

SO MUCH GARBAGE OR GOD'S IS THE KINGDOM, ... THE POWER AND THE GLORY....

This title was used at a theme-celebration of the Eucharist at the Queen's College, Birmingham, on the evening of 6 March 1985. 'So much garbage' is a phrase from one of the readings used in the course of worship (1). The theme itself was suggested by the gospel for the day in the eucharistic lectionary of the Alternative Service Book 1980 (2), the story of a squabble about power among the disciples even when Calvary was looming on the horizon. Those responsible for worship that evening decided to explore in word and symbol some of those claims to power that we, as Christians and as men and women in the world, attempt to make, as well as a presentation of the possible misuse of power. That presentation was to be balanced by the picture of the power of God portrayed in the humiliation and death of Jesus, a fate referred to in the opening verses of the gospel reading.

Four areas of power were chosen for consideration, each potentially contentious and each leading to tension (sometimes downright anger) within the organising group. The first area chosen related to the State - national(-ist); the second to education; the third to the power of people over other people, whether in terms of race or sex; the fourth to the Church. Each area was chosen for its 'closeness to home'.

The celebration was 'in the round', two circles of chairs centred on a traditionally vested (Anglican) altar, two candles to one side of the table (as at the High Kirk in Edinburgh) and a large silver chalice placed upon it (the gospel refers to the 'cup of suffering'); in the chancel where the altar-table would normally have stood were placed three empty thrones (the reading is the request that the sons of Zebedee should sit by Jesus in the Kingdom). The Call to Worship was given by the presiding Minister, dressed in cassock and stole, outwith the circle - a reading of the first three verses of the gospel. This was followed by invocation of the Spirit in the words of the Veni Creator. The remainder of the gospel reading followed, read by a number of voices.

Four images of power were intimated. To open the presentation, 'Land of hope and glory' was played over the sound system, wakening the whole gamut of nationalistic feeling; and from the doors of the chapel come one of the members of the group, formerly in military service, service dress cap in hand; this he placed on the altar and, taking one step back, bowed in best military style. Then, mirroring the candles on the other side, two empty explosive shells were placed on the table too.

Silence was kept for a space to let the incongruity of these symbols speak.

The second image was a reading from the College's Who's Who of the entries of those responsible for the worship; it should be said at this point that the graduates in the group wore gown and hood. The entries for graduates were notably longer than those for others (needless to say the Presiding Minister had the longest entry!); the final entry simply stated that the person was the fiancée of another student. The list was placed on the table. Again silence.

The third image was presented in the form of a conversation between two persons seated on opposite sides of the circle, one formerly highly placed within the adult education service for Birmingham. The issue-- why there were so few women in the top positions in local education, considering that they occupy some 60% of the teaching force. Lack of capability did not seem a realistic reason. The 'scripts' for the conversation, including a number of disturbing statistics, were placed either side of the altar. Again silence.

The final image was again simple. The opening of Monteverdi's 1610 Vespers was played, during which a bishop's mitre was placed on the table, then a copy of the Methodist Church's 'Constitutional Practice and Discipline', and finally a Roman collar with preaching bands. The first two items aroused a certain amusement which was notably lacking when the third appeared. Again silence. This 'Ministry of the Word' was drawn to a close by a 'comment by S Paul' on the merits of earthly power and achievement when all we have to boast of is the Lord Jesus, in whose death the power of God is revealed (3); the reading included that phrase 'so much garbage', at which point its significance as title was seen.

The response to the Word was in terms of prayer for pardon and peace, opening with the hymn 'Lord Jesus, think on me and purge away my sin'. Sorrow for sin was expressed in litany form, pointing to abuses of power in which we, individually and corporately, have from time to time engaged - trust in the organisation and in rules; aiming to be served rather than to serve; looking at paperachievements rather than people; forgetting that in Christ is neither male nor female, Jew or Greek; failing to share the resources of the world. Each of the four images received attention in four petitions. At the end of each section of penitence, marked by the verse 'let us pray to the Lord' and its response 'Lord, have mercy', the symbols used to indicate possible misuse of power were removed (even the minister's cassock and stole) and placed before the empty thrones, symbolising (a) their subjection to the judgement of God, and (b), by their removal from altar and person, the absolution of God. By the end of the Litany of Penitence everything was removed from the altar save the altar-frontal; this too was removed to reveal a bare kitchen table. The

exchange of the Sign of Peace was seen as the people's acceptance of God's forgiveness, and its seal. Prayer for the Church and the world drew this section to a close.

With nothing of the earthly glory or power remaining, the ministry of the Supper opened, the presiding Minister seated at the table. A loaf and bottle of wine were placed before him together with pottery vessels. The Eucharistic Prayer, specially prepared for the service, was simple, taking seriously the assertion that eucharist is made by thanksgiving; modelled on a prayer by Huub Oosterhuis (4) it contains no petitions at all, although it does contain all that might seem historically necessary or desirable in such a prayer in the mode of praise. The text of the prayer is reproduced below (5). The warrant-model for the Institution Narrative was chosen to emphasise that the concern of the Great Prayer is praise not history. The bread was broken in silence, likewise the wine poured out. The Holy Gifts were shared, being passed from hand to hand, and removed at once to the vestry when all had received. The Service ended simply, with the Lord's Prayer, hymn, and brief dismissal; the minister's introduction to the Lord's Prayer was a clear call for the definitive manifestation of the power of God in the Kingdom (cf 5 below).

Overall the act of worship conformed very closely and deliberately to the pattern suggested by the Lima Report of the World Council of Churches (6). It was, however, quite novel in its presentation of the Word more by inference/image than by words, and also in that the assertion so frequently made that the eucharist is effected by thanksgiving was taken so seriously as to exclude all petitions from the Great Prayer. It is offered as as one experiment in presenting the gospel in a symbolic and liturgical way, and in such a way that the obvious stress is on liturgy as holistic activity rather than mere assent to cerebral notions.

1 Philipians 3.8 in the NEB translation

2 Matthew 20.17-28

3 Philipians 3.4b-11

4 To be found in the 'Book of Services' of the United Reformed Church as the third Eucharistic Prayer (p34). S Andrew Press 1980

5 The Lord be with you.

And also with you.

Hear the story of the institution of this holy supper.

Our Lord Jesus Christ,

before he was handed over to suffering and death,

sat at table with his disciples.

He took bread and gave thanks.

He broke the bread and give it to them, saying:

Take, eat; this is my body which will be broken for you.

And he took the cup after supper, saying:

Take this, all of you, and drink from it;
this is my blood which will be poured out for you,
sign of the covenant between God and his people,
sign of the forgiveness of sin.
Do this and know that I am with you always.

And so, in obedience to the will of Jesus, and in memory of him,
we take this bread and this cup for this holy use and mystery
giving thanks to God the Father.

- Lift up your hearts.

We lift them to the Lord.

- Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

It is right to give him thanks and praise.

We give you thanks, Lord,
that you are not ashamed to be called our God.
that you know us each by name,
that you hold the world in your hands.

Blessed are you, Creator of all,
for this world and for life;
for the light of our eyes,
for the air we breathe.

Blessed are you, the Father of Jesus,
whom you sent to serve us and to call us to service,
whom you sent to bring your kingdom to the poor,
redemption to the captive,
and joy to those who were cast down.

Blessed are you for Jesus
in whom our life and death have been fulfilled.

Blessed are you for this mystery of faith
in which we remember the death he endured and the life he restored;
blessed are you, for he is at your right hand to plead for us
and to do justice for the living and the dead
on the day you have appointed.

Blessed are you for the Spirit which he sent
to reveal his life and presence with us now,
the life which brings us peace,
peace that we cannot make ourselves,

peace that is more powerful than violence,
your peace, like a bond,
a new covenant between us all,
the power of the crucified and risen Christ standing among us.

Through him,
and in the power of the Spirit,
we offer you our praises, heavenly Father,
and with all your people
we proclaim your great and glorious name,
for ever praising you
and singing:

Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power of might,
heaven and earth are full of your glory.
Hosanna in the highest.

Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.
Hosanna in the highest.

The bread is broken in silence.

The Holy Gifts are shared.

Let us pray for the coming of the kingdom
as Jesus taught us:
Our Father ...

6 Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry, WCC 1982 (p15)

R A Farrell

Queen's College, Birmingham