

**Nathan Mitchell:**  
***The Spirituality of Christian Worship***

A liturgical spirituality can emerge from the seeming chaos of current practices if we revise our understanding of worship and what it means to be spiritual persons.

**LITURGY AS GOD'S WORK**

During the 1960s, liturgical reformers frequently reminded us that since liturgy means "the work of the people," full, active, and conscious participation is essential. The principle is surely correct, and our previously inert congregations have begun to recognize and claim their proper role. But any principle, rigidly interpreted, may become an ideological weapon -- and this one is no exception. Active engagement in the church's worship certainly does not require that everyone belong to a liturgy-planning committee, nor does every parishioner need to volunteer as reader, commentator, or minister of Communion. The ideology of planning can, in fact, cause us to forget that in the final analysis worship is not something we do for God but something God does in and for us.

This last point deserves further comment. Despite its etymological derivation, liturgy is above all God's work, God's passionate activity on our behalf. Earliest Christianity -- as represented, for example, by Paul -- was convinced that in Jesus, God had done for us what we could never do for ourselves.<sup>(1)</sup> As Paul understood it, the problem was not God's anger toward us but our anger toward God. It was we who had become hostile, helpless, and impotent, and this vicious cycle alienated us from God and from one another. In the cross of Jesus, God acted to break the barriers of separation, to reconcile humankind, and to release us from the paralyzing hostility that bound us in a condition of "flesh," "law," and "sin." Freedom from all this was God's decisive ("eschatological") gift in Christ, and the Christian's life is nothing more or less than grateful response, thanksgiving. According to Paul, Christians do not need to barter with God, extracting divine reward for human virtue, because that makes God our debtor. So Paul's vision of ethical Christian conduct is based, not on bargaining with a petulant God, but on responsive gratitude to One who has acted decisively in our favor: "Rejoice in the Lord always .... Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God" (Phil. 4:4,6).

Paul's ethics color his perception of Christian worship as well. Not insignificantly, Paul insists that Jesus' death lies at the heart of baptism and Eucharist. Pauline Christology is Cross-centered, and although God acted to raise Jesus from death (see Rom. 1:3-4), resurrection remains a future reality for Christians.<sup>(2)</sup> Baptism thus plunges us into the death of Jesus (Rom. 6:3-4), while Eucharist proclaims that death until the Lord returns (1 Cor. 11:26). Paul reacted vigorously against those Corinthian enthusiasts who seemed to believe that Christians have already experienced a personal Easter. Christian life, Paul countered, is suspended "between the times" -- between God's decisive action in Christ and the consummation of that activity in the future

resurrection of Christians. We wait in hope, with the Spirit as "down payment" that guarantees the fulfillment of God's promise.

According to Paul, Christian life and worship are two sides of a coin. A single word summarizes the meaning of both: "thanksgiving" (Greek: *eucharistia*, "eucharist"). Worship is not an attempt to get God's attention; nor is it something we do for God; nor is it a form of brokering wherein debts are reckoned and payments made. Liturgy is God's work for and among us. The only liturgy that "counts" is the Cross, because there our freedom is fully and finally achieved -- not because we wanted it that way, but because God acted when we were utterly helpless to act. When Christians assemble to pray, hear the word, and break bread, they are not performing a cult but reacting gratefully to the liturgy which God has celebrated once and for all in Jesus' cross.

The first principle of a liturgical spirituality faithful to Paul's view of things is thus the recognition that worship is God's work, God's activity of reconciling humankind in Jesus' blood. If our liturgical activity obscures this fundamental fact, then it is a waste of time. Worship does not celebrate our ingenuity, still less our wisdom or virtue. It is a ritual reaction to God's supreme folly. For in Jesus, God is revealed as the One whose powerlessness subverts all human notions of salvation. The Cross reveals a God who acts in an un-God-like way through a broken body, the loss of a human life, and the painful collapse of a mission. This is the liturgy, one that smells of death and failure, torn hearts and wasted dreams, foolish wisdom and wise folly. To this liturgy all subsequent Christian worship attempts to react, however feebly.

But there is more. The liturgy which God celebrated in the cross of Christ was not one that took place in a secret corner of the universe, but in the rough-and-tumble textures of human history. Karl Rahner has written: "The world and its history are the terrible and sublime liturgy, breathing of death and sacrifice, which God celebrates and causes to be celebrated in and through human history in its freedom . . ." He continues by noting that "in the entire length and breadth of this immense history of birth and death . . . the true liturgy of the world is present -- present in such a way that the liturgy which the Son has brought to its absolute fulness on his Cross belongs intrinsically to it."<sup>(3)</sup> This liturgy of the world, of which Rahner writes so powerfully, belongs not to "sacred" times and places but to the entire expanse of human history, from the primitive campfires of our humanoid ancestors to the blazing revelations of Voyager II on its way through Saturn's rings. For at all times and places the world is permeated to its core by the graciousness of God.<sup>(4)</sup>

## **TESTAMENTS TO LITURGY OF LIFE**

The importance of Rahner's point cannot be emphasized too strongly. Even after two decades of liturgical reform, many of us still abide by a theological model that regards liturgy and sacrament as sacred precincts to which we may retire, momentarily, from the wearisomeness of "secular" life. There, in isolated splendor, we abandon a world devoid of grace and encounter the purity of God. This model forgets, however, that the God of Jesus is one with dirt under his fingernails, one who so implicated himself in our history that he became flesh. It forgets, too, that human persons are themselves the "place" where the world is "constantly and ceaselessly possessed by grace . . . constantly and ceaselessly sustained and moved by God's self-bestowal."<sup>(5)</sup>

Sacraments and worship are not glistening shrines that beckon us to withdraw from the world, but spattered landmarks built of human sweat, seed, meat, and eggs that point back to the world itself as the place where God loves to dwell. A sacrament, a liturgy, is but a small rough-hewn sign that the whole cosmos, with all its dizzying madness and unexpected grandeur, belongs to God. Never ends in themselves, Christian sacraments are tiny testaments to that larger liturgy of the world where men and women experience God's presence in the birth of a child, the death of a parent, the meeting of friends, the anxious trip to the hospital. In this liturgy of the world all biographies -- human and divine -- meet, clash, and are finally reconciled. This was, surely, what Gerard Manley Hopkins had in mind when he wrote that the world is "charged with the grandeur of God." God's largesse is discerned not in the carefully laundered images of official doctrine and cult but in the oozing of oil, the shuffling of feet, a bird's maternal brooding:

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.  
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;  
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil  
Crushed ....  
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;  
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;  
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell . . . .

And for all this, nature is never spent;  
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things; . . .  
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent  
World broods with warm breast and With ah! bright wings.[\(6\)](#)

This is not merely pie-eyed fantasy. Hopkins's poem touches the core of what Christians believe about the God uniquely revealed in Jesus and, indeed, in every human life. This God celebrates a liturgy that began in a garden, blazed in the fires of Sinai, exploded on Golgotha, howled in the unspeakable chambers of Auschwitz, cast unearthly light over Hiroshima, sank in the rice-paddies of Vietnam -- and continues even now. Throughout this cacophonous history of human goodness and greed, selflessness and stupidity, the liturgy of the world unfolds.

The second principle of a liturgical spirituality is, then, the recognition that worship does not create an "alternative world" to which we can retreat when ordinary life becomes intolerable. On the contrary, liturgy and sacrament are moments when we consciously recognize and ritually respond to the God who acts always and everywhere in the ruddy colors and ruinous catastrophes of this world. The drama of the liturgy is nothing more or less than the drama of human history, permeated by God's presence. One world, one history, one God who acts in them: this is what we confess and celebrate when we assemble for worship. When liturgy becomes a self-absorbed attempt at "religious behavior," or when it calls attention to itself as something "unworldly," it ceases to be worship and becomes an exercise in self-consciousness. Christian worship is inherently worldly. Its primary symbols are drawn from the messiest activities of human life: giving birth and dying, washing and smearing bodies with oil, eating and drinking, unburdening one's heart in the presence of another. All this is the septic stuff of the world's drama -- and the stuff of Christian liturgy as well.

## LITURGY FOR THE IMPURE

What prevents most people from developing a liturgical spirituality is thus not inattention to worship but inattention to human life in all its complex subtlety and convoluted texture. The life which liturgy offers is the one all of us live, but it takes a poet to perceive the wondrous epiphany in the ordinary human event. Poetry is above all a contemplative art, passionate to the core, and such contemplative passion is essential if one is to inspect closely what happens in life (and thus in liturgy). The American poet A.R. Ammons seems to have sensed this in a poem with the liturgical title "Hymn." In it, Ammons blends two images of contemplative hunger for the "real": the biologist's passion for a precise description of living things and the mystic's impulse to turn inward toward "You":

I know if I find you I will have to leave the earth  
and go on out  
over the sea marshes and the brant in bays  
and over the hills of tall hickory . . .  
and on up through the spheres of diminishing air  
past the blackset noctilucent clouds  
where one wants to stop and look ....

And I know if I find you I will have to stay with the earth  
inspecting with thin tools and ground eyes  
trusting the microvilli sporangia and simplest coelenterates  
and praying for a nerve cell  
with all the soul of my chemical reactions  
and going right on down where the eye sees only traces  
You are everywhere partial and entire  
You are on the inside of everything and on the outside . . . (7)

Almost flawlessly, Ammons's poem captures the sharp tension between yearning for a God who utterly transcends "the sea marshes . . . the hills of tall hickory" and looking for One who can be known only with the "thin tools and ground eyes" of this earth. There is no recipe for resolving this tension, but in the final line of the poem Ammons concludes that the One who is "on the inside and outside of everything" can be met only if the poet stays at home on earth. The numinous "You," object of the poet's search, is discovered not in some mystical fogbank shrouded in noctilucent clouds, but in the simplest realities of organic life -- coelenterates and sporangia, nerve cells and the body's chemistry. We must learn, Ammons insists, to trust the earth as primary revealer of the One who is "everywhere partial and entire."

Trusting the earth to tell us who God is requires both supreme attention and contemplative discipline. Nothing is more difficult or more rewarding. For the earth, its history and people, reveals its mysteries only in the ribald language of an "impure poetry." Earth's impure speech is the prime occasion for both the poet's insight and the worshiper's task. No other language is available -- for poetry or for worship -- than the utterances of a world smudged and worn by human contact. As the great Chilean poet Pablo Neruda once wrote in an essay on "Impure Poetry,"

it is well at certain hours of the day and night to look closely at the world of objects at rest. Wheels that have crossed long, dusty distances . . . barrels and baskets, handles and hafts for the carpenter's tool chest. From them flow the contacts of man with the earth, like a text for all harassed lyricists. The used surfaces of things . . . lend a curious attractiveness to the reality of the world that should not be underprized.

In them one sees the confused impurity of the human condition, the massing of things, the use and disuse of substances, footprints and fingerprints, the abiding presence of the human engulfing all artifacts, inside and out.[\(8\)](#)

It is this impure world of human artifacts that supplies us with a language for worship. There is nothing sanitized about the words we use to praise God; they are the same worn, time-tattered words we use to make love, console the dying, confess our guilt, and scold our children. There is no shame in calling God a seducer (Jer. 20:7); nor is there need for alarm in comparing him to a drunken warrior sotted with wine (Ps. 78:65). Ours is an impure language, earthy and spiced, and ours is an "impure" God whose holiness is manifest in an imperfect creation.

Christian worship invites us to see and hear God in the soiled language of humankind. If this offends us, it is only because we usually prefer to keep God at a distance. God is, after all, not only holy, good, and beautiful, but supremely dangerous as well. Dangerous -- not because he will thrash us for making a mistake, but because he will love us more than we can tolerate. A remote, otiose God is easier to handle and can be safely enshrined in the archaic formalism of "Thees" and "Thous," "beseechings" and "vouchsafings." But One whose primal word is nothing more or less than a quivering human life is dangerously close.

This latter is the earthly God revealed in Jesus and in Christian worship. Like Pablo Neruda's impure poetry, liturgy invites us to gaze more deeply, not upon some extraterrestrial haze, but upon human life itself, "worn by the hand's obligations, steeped in sweat and in smoke, smelling of lilies and urine, spattered diversely by the trades . . . we live by. . ."[\(9\)](#) Liturgies that fail to make us more profoundly and compassionately human may be elegant exercises in ritual aesthetics, but they can hardly be called Christian. This, perhaps, was the premise neglected by the style of liturgical spirituality popular before the Council. It was often assumed that really "good" liturgy can happen only in a very controlled environment like a cloistered convent or monastery. There, one was freed from the "distraction" of fussy babies, whooping children, hacking coughers, and the occasional drunken penitent.

But if what I have suggested in the previous paragraphs is true, then a cloistered model of liturgical perfection is altogether beside the point. God's people are not, in fact, a conventicle of celibate professionals who happen to love silence and incense. The vast majority of Christian people are the grouchy babies, the harassed parents, the coughers -- in short, the noise-makers. This rather rowdy assembly of Christian "nonprofessionals" is the norm, though liturgists often seem to treat it as the exception.

Most Christians come to liturgy so deeply immersed in the process of living that they have little time for "planning the celebration" or "discussing the themes" of the Sunday readings. This, I submit, may be an advantage rather than a liability. In Christian tradition, the best liturgies have

always been the messy, "impure" ones that need little planning or explanation. A good example is the ancient Christian liturgy of baptismal initiation: nude bodies were rudely plunged in a pool, dried, oiled, clothed, kissed, fed with bread, wine, water, and milk. These are fundamental human actions that speak powerfully of living, dying, begetting, caring, nurturing, belonging. They are the kind of thing every parent or child knows about simply through the septic process of living. Early Christian initiation was messy: it intended to make one newborn, wet, salted, sticky, and well-fed -- facts that hardly need to be explained to parents.

My point is simply that liturgical spirituality is possible only for people who are willing to let life be messy, language impure, and God dangerously intimate. The poet who tracks God's traces in the coelenterate's cavity, the parent who knows the subtle registers of a baby's wide repertoire of cries, the child who is wonderstruck by a calf newly born and blind -- all are passionate contemplatives familiar with an impure God at work in an imperfect creation. This is the God "ever to be worshipped and adored" in liturgy, the One whose presence thickens the plot of human history.

### **LITURGY AS METAPHOR**

It may appear at this point that liturgy has been reduced to a tawdry fascination with the seamier side of human existence. Is worship not supposed to uplift us, give us courage to face life's breakdowns and crack-ups? Is there not more to liturgy than grubby sneakers and screaming kids? The answer to these questions is obviously yes. Worship does more than rehearse what we already know about life. It draws us toward the vision of who we can become if we choose to live more lovingly, faithfully, and creatively. In short, liturgy is a metaphor of that more "cheerful order of things" that burst into the world in Jesus Christ and continues to grow among us like leaven.

When I say that liturgy is a metaphor, I mean something quite specific. Metaphor is a strategy (verbal or nonverbal) for putting two things together that appear to be irreconcilable. "The Word became flesh" (John 1:14) is metaphoric, for if the Word (=God) became flesh (=human), has God not become something other than who he really is (absolute, unchanging, untouched by human history)? How can God become not-God? How can a human being (Jesus) be everything that God is and everything that we are as well?

Metaphor betrays the breaking-point in the human intellect's ability to reason its way out of a jam. Tension, clash, and conflict bristle at the heart of metaphor. Our ordinary power to figure things out is subverted, and we are left with the explosive possibility that things may not be what they appear to be.

Jesus used metaphors in those disturbing stories of his called parables. The kingdom of heaven is "a pearl of great price" (Matt. 13:45-46) and a merchant sells all he has to buy it. It sounds innocent enough, but consider: if the merchant divested himself of all his capital to buy the pearl, what will he do for ready cash so he can secure food, clothing, and lodging? He could put up the pearl as collateral -- but this will jeopardize the gem should his creditors decide to foreclose. He could sell the jewel -- but then he is back where he started, with plenty of money but no pearl. In Jesus' "simple parable the merchant is unwittingly trapped by his own good intentions. He wants

the right thing (the pearl, remember, is the Kingdom), but his businesslike strategy -- rational enough on the surface of things -- ultimately frustrates his desire. In this story, furthermore, God's kingdom sounds more like a hot potato than a pearl.

Metaphors like the one Jesus used have a way of catching us by surprise, of exposing the "crack" in our good intentions. Worship works like a metaphor: it brings irreconcilable realities together and challenges us to believe that its vision is true. Consider again: in the liturgy we claim to act as Christ's body broken for the world in selfless love. Our factual experience whispers that this is a lie: we are often petty, selfish, self-absorbed, and cruel. Like the merchant who bought the pearl, we are trapped by good intentions: we want to have and be what we know we can never possess -- the body of the Lord offered for the world's salvation.

It is precisely by creating conflict, however, that metaphor is able to reconcile us to the irreconcilable. Because it seems to be "wrong," metaphor brings us, paradoxically, to the deeper truth about things. As metaphor, worship permits us to perceive that we are not either sinners or the body of Christ, but that we are both, simultaneously. Sinful aliens estranged from God and one another, we Christian worshipers are also -- and just as truly -- a holy nation, a royal priesthood, a people set apart. Only through the metaphoric power of liturgy can these two irreconcilable realities be brought together into a coherent whole. That is why worship is always an "epiphany" of the church at its worst and at its best. And that is also why the liturgy moves back and forth between protestations of sin and unworthiness ("We confess . . . We are sinners") and bold, confident assertions of intimacy with God ("We thank you for counting us worthy to stand in your presence and serve you . . ."). Truth lies in metaphor's power to unite what appears to be hopelessly divided: sin and grace, alienation and intimacy, estrangement and familiarity.

With our discussion of liturgy as metaphor we are brought back to our starting point: worship is God's work for us, not something we do for God. Rooted in the earthy tones of human flesh and history, liturgy invites us to experience more profoundly and more compassionately the action of an "impure" God in an imperfect creation. A tiny landmark erected within the larger "liturgy of the world," our worship leads us back, always, to a world ceaselessly possessed by God's grace -- even when that world does not recognize the One who claims it. This is the inestimable privilege -- and the burden -- of the Christian worshiper.

#### NOTES

1. Leander Keck, *Paul and His Letters*, Proclamation Commentaries (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), pp. 33-37.
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 78-81.
3. "Considerations on the Active Role of the Person in the Sacramental Event," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 14, trans. David Bourke (New York: Seabury Press, 1976), pp. 169-70.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 166.
5. *Ibid.*
6. "God's Grandeur," in Gerard Manley Hopkins, *Poems and Prose*, ed. W.H. Gardner (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1963), p. 27.

7. A. R. Ammons, "Hymn," in *Contemporary American Poetry*, ed. Donald Hall, rev. and enlarged ed. (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1971), p. 168.
8. *Selected Poems of Pablo Neruda*, ed. and trans. Ben Belitt (New York: Grove Press, 1961), p. 39.
9. Ibid.

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