

Chapter Eighteen

Christian Prayer

I: Praying the Liturgy of the Church

Purpose: The aim of this talk is to help the young people to integrate their experience of liturgy and their experience of prayer, to bring together their participation in the public worship of their Church and their personal prayer life. For young people from the free churches, without any liturgical format, they can be helped to see that liturgy is not unspiritual and empty ritual, and to see that they too need to integrate their experience of corporate prayer with their personal private prayer.

Presentation: It is important that any liturgy celebrated during the conference is done well, intelligently and with dignity. The liturgical gestures should be full human gestures, so that for example hands and arms are truly raised, the sign of the cross is made deliberately and doesn't look like someone scratching his chest, processions of any kind have a seriousness, which does not mean that they cannot be joyful. The readings should be read clearly, maybe a second time in another language. The homily should really open up the Scripture passages that have been read. It could be good to include a morning prayer or evening prayer from the Divine Office. They should experience the liturgy as Church: this is what Church really means.

It may seem strange to you that we are starting the teaching on prayer with the liturgy. The reason for this is very simple. We are members of the Church, the body of Christ. Our position and dignity as Christian believers is as members of the body. The Church is not an afterthought, as though it is normal for us to be first individual believers and then to decide about joining a church. This relationship believer and church is parallel to the relationship between being human and being part of a family and of society.

The liturgy is the official prayer of the Church. In the Catholic tradition, the liturgy includes all the liturgies of the sacraments and the Divine Office, or the Prayer of the Hours, that is sung each day in monasteries and convents. "Christian prayer is a covenant relationship between God and man in Christ. It is the action of God and of man, springing forth from both the Holy Spirit and ourselves, wholly directed to the Father, in union with the human will of the Son of God made man." (CCC, para. 2564). This definition is firmly Trinitarian and Christocentric, and manifests the ecclesial (church) context of all prayer by describing it as a "covenant relationship".

The Liturgy of Israel

What are the origins of the liturgies of the Church? The origins of liturgy are in Israel. The people of Israel were formed as a liturgical people. The formation of the people as a people and the formation of Israel's liturgy were part of one process. So the life of Israel is structured around a weekly cycle and an annual cycle: the weekly cycle has the Shabbat at its centre; the annual cycle is structured around the three major feasts (Ex. 23: 14 - 17; 34: 18 - 23; Deut. 16: 1 - 17), to which were added Rosh HaShana (new year) and Yom Kippour (the Day of Atonement); see Lev. 16: 4 - 43; Num. 28: 16 - 29: 39. There was also a monthly cycle of lesser importance (see Num. 28: 11 - 15). The psalms were primarily written to be sung by the Israelites in their liturgy. So, for example, the Psalms of ascent (Ps. 120 - 134), which were sung by pilgrims going up to Jerusalem to the feasts. We need to expand our understanding of liturgy to realize that the songs of ascent were also liturgy. They were the worship of the people, of all those keeping the commandment to go up to Jerusalem. This worship had a form, and clearly contained traditional songs sung by

earlier generations of pilgrims but with a freedom to adapt and develop the heritage received. At the time of the exile in Babylon when the Temple had been destroyed, the Jews gathered to pray on the Shabbat, and this is believed to be the origin of the synagogue. The psalms played a major part in the synagogue liturgy. On Shabbat, there is read the Torah portion (about four chapters from the Torah, the first five books of the Bible) and the *haftarah* reading (from the other writings in the Hebrew Old Testament).

The Jewish feasts generally have a harvest (agricultural) component and an historical element. So, for example, the Passover commemorates the historical event of Israel's deliverance from Egypt, but it is also the celebration of the first sheaf of the year (Lev. 23: 10); the Feast of Weeks (Pentecost) celebrates the completion of the first harvest of the year (Ex. 23: 16; 34: 22) that in Jewish tradition also celebrates the gift of the Torah on Mount Sinai, a signification that adds to the biblical meaning of Pentecost. In these ways, the liturgy structured the life of Israel: the cycle of sowing and of harvesting structures the life of an agricultural community and the annual cycle of Israel structured their life as an historical people living by memory (of call and of promises) moving from first call in the past to fulfillment of the promises in the future. At the heart of liturgy then is memory or remembrance: of the mighty deeds of God in the past, of the commandments of the Lord and of the promises given to the chosen people (see Ps. 136; Neh. 9: 6 - 8). So in Jewish liturgy, especially at Shabbat, there is a strong remembrance and proclamation of the wonder of creation by the one God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. At Passover, the people of Israel remember their deliverance from Egypt. This is not just a simple memorial, like remembering some highlight in our lives. It is a re-living of the foundational event, in which they are required to dress like those setting out on a journey, a very strong understanding of memorial.

Christian Liturgy

Here we remind you that we cannot understand the Church as a totally different reality from Israel as her replacement, but as Israel renewed and raised up by Yeshua to which we from the nations are added. So just as the Church was formed within Israel, so the worship of the Church was first formed within Yeshua-honouring Israel. So the Church receives a weekly cycle (Shabbat and the special honouring of the Day of the Resurrection, the first/eighth day; and an annual cycle of feasts. This is not the time to go into the relationships of the Church's feasts to the feasts of Israel. But what is important to note is that the structure of the Church's liturgy is received from Israel. The use of Israel's Scriptures and of symbols from the history of Israel (bread, wine, water, oil) is not abandoned but over the first century or more is expanded, with the addition of the New Testament writings and the new role of Yeshua - Jesus becoming central. Jesus, the eternal Son of God become man, is both seated alongside the Father (see Acts 2: 33; Eph. 1: 20; Col. 3: 1; Heb. 1: 3; 8: 1; 12: 2; see also Rev. 5: 6 - 10) and is our mediator and great high priest, the only way to the Father (John 14: 6; Acts 4: 12; 1 Tim. 2: 5 - 6; Heb. 7: 25; 8: 1; 9: 15; 1 John 2: 1 - 2). But notice that just as Israel worshipped the one God, so the prayers of the liturgy are directed to the Father, but through, with and in Jesus Christ (see doxology at end of every Eucharistic prayer)¹.

Likewise the Church inherited the Jewish pattern of daily prayer (see Acts 2: 42; 3: 1; 10: 9, 30). This pattern of prayer that structures each day became firmly established in the monasteries, taking shape as what we now call the Divine Office, the breviary or the

¹ There are a few liturgical prayers addressed to Jesus rather than the Father, mostly in more recently instituted feasts. Most liturgists would see this as a regrettable exception that needs to be corrected.

Liturgy of the Hours. Apart from the office of readings, with longer biblical readings, the office is mostly made up of the psalms. The four-week cycle is so organized that the whole Psalter is prayed every month. So as the Jewish people used the Hebrew terms *sefer* or *siddur* (order), so the Western Church used the Latin term *ordo* to describe its liturgy.

The Liturgy and Our Personal Lives

This teaching has emphasized the role of the liturgy in structuring first the life of Israel and its people, and then the Church. Visitors to Israel experience how the Shabbat structures the life of the people (no buses, no shops open) in a way that is not true any more with Christian observance of the Lord's day. We need a structure to our lives: annual, monthly, weekly and daily. A biblically-based structure in our lives is not a bondage, but a liberation. It provides meaning, it provides a sense of purpose, it gives a rhythm. Without structure it is hard to have a clear identity. The structure of the liturgy connects us to a past and prepares us for our future.

We should see the liturgy as our school of prayer. This has been clearer in Judaism than in Christianity, as for the Jews it has been obvious that they learn to pray in the family where there is a liturgical character to prayer and in the synagogue. The more Christian liturgy is renewed, the clearer it will be that this is the primary setting for Christians to learn to pray.

What do we learn about prayer from the Church's liturgy?

1. *Its Trinitarian Structure.* Christian prayer is above all the worship of God the Father in, with and through Jesus his Son in the power of the Holy Spirit. It is also the confession that "Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father." (Phil. 2: 11).
2. *Its Belonging to the "age of the Church" between Pentecost and Parousia.* "In this age of the Church Christ now lives and acts in and with his Church, in a new way appropriate to this new age." (CCC, para. 1076). "New age" here means the age of the Church, the age of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the period of the New Covenant. All Christian prayer takes place after the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and before the second coming of the Lord Jesus in glory. It is based on Jesus' first coming and prepares for his second coming. This structure is clearly present in the liturgy (see acclamations after the Consecration in the Roman rite and the prayer *Libera nos* after the Our Father). "In the Eucharist, the Lord's Prayer also reveals the eschatological character of its petitions. It is the proper prayer of 'the end-time,' the time of salvation that began with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and will be fulfilled with the Lord's return." (CCC, para. 2771).

The age-long aspect of the liturgy reminds us that each time we begin to pray we enter into a praying history of a praying body. This is shown most clearly in the Eucharist, where when each Eucharist is celebrated, the Church is obeying yet one more time the command of the Lord, "Do this in memory of Me." When we celebrate the Eucharist, we are entering into something that has been going on for twenty centuries. This shows us that this is in effect true of all our prayer. It is even true when we pray in tongues. Then we are also entering into the "groaning of the Spirit" and the longing of the Spirit that the Spirit has been stirring in the hearts of believers since the day of Pentecost.

All Christian prayer, like Jewish prayer, is activating our memories, for the Jews the memory of Israel and for Christians the memory of the Church, recalling God's mighty work of creation, his faithfulness to Israel, and above all the life, teaching, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus, followed by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. All Christian prayer, like Jewish prayer, confesses the promises of the Lord and prays for their soon fulfillment.

3. *The First Place of the Word of God.* Christian prayer is awakened in us by the Word of God. It is a response to God's Word. This is a vital pattern for all our prayer. When we do not start from the Word of God, we run the risk of starting from our own religious conceptions that produce distorted forms of prayer or from an inner emptiness that remains without being filled.
4. *Its Communal Character.* Christian worship is always worship within the Body of Christ. In the liturgy, it is expressed as "we" and "our".² This finds its supreme expression in the *Our Father* which is how Jesus taught the disciples to pray. "In the Eucharistic liturgy the Lord's Prayer appears as the prayer of the whole Church and there reveals its full meaning and efficacy." (CCC, para. 2770). When we pray we are never alone. Our prayer takes place within the history of the praying Church, and is accompanied by the "great cloud of witnesses" already before the heavenly throne (see Heb. 12: 1).

Questions for Discussion

1. Do you see any connection between your personal prayer and your public prayer in Church liturgy or other services?
2. What light does the history and the worship of Israel throw on Christian prayer, and the relationship between personal and liturgical prayer?
3. How Trinitarian is your prayer?
4. What role does the Word of God play in your prayer?

² The major exception to this is in the recitation of the Creed, that in the original begins with "I believe". Another exception in the Roman rite is in the prayer before communion "Lord, I am not worthy ..." which is a citation from the words of the centurion in the Gospel.