



Lent 3, Year B – March 15, 2009
An Instruction of the Role of the Assembly in Worship
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Introductory Comments/Preparation for Worship

Over the past four years, now, we have set aside one Sunday each Lent to consider the act of worship itself: our topics as wideranging as the structure of the eucharistic rite itself, to the dressing of the altar and preparation of the chancel, to the names of our vestments and where they came from. But for all our attention to bread & wine, altar & font, chasuble & stole, we have not yet considered what is in fact the primary term in the Sunday event, namely, the people who came, what we call "the assembly". Perhaps I catch you by surprise, and you wish to point out that it is surely *God* who is the primary term in our Sunday liturgy. You would be correct of course, but remember this: we are, by virtue of our baptism, the Body of Christ, the temple of the Holy Spirit. This is the immense dignity of our gathering, and it is why it matters as much as it does that our worship is a worthy offering through the Son to the Father. And so it is with this in mind that I propose to say a little bit about the role of the assembly in our worship.

Could I begin by stating the parenthetical obvious, namely that if the assembly is so important, then it matters who comprises it. The point here is not that God is a respecter of persons (so we think we must really be something if a lot of bigshots come to church here), but contrariwise, that God is *not* a respecter of persons, and that we will not have done justice to God's eclectic love until we are ourselves as multifaceted as a prism. Considerably more multifaceted than we are.

You have probably heard liturgy defined as "the work of the people". It is an etymological definition from the Greek words *ergon*, and *laos*. Here is my question: what if we were to take that definition seriously? What if the measure of this morning's liturgy was not just the quality of leadership (did the choir sing in tune, were there enough jokes in the sermon), but whether the people *meant* it, whether people had really heard the readings, or sung lustily and with attention to the words — whether together we had crossed the threshold of heaven? To speak of the role of the assembly is to venture a few suggestions about the "work of the people".

In large measure (for priest and people alike), it is work of *preparation*. One helpful metaphor is to think of the liturgy as a weekly drama offered to God; if it is going to be a worthy offering, it requires all players to be thoroughly familiar with the text, and mentally, emotionally, and spiritually ready. Meaning what?

It means, first, arriving, if at all possible, before curtain time. Curtain time is for spectators, not the cast. You may remember the old rule about not receiving communion if you arrive after the gospel (it wasn't a bad rule; operating as it did on the principle that word and sacrament are inseparable.)

Preparation or readiness also a matter of attitude: it is on the one hand, to assume a posture of openness in order to receive; and paradoxically, of girding our loins as it were to empty ourselves totally, to give back, in the praise of God. The cultivation of attitude or interior posture towards God comes about only as the result of deeply quiet prayer.

More than this, preparation includes dealing with the script. Who ever heard of an actor arriving at opening day still learning his lines? Is today a special day or

occasion (what colour, why?), which rite are we using, mark psalm, etc. Making use of whatever resources are provided (e.g. leaflet). It also means immersing oneself in the scriptures of the day – reading them over before the service, and preferably, even before you come to church. If the leaders have done their job, there will be a connection between the readings (and occasion) and every choice made in the conduct of the rite. How are you going to appreciate the resonances between the gradual hymn, let's say, and the gospel which follows it, if you don't already know what the gospel is going to be about?

I know from my experience of choral singing that if you're good enough (and especially if the person beside you knows what *she* is doing) you can make it through the performance by the seat of your pants, and the concert might even be good. But had you practised your part, it would have been better. Liturgy is about offering our best to God.

Engaged Worship

Preparation, of course, is not the performance. The purpose of readying ourselves for the liturgy, of learning our part, as it were, is to free us from the distraction of figuring out what comes next, and to allow us instead to become deeply engaged in the act of worship.

What we must strive for is the sense that every one of us is part of a great orchestra of praise, each playing our own instrument, sometimes in our turn, alone, sometimes all together, sometimes tacit. Good liturgy, worthy worship, requires full participation, with all our senses.

So, for example, the reader reads with great care, the listeners hear with equal care. Listening is the assembly's part in the great drama when the reader reads.

Similarly, the dialogue between presider and congregation must have rich and full volume. There is no excuse for anaemic little responses, or for a congregation larger than one to make less noise than the presider in responding to prayers. (Which allows me to climb up on one of my favourite soapboxes, namely the "amen". Amen is the people's part of a prayer, and it signifies assent — "so be it"; presiders are taught not even to say it, for this is like talking to yourself. It is debilitating to say the least to have a congregation mutter its assent to something to which one had hoped for its whole heart.) No presider should ever have to feel that all the energy came from the front, and the people just sucked it in. But neither should any congregation ever have to feel that the celebrant is dragging them down, is mentally absent, or bored. The one is as damaging to true and spiritual worship as the other.

One other aspect of our liturgical participation has to do with parts of the drama which we have in common with the people around us, for instance, hymns, responses, and prayers. When we gather for worship we as one Body, one assembly, offering our praises and petitions to God as with one voice. This is as opposed to a collection of 150 individuals each doing more or less our own thing at our own pace, as if it really didn't matter that our neighbour had come to church today, or as if our neighbour's voice wouldn't add anything to our act of worship anyway. One of the reasons Anglican worship makes such fulsome use of singing and chanting (as for instance the psalms and canticles) is that music forces us to pray with united voice. In religious communities, where they do a lot of spoken prayer, sisters and brothers are taught to listen to the voice on either side of them, and to pace their own voice accordingly. It wouldn't be a bad discipline for parish churches to adopt.

Why Bother

Now that we're here, of course, all of this makes sense. But it doesn't answer the question, Why assemble in the first place? What's so important about "going to church," or "creating an assembly" anyway? Why couldn't we just offer our praises to God on our own time, at our own pace, in our own space? (As the ubiquitous "they" say, "I can worship God as easily on a golf course as at church" — an argument I would find more compelling if I thought its proponents actually were worshipping God on the golf course!)

Let me begin by reiterating the assumption on which this whole instruction has been based, namely that once you are baptised, you have been grafted into a community, the Body of Christ. If you accept this, and it isn't really negotiable!, then surely you must see that the gathering of the community isn't just about *you*, or *your* needs, or what *you* can get out of it. It is partly about you, of course, but it is equally about the person beside you, and what happens to the assembly when there are people missing. To return to our orchestral metaphor, we are like instruments playing solo all week. The sound we make is nice enough, but the truth is when it comes to making thunder, a flute doesn't cut it! You need help from the timpani. More than this, it is hard to appreciate our own little line until it is rooted in the context of the whole score. So we need each other; and that is part of why we come. But so does the community need us: after all, it is a pretty insipid Concerto for strings which has no violins.

We assemble then so we can trade stories and wisdom about our various ministries in the world; to be recalled to the Word, who is Christ, to first principles; to seek each other's prayers for those whom God has given us in the past week to care for; to be forgiven for our lapses and failures; to be fed with the provisions of Christ's own life, so that we can manage the next leg of the journey. But most of all, we gather to return thanks, and to join in the single voice of praise that blesses God for the dignity of being the instruments of his love in the world.