

# Taking off our shoes

**Paul Sheppy, minister of the West Craven Fellowship, Barnoldswick, and BUGB representative on the Joint Liturgical Group, explains the craft of the liturgist.**

Liturgists are predominantly (though not exclusively) concerned with liturgical texts. That is to say, we busy ourselves with studying and preparing texts which will shape or support the worship of the people of God.

The old tag *lex orandi, lex credendi* means that our praying shapes our believing. I have some problems with this if it means that theology cannot shape worship. For me the two are interactive rather than crudely cause and effect. However, it is true that what we pray often betrays what we believe. We have all heard prayers which leave us wondering if the one praying has thought about what has just been uttered. Surely, they don't believe *that*, we say to ourselves.

If the Westminster Confession is right in its assertion that our "chief end is to glorify God and enjoy Him for ever", then worship is the primary function of the Church – dare I say it? – even before mission. When we adore and worship God in spirit and in truth, that selfsame Spirit impels us into mission. We have no mission without a vision and knowledge of the presence of God, and we find that vision and that presence in worship. It is vital, therefore, that we pay attention to the ways and the places in which we worship. These ought not to be matters of indifference to us. Moses took the shoes off his feet, for he stood on holy ground.

Liturgists are concerned about how we enter the holy. Do we, for example, begin immediately with confession? Or is this to put the human condition at the centre when our primary gaze should be upon God? Do prayers of intercession (an essential action of the priestly people of God) precede the sermon or follow it in response to the proclaimed word of God?

Do we take an offering at the start of worship, or include it in that section where we begin to see how we are to go out with the good news into the world of which we are part? Do we celebrate the Lord's Supper, Holy Communion, the Eucharist, every week or less frequently? Are our reasons based on private psychology (it becomes cheap if we do it too often) or on tradition (we've always done it this way – actually, we probably haven't!) or what? How much scripture do we read – just a few verses, or selections from the Old and New Testaments (perhaps including both Epistle and Gospel)? Do we read the Psalms, or sing them as they were meant to be? How often? Who chooses the scripture texts – the minister with some private plan, or do we use a lectionary? Does a lectionary stifle the Spirit (that old objection again!), or does private choice mean that the congregation hears less scripture and from a narrower range? When we pray what kind of language do we use – Cranmer's Elizabethan periods, or contemporary words *ex tempore* full of *justs* and *ums*? Is God always "he" or "He"? Do we pray for our fellow men or is our language inclusive? Trevor Hubbard, a great Welsh exponent of *ex tempore* prayer, used to speak of "men and women, boys and girls" – how refreshing *that* was!

## Willow Creek

These are the sorts of questions that liturgists are passionate about! In order to find their answers they do not simply observe current developments, they

investigate the story of Christian prayer and worship through the ages. This interest is not simply antiquarian, but an attempt to address the present by understanding the past.

One of the major concerns of liturgists at the present time is the question of inculturation. How do we make worship culturally relevant? Now this is not a dry academic issue, it is a central question for missiology. Whatever you think of Willow Creek or seeker services or housegroup worship, they all reflect a concern to make the experience of Christian worship relevant. The difficulty for all inculturation processes is to discern how far we can immerse ourselves and the gospel into the culture we wish to address.

This problem is as old as the Gentile mission. The Apostle Paul refuses to allow either Gentile culture (cf. the Corinthian correspondence) or Jewish culture (cf. the Galatian letter and the Acts 15 narrative) to dictate limits to the liberty of the Gospel which, as he clearly saw, is at times counter-cultural. The Apostle resists the suggestion that the world (what he calls the flesh) can shape the worship and the ethics of the Church (the life of the Spirit).

Theology has to adapt its terms to meet the variety of cultures and societies it addresses; the prologue of the Fourth Gospel, for example, has quite a different universe of discourse from that chosen by Paul in the letter to the believers at Rome). In the same way, the expression of how we worship will vary according to the world we understand ourselves to be inhabiting. It is at this point that some of the questions I raised earlier about the actions and language of worship begin to grip. Different situations may well call for different answers.

One of the current hot potatoes in liturgical revision is the question of which

version of the Lord's Prayer we should use. A couple of years ago I ventured into the debate in the *Baptist Times*. Some readers may remember the correspondence. Assuming that we use the Lord's Prayer on a weekly basis is still controversial among some, who argue that the Lord only taught his disciples to pray "after this wise" rather than prescribing an exact formula.

### Confusion

Even if for the purposes of the argument we ignore this objection, it is not without some force. A quick look at Matthew 7.9-13 and Luke 11.2-4 shows that the Evangelists did not have a set text. Luke is considerably shorter than Matthew. Luke has "Father" rather than "Our Father in heaven", he talks of the forgiveness of debts rather than trespasses, and he omits the petition for deliverance from evil (or "the evil one"). Neither Evangelist includes the doxology at the conclusion of the prayer which is commonly used in worship.

Consider two Modern English language forms of the Lord's Prayer. They vary in the translation of the couplet which in the traditional form appears as:

And lead us not into temptation  
but deliver us from evil.

The ELLC (English Language Liturgical Consultation) text has "Save us from the time of trial, and deliver us from evil". The ASB (Alternative Service Book of the Church of England) has "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil".

The ELLC text works from the Greek text, while the ASB (at this point) works from the Latin. The ELLC text (written in the mid-seventies) is controversial because it followed Jeremias' exegesis of the Lord's Prayer as an eschatological text of the Kingdom. Current NT scholarship (led by Luz) reverts to reading the Greek

*peirasmos* as “temptation” rather than as “the eschatological trial” – which was what Jeremias advocated. Proponents of “temptation” appeal not only to the NT Greek but to the liturgical tradition, which in the West came to us in the Latin – *ne inducas nos in tentationem*.

It is interesting to remember that Jerome had a similar problem when he translated the scriptures into the Latin Vulgate. He did not use the text of the Greek Septuagint for the OT, but went directly to the Hebrew. In so doing, he ignored the liturgical tradition of the Church, which used the Septuagint for the reading of scripture in public worship.

Jerome’s concern was with accuracy to the original text; his critics (of whom Augustine was one) were anxious not to create confusion among the faithful when the version they knew varied from the new translation. Does this sound familiar?

### **Political Correctness**

And what are the criteria for deciding what the modern language text for the Lord’s prayer should be? If we suggest the NT texts as determinative, we raise two separate problems. Should we use Matthew or Luke? And can we so quickly abandon the liturgical text which has added the concluding doxology?

Even if you think all this is irrelevant, you are still left with the question of why we should teach people in the third millennium to recite the central prayer of the Christian Church in the periods of Cranmer’s English. To insist on the modified traditional form of the Lord’s Prayer as the only suitable version is to force new believers into an alien way of speech (which, of course, was itself probably controversial when it was introduced – “Why wouldst thou meddle with the Pater Noster, sirrah? Canst thou

not leave well alone?”). How does this differ as a missiological issue from Paul’s concern to resist circumcision as a central cultural requirement for new Christians?

The Lord’s Prayer is but one example of where liturgists find the shoe pinching. They continually have to ask questions about what they are inviting congregations to do when they write new prayer and service texts. One further case may demonstrate the problem. When we pray a prayer of confession, who is confessing what?

If (with the Millennium already upon us) we confess that slavery has been the foundation of much of our national wealth in the past and we ask God to forgive us, it may be dismissed as political correctness. Or it may be viewed as an appropriate acknowledgement that our past shapes our present, and that part of the institutional racism of our society stems from the earlier use of black people as slaves. If you take the second view, you may feel that you are justified in using a prayer which asks God to forgive our society for the sin of enslaving Africans and transporting them in chains to the Caribbean in the filthy and stinking holds of ships at the mercy of wind and wave. But what if in your congregation you have people of African-Caribbean heritage? How can they be part of the “we” who confess such a sin? How can a Brazilian immigrant in your congregation be asked to confess “our” indifference to the fate of the Jews in Nazi Germany?

### **Guilt-inducing**

Part of the difficulty of prayers of confession is that they either produce shopping lists of sins where inevitably something gets left out (ageism, sexism, whatever), or they are so vague that nothing is addressed with any real cost or chance of repentance, forgiveness and

conversion. Equally, some people come to church knowing their guilt and their brokenness, and do not want to be told immediately that they are sinners. An abused child needs affirmation not confession. To begin with our sinful state will add an even greater burden to the woman whose husband beats her, and believes that she must have done something wrong to deserve such punishment.

Prayers of confession are not as straightforward as we like to think. Is it possible to devise ways of confessing which are not in themselves guilt-inducing? Perhaps if we remembered that as well as confessing sin we confess the name of Jesus, we might have a different starting point. If we remembered how God is holy – in love, in justice for the oppressed, in mercy, we might have a new way of confessing. If we remembered that Jesus, who showed us how God is holy, did so by compassion on the outcasts, by touching the physically and ritually unclean, by eating with tax-collectors and sinners, we might see things differently. We might recall how Christ's holiness is not seen in disengagement from the world, but manifests itself in the risk of being besmirched that others might be cleansed. Then we might begin to extol the goodness, the mercy, the generosity and the vulnerability of God in prayers of confession. Then we might include a vesicle and a congregational response:


V: Lord, you are holy. You call us to be

holy, as you are holy.

R: Lord, have mercy upon us.

This is the sort of work I have included in my texts for the Millennium which Churches Together in England (CTE) have published in the NewStart worship resources books. My concern as a liturgist is to ensure that the words we invite congregations to use in worship and prayer will enable them to worship and pray in spirit and in truth. Part of that goal is achieved by ensuring that what we say is authentic to our situation and is honouring to God.

Recently I went to Kerala in Southern India to represent the Joint Liturgical Group at a meeting of the English Language Liturgical Consultation and to attend an international liturgy congress. On the Sunday I attended a service in the Jacobite Syrian Orthodox Cathedral. I couldn't understand a word of the liturgy, which was in Malayalam (the local vernacular) and Ancient Syriac. Fortunately, because of my liturgical training, I could understand what was happening. The shape and the actions of the liturgy made everything clear. The Cathedral was packed with worshippers (men on the left, women on the right) who stood throughout. Two things were abundantly evident: the deep reverence of the liturgy rooted in a long historical tradition, and a congregation rooted in its attention and full of joy of the Lord.

That is what liturgy is about. 

## BEYOND EXPLANATIONS

'When Christians find in the world a state of affairs that is not in accord with the truth they have learned from Christ, their concern is not that it should be explained but that it should be ended.'

- Philip Potter in the foreword to Keith Clements' biography of the ecumenical pioneer, J H Oldham: 'Faith on the Frontier', T & T Clark 1999.

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## **To the readers of the Baptist Ministers' Journal**

In recent weeks I have come across several incidents where individuals have suffered injury on church property with the result that they are now taking legal action against the church. Whilst we are in a position to provide an indemnity for these unfortunate incidents it is evident that some churches are not fully aware of their responsibilities for church safety. I feel the need therefore to remind churches that in a changing society where compensation is all too readily sought it is essential that greater attention is needed to safety than hitherto.

The Church Deacons have a duty to ensure the safety of anyone who may visit the Church and it's associated buildings and grounds for any purpose. This includes paid employees, voluntary workers, regular members of the congregation, visitors and contractors.

If you have not already done so we suggest that your church appoint a member with responsibility for health and safety. This person could, if practicable, lead a small sub committee who should be given the specific responsibility of checking out potential hazards on an ongoing basis so that action can be taken.

Paths and driveways regularly produce accidents and warrant special attention. These must be kept free of potholes and steps must be in good condition. They need to be properly drained to prevent collection of rainwater and the growth of moss. Where paths are regularly used at night they must be adequately lit. Steps and steep paths should be fitted with handrails.

I also strongly recommend that you check whether your church has any responsibility for maintenance of shared drives and paths. These are often left to their own devices and it is only when an accident occurs that it is discovered that the church is responsible for their maintenance.

We do offer the help and advice of our surveyors without charge and if you feel that this would be of benefit please do contact Baptist Insurance.

**A.J.GREEN ACIJ ASSISTANT GENERAL MANAGER**