, it does not preach the Bible and use the Gospel. The preacher is not there to astonish people with the unheard of ; he is there to revive in them what they have long heard.

P. T. Forsyth in 'Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind'.

REVIEWS

Cheslyn Jones, Geoffrey Wainwright, Edward Yarnold (eds):
The Study of Liturgy - London, S P C K 1978
 xxvii + 532 + Indexes, limp £8.50

W. K. Lowther Clarke (ed): Liturgy and Worship - London, S P C K
 (12th impression) 1981 pp 858 + index £15