

TRINITY 15/LITURGICAL CONSULTATION | 20 Sept 09

Let me say at once that this is not the address I expected to be giving. I had said that I would try to crystalise my thinking on liturgy in the form of a PowerPoint Presentation and Indeed I worked on the text while we were away in France. However, in the early hours of Saturday morning, thieves broke into the house and stole everything of value which could fit into a couple of bags - including Catriona's laptop, my digital camera, the Tom-Tom, two wallets and a purse. What was so galling was that probably the same people had already taken a range of stuff while the PCC met in the Vicarage the previous week. Catriona had to stop off at PC World in Staines before finally going up to Royal Holloway at lunchtime yesterday. Then there was the police and the locksmith and ... well you know the score.

But before I think through with you some tentative ideas about our worship I want to start with an apology. I am very well aware that there has been a considerable amount of anguish around the parish over the last few months. I guess I have only seen and heard a small proportion of these sentiments – but it has been enough to give me all too many sleepless nights and to be aware - and be extremely sorry - for things which have been said and done which people have found either hurtful or unduly unsettling. As Fiona was kind enough to say in a recent email, none of this has been malicious but that does not hide the fact that some of the things that have been attempted could have been done differently or more carefully. As I say, I am very sorry for all of that.

So let me be very clear that what follows is not any kind of excuse. I know my prevailing sins – and impatience and an excess of energy and determination are just three of them! But I want you to know that this has been probably the hardest six months of my priestly ministry – and for two reasons. The first I have shared with a number of you already. It is simply this: the expectations of what many in the congregation thought they were asking for in the Parish Profile – and the description of my liturgical outlook that I wrote in my CV, could be seen to be diametrically opposite.

Where some of you hoped for a continuation of a very stable and uniform liturgical experience that you had fondly shared with Fr Evan, I talked in my CV about the way the Anglican Catholic tradition was undergoing a new journey – unearthing, embracing and

treasuring forms and texts from the last 2000 that required and rejoiced in an ever increasing diversity of form and content to allow them to blossom. I had sat on liturgical committees for ten years where these things were commonplace and that had been our tradition at St Martin's where we had pioneered services which were much more radical than those to be found in Common Worship.

Having been appointed last October, it therefore seemed entirely natural to me to continue in a similar vein although I have been much less adventurous than I would have been. This is the air that I breathe and I did not imagine that it would be seen as anything but an extension of what was already valued here. Such variations were just a way of sharing some of the riches that the liturgical movement has uncovered in the recent 20years. I did it without comment because no amount of explanation 'works'; you either appreciate it for what it is or you don't. And of course you review it - as we will be doing later this morning.

The second reason for some of the difficulties is that I have had to endure a pretty complicated and unsatisfactory domestic situation – with my family away because of exams, my mother needing to be moved into residential care and massive alterations to the house being done as I have to work. The plumbing is still hopeless and we still don't have a proper bathroom. If my patience or sense of humour has snapped a bit, there have been reasons! And that is before the recent thefts.

But enough of that. Let's look at where we might go from here.

For the fact is that what we are doing at St James' is being mirrored the length and breadth of the UK – and no one is finding this process of liturgical evaluation easy!

In that context, excellent books like 'The Parish' edited by Malcolm Torrey urge us to sharpen up our ability to say why we do what we do, to justify the priorities that we have made – to ask how we make Christ known in our area, how we cope with secularism, how we respond to rapid technological shifts – all the time reminding us that we cannot be an oasis against the tide of change if Christ is to be made known in the world.

Which is why the liturgy debates are both fascinating and difficult. We all know that what we do on a Sunday morning is our shop-window and we are being judged, week in, week out, by those who drop in to see if we have anything useful to offer. We, the servant Church, are not just a community who can please themselves but have to be sufficiently flexible and porous for people to want to stay with us. To gauge our success, Maria and I worked on the communicant figures for St James' while we were in France and I simply have to say to you that I do not know the reason why, when there were 62 communicants at 10am in 2002, last year (2007) there were less than 50 – and against the trend of the rest of the Diocese. For all of us who love St James, this has to be a worry that we need to address.

Far from having some half-baked solution in my (now stolen) briefcase as I drove down the M1, all I have tried to do (in difficult circumstances without a permanent organist) is to test out a range of possible alternatives in our 10am Masses, to see what worked and what didn't. So I have been tremendously grateful to everyone who has – or who is planning – written thoughts and reflections on these services. Every single one has been thought about at length. But I know some of you have been cross with me for refusing to call these tweaks and adaptations “changes”. However, I am sticking to my point that, currently, everything is in experimental mode and if we see that something doesn't work, we think again – as we have done with the exit of the sanctuary party at the end of Mass. Someone kindly made a comment and the adjustment was made at once. Of course I sometimes get contrary requests (like over the Kyries) and we need to think that issue out yet again.

But I cannot, with my hand on my heart, imagine that we will ever go back to having a handful of set service books with almost no alternatives. Why else have we been offered eight confessions in Common Worship – and a string of alternatives in Patterns for Worship, let alone the carefully worked examples from all over the world which sit on my bookshelves? All have the ability to stir us in different ways and move us in directions we would not ordinarily go. Of course we need to make sure they are available in a form which is easy to use, but a highly intelligent congregation like St James' is more than capable of working through printed alternatives – and growing spiritually as a result.

So I was grateful to one emailer who asked, as part of this process of discernment, for some extended teaching on how our liturgy has developed in the way that it has. That we can surely do. We can also begin to plan for an open Liturgy and Music Committee which would help us to put together some of our big festival services – and begin to see how a new generation of seasonal booklets might give us that mix of security and flexibility that Common Worship presupposes.

As a result I hope for example that, by using many of the alternatives available to us, we can ensure that seasons like Advent and Lent feel really different from – say, Christmas and Easter; that the Bells Sunday service and the Young People’s Mass last summer will give us some clue as how to draw on the rich seams of knowledge that are to be found all around us; that some of the wonderful prayers in Common Worship and beyond will soon become favourites here and will become imbedded in our collective prayer lives, and that the work on our Baptismal rite will enable to welcome an even wider spectrum of the parish through our doors.

And every moment we spend on this form of consultation is helping us to define what kind of Church St James’ is becoming, what God is demanding of us, what liturgical forms will enable us to be transformed by the power and love of God.

As I stand before you now, I haven’t a clue what shapes they will take. I am happy to continue to make suggestions but the final outcomes will depend on the kind of discussions we are going to have after the Notices today – the kind of theological reflection that will help us to answer the questions that books like ‘The Parish’ put before us.

But let me finish with this. I really do hope this continuing process of reflection will soon stop feeling like a threat to those who have found this first period of experiment so unsettling. I hope, for example that even just meeting each other in small groups this morning will quickly show the range of opinions that we hold, and the value of discussing things with people we don’t know very well.

For it is by such simple means that the Holy Spirit will lead us into areas we had not even thought possible before.

Moreover, I suspect that such a process will help us to grow in more than just experience; we will grow in numbers too as our commitment to diversity deepens. I know that will mean that some Sundays will feel better than others, but isn't that how all families work?

Better still, as each of us thinks more and more deeply about the various ways of slotting our Masses together, I hope we will pass the litmus test for all liturgical renewal: does our worship lead to changed lives and changed communities?

Only when we can be sure that that is happening, will we know that our current period of theological reflection can ease up a bit! Until then, I want to suggest that we have a lot more consulting and a lot more praying to do and I do hope we can embrace that enthusiastically, lovingly - and of course, really, really sensitively.

'The Parish' People, Place and Ministry: a theological and practical exploration edited by Malcolm Torry
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