

LETTING LITURGY LIVE: BREAKING THE HABIT

As John said, today is the final sermon in the mini-series on liturgy. Over the past two weeks, together, we have unpacked a few specific prayers, going over the prayers proclaiming God's presence; and about God's mercy. We have seen together how liturgy, how those prayers that we read week by week, are powerful and should be proclaimed with all our hearts, instead of just being said for the sake of being said.

So we've looked at *how* to go through liturgy. We haven't looked at *which* liturgy, and, much more importantly, we haven't looked at *why* we go through liturgy. We haven't looked at *why* we go through the same patterns week by week, nor wondered whether we actually should. I think this is especially important for a service such as this 1662 service, where we use traditional language and speak in words that we wouldn't use in any other context any longer.

Patterns; traditions; they can be respected, and they can be broken, too. I think today's readings call us to reflect on this.

The passage in Exodus comes after forty years in the Desert of Sin, where the people of Israel had been following a simple pattern of collecting and eating, on a daily basis, the manna that came from heaven. But they grow weary and distrustful, at the first annoyance, demanding water. Their motivations for breaking the patterns of obedience, obeyed for the past forty years, are directly

putting in question the Lord's providence. Moses notices this and asks: "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you put the Lord to the test?"; but still goes and complains to the Lord about his people. In short, in this passage, everyone is focusing on themselves and on themselves alone. The result is clearly spelled out in the text: quarrel. Discord. So much so that they named the place where this happened Meribah, which means, in Hebrew, "place of strife".

Breaking God-given patterns sure is a bad idea.

But that does not mean that patterns must always be followed. Let's think about today's Gospel reading, about how Jesus behaves around the Samaritan woman at the well.

In this passage, a lot of traditions are broken and patterns are completely reversed. The first one I'll mention is that the Samaritan woman is drawing water around noon, in the heat of the day, and on her own. Usually, women would draw from the well in the cooler hours of the day, and it would be a major gossiping place. So this uncommon pattern is showing us that the woman at the well, who is unnamed, was a bit of an outcast, probably because of her promiscuous lifestyle. In turn, this promiscuous lifestyle which Jesus describes is contrary to the respectable patterns of living of the time; and probably had led to strife, driving the woman away from normal, respectable company.

Jesus's behaviour is unusual, too, in comparison to what we might be used to from other parts of the Bible.

- We hear he is without his disciples (who had gone into town to buy food).
- He is described as tired – and it is the only time in the Bible that we hear about Jesus being tired, although we do hear about him resting or sleeping.
- He explicitly claims to be the Messiah, which is in stark contrast to other parts of the Gospel where he only leaves others to make their own conclusions – for instance Pontius Pilate.

He is also breaking social rules (although that is in character) when he, as a Jew, asks the Samaritan woman for a drink. The list could go on.

But those changes are, nearly entirely, changes in decorum. The change resides in the way the situation is approached. But what happens as a result of this scene, and what motivates the entire encounter, is something that appears throughout the Gospels: a sinner being taught by Jesus, recognising him as saviour and being forgiven or repenting from their sins. There are plenty of other instances of this in the Gospels.

In contrast with the Old Testament reading, where water itself and, ultimately self-service were the main aims of drawing water, Jesus's thirst and tiredness seem almost instrumental to the following conversation, which led to the glorification of God, through the repenting of the Samaritan woman.

Thus, the motivation for breaking the usual patterns of behaviour (in form at least) was *not* self-serving; it was placing God before and above everything and every desire. And it led to peace, and to the Samaritan woman findings streams of living water.

This is at the heart of proper worship: not the well-ordainment of it; not whether the i's are dotted and the t's crossed; not whether we are using the proper prayer preface for the time of year or whether the vestments have the authorised colour. Not whether we're using thous and thees or not. But that God, and God's people. With honesty – not seeking to show oneself off – but with the help of the Spirit. That's what Jesus says in verses 23 and 24: “a time is coming and has now come when the true worshippers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshippers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshippers must worship in Spirit and in truth.”

I hope that, over the past two weeks, I have managed to show how traditional liturgy can help and support this, but only as long as these are not patterns followed for the sake of following them. Equally, we have seen today that those patterns should not be broken either for the sake of doing something new, or for self-serving purposes. Richard Hooker, a very influential theologian from Elizabethan times, said something like this. He said: “True it is, the ancients, the better ceremonies of religion are; howbeit, not absolutely true and without exception: but true only so far forth as those different ages do agree in the state of those things, for which at the first those rites, orders, and ceremonies, were instituted.”

I think there is one main reason for this, beyond “due reverence” which can, after all, be achieved through a variety of expressions of worship, fresh or not. That reason is at the heart of what we do when we come together for worship: we are displaying unity in our spiritual life. Coming together, from our various walks of life, but saying those prayers and meaning them *together*. Well, when we are using those words from 1662, we are also displaying that unity with the Church through the ages, and recognising, as we sometimes say: “Though we are many, we are one body because we all share in one bread”. When we are saying the same prayers as our forefathers, we are expressing that communion with all the saints that we often talk about.

But again, what matters, in following or in breaking the patterns for worship, is to stay **true** to ourselves and to God, and that those changes that we make are there to serve *not our own comfort but the edification of ourselves and of others towards the glorification of God*. Not our own comfort; but our edification towards the glorification of God.

[MAJOR PAUSAGE]

This is worshipping in Spirit and in truth. And the consequences are amazing. Comparing today's two readings shows them to us. On the one hand, the Israelites were self-serving and self-focused in their practice and in their turning to Moses and to God. This led to water that left one thirsty, and it also led to strife. To quarrel. And this is what we're meant to remember it by – not God's providence despite the testiness of his people; but strife – Meribah.

On the other hand, Jesus by serving God in his worship, and in his pattern-breaking; led to peace and satisfaction. Jesus, in contrast to his disciples, and to his tiredness and thirst at the start of the reading, is now replete. His food, he says, is to do the will of God the Father.

Peace and satisfaction are there too for the woman at the well, who moves from her state of unrepentant sin and outcast, to that of a repenting woman who is believed by those in the village. For she has tasted living water, and through conviction, and admission of her sins, can now live at peace.

This is the peace that we wish unto others when we share the peace; when we say “peace be with you”. It's little wonder that, in the Agnus Dei which the choir is going to sing in a bit, we ask for mercy, recollecting our sins, *before* asking for peace. So the “peace of God, which passes all understanding” is not an easy spiritual high, not simply a feel-good, well-meant sentiment either; nor is it a greeting. It is a true calling which leads us to recognise our sins; and it is through that calling, and through Christ *alone* that we can face them and repent of them. This in turn is what allows us to go and serve God in sharing with others, with no fear; much like the woman at the well.

So peace and mercy be unto us all.