

LITURGICAL TEXTS: TECHNIQUES OF DELIVERY

Whilst most members of the Society will make use of traditional set prayer at some point in the service, I wonder if we have taken much thought as to the technique of reading liturgical texts.

Bonhoeffer in "Life Together" makes a very telling point about the reading of Scripture in a passage which is worth reproducing here.

"It may be taken as a rule for the right reading of the Scriptures that the reader should never identify himself with the person who is speaking in the Bible. It is not that I am angered, but God; it is not I giving consolation, but God; it is not I admonishing, but God admonishing in the Scriptures. I shall be able, of course, to express the fact that it is God who is angered, who is consoling and admonishing, not by indifferent monotony, but only with inmost concern and rapport, as one who knows that he himself is being addressed. It will make all the difference between right and wrong reading of Scriptures if I do not identify myself with God but quite simply serve him. Otherwise I will become rhetorical, emotional, sentimental, or coercive and imperative; that is, I will be directing the listeners' attention to myself instead of to the Word. But this is to commit the worst of sins in presenting the Scriptures.

If we may illustrate by an example in another sphere, we might say that the situation of the reader of Scripture is probably closest to that in which I read to others a letter from a friend. I would not read that letter as though I had written it myself".

I believe that in a similar way it behoves us to consider carefully the manner in which we use set prayer.

Such prayers should not be read as if they were our own. Is there still sometimes a lingering guilt complex which makes us suggest to the congregation, "Listen to this - I have been diligent - I have brought you this prayer and I'm really not just reading it"? If we could finally rid ourselves of the remaining traces of puritan prejudice in this regard would we not find a great relief not only for ourselves but for the worshippers? For the value of such prayer is that at this point in the service we are all liberated from the striving of the minister and can rest upon the prayer of the Church. Far from trying to hide the fact, we should allow the worshippers to recognise that after a section of free or constructed prayer we are now letting our intent be summed up in a traditional given prayer.

Indeed, if people can recognise such prayers by the manner of their delivery, not only is their appreciation of the varied elements of worship enriched but they are more ready to recognise and appropriate these texts as they recur.

As far as delivery itself is concerned, Church of Scotland ministers are not renowned for their skill in presenting an office or set liturgy. I have often felt uncomfortable when a Church of Scotland minister leads an office, yet the same texts come easily and helpfully from Anglican or Roman lips. It has nothing to do with accent although Cranmer's English to an Oxbridge tone may initially cause less surprise than

when articulated in Upper Clydesdale. That is purely a matter of conditioning, like strawberries with cream.

No, much more important than accent are rhythm and that nicely disinterested delivery which says, "I did not compose this; I am leading you as we pray it". We should not be seeking to inject meaning into the prayer. If it is a good prayer it will do its work despite us and we are more likely to damage its flow by trying to emphasise certain clauses or by drawing attention to our own voice and its inflections.

I also believe that we tend to say many things much too slowly. There are appropriate points for meditative prayers, for biddings with silence and so on; but I believe we take the life right out of collects, the Lord's Prayer, the people's acclamations at the eucharist and other texts which we may say together when we allow them to be dragged out. It may seem to us that some Roman congregations rattle through texts in an unseemly fashion, but perhaps there is a happy medium if we learn from them that a prayer is effective by the offering and not only if we pretend that we have never seen it before. I have noticed in my own congregation, where the "Frost" psalter has been in use for three or four years, a gradual development of rhythm and quickening of pace in reading which are more and more delivering us from ourselves and allowing the psalms to do their work.

Colin R Williamson
Aberdalgie

CAP THIS

At the end of each session the Leith Association of Bowlers join together for their annual evening service in one of the Leith churches. In 1977 the service was held in North Leith. The then Minister began the service with "Let us worship God. Hymn number 323 to the tune Irish - Thy Kingdom come! on bended knee".

D A Stewart