

LETTING LITURGY LIVE: THE LORD IS HERE

We have just embarked into Lent: a season of reflection and of preparation before the season of Easter. It is traditionally a time where we take on some disciplines – historically abstaining from eating meat; or, if you have a sweet tooth, abstaining from chocolate. Some even give up tea, although how they manage to do so is beyond me. Habits can be taken on as well, such as special reading (and in the notice sheets, you will find two suggestions of books to read), or days of fasting, or giving to the needy, or random acts of kindness. Sometimes, giving something up and taking something on are even combined: someone I know decided to give the money he saved by not eating chocolate to charity. As an in-joke, I once gave up “being French” for Lent. Call it an attempt at self-improvement, if you like.

So *some* Lenten disciplines can be great, but they have two pitfalls, expressed in the readings today. Both these pitfalls also apply to other things we do as Christians, and have to do with the spiritual dimension of our practice.

The first one is clearly spelled out at the start of our Gospel reading. We should not behave in a certain way for the sake of appearances; rather, we should do our best to be discrete. Now, for those who were here on Ash Wednesday, you will already have heard Alyson talk about this; and you might remember that she described this passage as one of the most challenging ones in the Gospels, so I think it's worth repeating it here: we should not behave in a certain way for the sake of appearances; rather, we should do our best to be discrete. “When [we] give to the needy, [we should not] announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the [churches, in their

workplace] and on the streets, to be honoured by others” for their generosity. Now this is quite a temptation, isn't it? We all long for a pat on the back that says “well done”, and we all like to feel the approval of others. The reading goes on: “When [we] fast, [let us not] look somber” - let us not try to elicit either pity or admiration from our friends. Again, tempting to do so. It's even embedded in our language: just this week, I saw on the Internet someone asking how people were going to *show* restraint this Lent. Because we are *obsessed*, in today's society but, I believe, throughout history, we are obsessed by how we are perceived. We try to achieve a certain image. Depending on our surroundings, we may wish to look like we are hard-working, liberal and politically correct; or “down with the cool people”. Within the church and in Christian company, we like to seem devout and holy; whereas in secular circles, especially where religious behaviour tends to be sidelined, the opposite can be true.

Fickle, shallow, and ultimately pointless: these words describe our behaviour when it is dictated by our obsession with appearances.

Pretending to be holy for the sake of appearances is something that should, clearly, be avoided. This includes Lenten disciplines taken on in order not to be left out; it also includes choosing to go to a small group for fear of not being as “involved” as the rest of us. It also includes false humility. And finally, it can include the way we approach worship and liturgy. Now, the word “liturgy” means common worship; and for the 9.30 congregation, encompasses in particular all the prayers we read from the black books.

Sometimes, we go through the order of service out of habit, or because everybody around us is doing the same thing – either because we do not understand the words of liturgy fully enough to feel their power, or because we have not awoken to that power. And

going through liturgy for its own sake, with no deep seated desire to truly understand, feel and mean the words we are saying is not only a waste; it also goes against what we are taught in the Gospel reading today. So I'd like us to try to reignite this burning passion not *for* liturgy but *through* liturgy: this week, and in the coming two weeks – hopefully – I will attempt to show how liturgy can be alive and powerful, by expounding specific parts of the motions we go through every week.

Let us go back to the pitfalls of Lenten disciplines first. The first one, as we just saw, is to do them in order to *look* good. The second one is to mistake our commitment as a programme of self-improvement. The disciplines we take on for Lent are *not* primarily for self-improvement. Trying to be better for the sole sake of being better – eating healthier food, swapping coffee with tea, giving to charity – all that is good, but it lacks the spiritual dimension of Lent. Improving our health, or our behaviour: all this consists in storing up treasures for ourselves in this world. Treasures that can be eaten up. Health is fickle, as we all know, and subject to sudden change, despite our best efforts. The same can be said of improvements in our attitude: behaviour can change, despite the best commitment. And I can see in myself at least that my behaviour is far more dependent on whether I'm hungry or tired than I'd like.

These treasures of this world are, we are told, not the wisest possible investment. No, we need to store up treasures in heaven, “where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where [our] treasure is, there [our] heart will be also.” Where is that treasure?

We need to do it all with one overruling thought in mind: God. God as someone *for* whom we live, as we will proclaim in the affirmation of faith: “the one for whom we exist” . This is, in itself, something extraordinary to proclaim, and not to be discarded as

mere words. When we say this, we are affirming that God is the ultimate purpose of everything we do, and that this purpose overrides all, even our dearest desires.

Yet God is not simply present as the purpose of what we do, but also as the underlying principle to all our actions: He encompasses all our desires, knows all there is to know about us and cares for us. It is in such a frame of mind that we should be when we say liturgy: with God in every single word, and even more than that, with God in every single thought behind those words. Have you noticed what the opening prayer – the one that we all said at the very start of this service – is called? It is the Prayer of Preparation. It is designed to place us in this mindset, where God permeates our worship and overrides every single thought.

“Almighty God, to whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hidden.”

Now, this line is followed by a petition that focuses on our hearts and their thoughts, but it would be a mistake to think that this cleansing is at the heart of the prayer of preparation. These two lines which I have just repeated are more than a simple introduction: they do three things. Firstly, they dedicate and direct our worship to God first *before* focusing on our own individual hearts, asking to cleanse their thoughts, and then turns our behaviour *back to God* by expressing that the purpose of this sanctification is to “perfectly love Him and worthily magnify His holy name”.

Secondly, and this is the bit I absolutely love, it describes God as someone who is so much greater than all of us, “Almighty God”, and yet who intimately knows us, cares for us and – through the very fact that we can petition Him – answers prayers. Now that is something

quite amazing and special, and possibly even awe-inspiring – at least when we do more than simply saying these words. The prayer of preparation should bring, for us, an intimate feeling of the presence of God, which is then reminded, in liturgy, throughout the rest of the service. In a few moments, after [NAME] has led us in intercession, we will start the communion liturgy by proclaiming this presence. Alyson will say “The Lord is here”, and we will answer “His Spirit is with us”. The presence of the Spirit of the Lord is something I don't think I could ever become *blasé* about, so let us not just *say* that His Spirit is with us, but allow this claim to fill us with enthusiasm.

Finally, and this ties back to the readings from today, it tells us that there is no hiding from God. It reminds us that pretending to be holy for the sake of appearances is useless, but also reminds us that we, ourselves, are quite helpless in becoming holy. Not unlike Adam and Eve, all we can do in our own strength is sew on fig leaves to our wretched behaviours; and we should turn to God to cleanse the thoughts of our hearts. Thus, we live both *for* God and *by* God (“by the inspiration of His Holy Spirit”), which is made possible *through* Christ.

So, to close, I would like to encourage us to re-discover liturgy, and to allow it space to be alive rather than simply going through it week after week. And to help this process of re-discovery, there will be some handouts at the back explaining how we might want to approach liturgy.