

# Liturgy Coming to Life

**Christine Simes**

## *Preface*

Why do people in churches seem like cheerful, brainless tourists on a packaged tour of the Absolute?

The tourists are having coffee and doughnuts on Deck C. Presumably someone is minding the ship, correcting the course, avoiding icebergs and shoals, fueling the engines, watching the radar screen, noting weather reports radioed in from shore. No one would dream of asking the tourists to do these things. Alas, among the tourists on Deck C, drinking coffee and eating doughnuts, we find the captain, and all the ship's officers, and all the ship's crew. They offer chat; they swear; they wink a bit at slightly raw jokes, just like regular people. The crew members have funny accents. The wind seems to be picking up.

On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return.<sup>1</sup>

This booklet began life as weekly inserts in the Pew Sheet written to say something about the Sunday liturgy. Do we wonder what we are doing? Are we 'sufficiently sensible of the conditions'? Does the liturgy give us life? I hope that these little articles may help the liturgy come alive for us. The eucharist is the moment in the week that is like the sun's rays being focused through a magnifying glass. God who is present everywhere is here with us, focused in bread and wine and word, present as we gather together. If the liturgy doesn't bring us to life it is failing. If it doesn't connect with our daily lives in the world it is failing. The liturgy is a work we do together. If those who prepare the liturgy do it well and with care and if we know what we are doing, if we attend with expectation knowing that we stand on holy ground and that the living God is here, we will not be disappointed.

**Christine Simes, parish priest**

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<sup>1</sup> Annie Dillard **Teaching a Stone to Talk** Harper Collins 1982 p45

# Liturgy coming to Life

## Presence

*Pause at the threshold  
Of the sacred space,  
Bow low.  
Prepare for fresh  
Encounter  
With the Holy One*

Ann Lewin

The Sunday liturgy, our worship, is first and foremost about presence, about coming into the presence of God. We come to meet with the Lord, the Giver of Life to be given life! So how is God present? In the liturgy there are three places where the President says ‘The Lord be with you’ and the assembly responds, ‘And also with you.’ This happens at the very beginning of the liturgy, before the reading of the Gospel and at the Table. These words mean what they say. God is present in our gathering. We are the Body of Christ. God speaks through the Word, through the gospel stories of the Word made flesh and God is present in bread and wine on the altar. Jesus said, “This is my body for you.” “This is my blood.” SO in the words of archbishop Peter Carnley Christ is present on the table and gathered around the table. This is the meaning of resurrection. This is the reality of the Christ who has died and is risen. This means that we should come to the liturgy with expectation. We should come knowing that we will meet Christ here. We will know his presence in one another, in a word, in our care for one another. We will hear Christ speak to our hearts, to our needs, speaking in ways that we can understand as we hear the words of scripture and the preaching. We will come close to God as we stand side by side around the Table of the Lord. Here we receive Christ’s life into our own. Here we are made over, transformed just as bread is changed into the body of Christ so we are changed to be like him. All this means that we need to come into the presence and attend. We need to be still, internally quiet, attentive, open. Perhaps we can all say the prayer that I say with the ministers of the liturgy in the entrance before we begin:

*Come to us, O Holy Spirit of God,  
that we may see Christ  
in the breaking open of the Word,  
in the breaking of the bread  
and in one another,  
and love and serve him all our days. Amen*

## The Gospel

*May your Word live in us, and bear much fruit to your glory.*

Every Sunday we hear the gospel. We can leave out other readings from the scriptures but we never omit the gospel from a eucharist. The four gospels are the good news of Jesus Christ our Lord. *Gospel* means *good news*. In them we have the story of God's love for the world in sending Jesus to live and die with us and for us. They are beautifully crafted narratives. They have a real power to speak to us. The Word comes to us through the words. At the end of Luke's gospel which we read this year, Jesus appears to two disciples who are walking away from Jerusalem to Emmaus. They are dejected and without hope. Jesus has been crucified and they thought he was the one who had come to redeem Israel. Jesus joins them on the way, just as Jesus joins us on the way to wherever we are going. He opens the scriptures to them and he breaks bread with them. They recognize him in the breaking of the bread. Their eyes are opened and they say, "*Did not our hearts burn within us as he opened the scriptures to us.*" This is eucharist. We hear the Word, Jesus speaking to us. Our hearts burn within us. We break the bread and recognize him. We see our own lives in the context of the life of Jesus and we are strengthened through the life-giving Spirit to become more like him. We always stand for the gospel. We greet the gospel with the words. '*The Lord be with you.*' '*And also with you.*' And that's what we mean! The gospel is read in our midst and we listen. The reader faces the entrance of the church. We turn to face the gospel. We are ready to go out and proclaim the life that we receive. The gospel is read by the deacon in the church if there is one. The deacon is the one who gives their life to make the connection between the world and the church. That is the deacon's work. If there isn't a deacon the presiding priest reads the gospel and then breaks open the word in the sermon.

Before the gospel is read the words and response are said:

*A reading from the holy gospel according to Luke. Glory to you Lord Jesus Christ.*

As we say these words we can mark ourselves with a cross on forehead, lips and heart. This action is a prayer:

*Christ be in my mind and on my lips and in my heart.*

## The Sign of the Cross

In many churches there are crosses everywhere. Often there is one on the wall behind the altar. If there is a pulpit a crucifix often hangs over it. A processional cross may be carried in procession to begin the Eucharist. This is then placed somewhere. Sometimes crosses are found sitting on credence tables, carved into furniture, decorating altar frontals, hangings or vestments. This proliferation actually dulls the effect of the sign. In a liturgical space there really needs to be only one cross. It should be substantial enough to draw our attention and help us to focus our hearts. A crucifix helps us not to romanticise the cross but to face reality. Some crosses polished and decorated look as if they have never been used! The crucifix makes us look at truth about humanity and our endless violence and the truth about God who suffers and dies rather than retaliate to violence with violence. The cross shows God's arms are tied by love. Here we see a fist that can't be clenched against us.

We can make the sign of the cross on our own bodies at several places during our worship. Firstly, when we speak the words which name God as Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, or Creator, Christ and Spirit or whatever formulae we may use. We can make the sign of the cross before we receive the bread and again before we receive the wine of Holy Communion. We can trace the cross over our bodies as the words of forgiveness are spoken, *May God who loves us, have mercy on us, forgive us our sins ✠.....* We can make the sign on ourselves again when the words of God's blessing are spoken over us at the end of our liturgy. When we make this sign we can make it well, tracing the cross from our forehead down our chest, and from shoulder to shoulder. Gather up all your thoughts and your feelings into this sign. It covers your whole body. In baptism we are marked with the sign of the cross on our foreheads. We are marked as Christ's own for ever. The cross is the place and sign of our redemption, the place where humankind are loved into wholeness by the God who dies, arms stretched wide around the whole creation. Mark the cross on your body and remember the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit - God who made us, God who dies for us, God who brings us to life. In our gathering together, through forgiveness, in the preaching of the Word, in bread and wine, in blessing our lives, in all these ways, God is in us and with us.

Making the sign of the cross on our bodies helps us to remember these things.

## The Eucharist as Meal

The Eucharist is a meal. Sometimes this fact has been obscured by the way our liturgies have been played out. When the priest had his, (and it was *his*) back to the people the feeling of gathering around a table together was completely lost. When people come up to a fenced off sanctuary and kneel in lines the feeling of gathering around a table is lost. These practises certainly emphasised the holiness of the act and reminded people that they were not just eating bread and wine but the Body and Blood of the Lord. The transcendent element was there but at the expense of the gathering of the community around the Table with their risen Lord.

The eucharist has its origin not just in the last meal that Jesus had with his friends but in all the meals Jesus shared during his life on earth. We read Luke's gospel this year<sup>2</sup> and it has rightly been called the gospel of the hospitality of God. In this gospel there are more meals than miracles. Jesus eats at the house of Levi the tax-collector (5:27-30). He shares a great dinner in the house of Simon the Pharisee (7:36-50). He feeds the five thousand (9:10-17). He eats with Mary and Martha (10:38-42). He eats with some Pharisees who become critical and hostile (11:37-54). He then eats at the home of a leading Pharisee. He calls Zacchaeus down from the tree and invites himself home to eat with him. After all these meals Jesus shares the Passover with his friends. This meal celebrates God's faithfulness to Israel, God's saving act in bringing the people out of slavery in Egypt. Now Jesus adds to its meaning saying that the saving blood will now be his own. Our Creator is our Saviour. God comes to us in Christ offering us the hospitality of God's own table. We are friends of God, loved children, invited to become who we are created to be by sharing in the company of God and becoming like God, fully alive, loving and giving. The meals in Luke do not end with the Passover meal, but continue after the cross and resurrection. Jesus meets two disciples walking dejectedly to Emmaus. He opens the scriptures to them and then shares a meal with them. They recognise him in the breaking of the bread and they recall how their hearts burned within them as they heard him speak. This is the Eucharist we share – we break open the Word and break the bread. Christ is here with us when we gather together. We set the table, lay the cloth, fill the cup, break the bread and we all eat and are satisfied.

### **The Eucharist as a Living Sacrifice**

Last week I wrote about the Eucharist as meal which it is, but the meal table is also an altar. An altar is a place of sacrifice. We remember the sacrifice of the life of Jesus given for us. This is not a sacrifice required by God. We do not believe as a matter of Anglican doctrine the idea of the substitutionary theory of the atonement. This idea is alive and well in fundamentalist circles and is the basic tenet of the Alpha course. The idea that Jesus died in our place, as a substitute, is one that arose first in the eleventh century when Anselm looked for a logical reason for saying that Jesus died for us. Living in a medieval world, he compared God with the Lord of a castle who was master of all those in his town. If someone offended his honour it would need to be satisfied by some act. Anselm believed Jesus had satisfied God's offended honour for our failures to live as God commanded us to live. Calvin later advanced this theory by saying that we are sinners who deserve to be punished but Jesus took the punishment for us – 'he died that we might be forgiven.' This then becomes the penal substitutionary theory of the atonement. Now none of this is actually biblical. It is all interpretation. 'Jesus died for us' does not need to mean that Jesus took the punishment for us. When Martin Luther King was campaigning for civil rights for the black people of America many attempts were made on his life. He refused to stop making speeches and fighting for the people. He was murdered, martyred and we would say 'he died for the people.' This is a Christlike death. When we die for others, we are sacrificed for them. God is all love. God's justice is not about revenge or punishment. What we see in Christ is a perfect image of God. Jesus lives among us loving us and showing us the way to live in love. Jesus never retaliates to evil with evil and neither does God. We see God's love for us in that God is willing to send Jesus into the world and take all the evil that the world hands out. Jesus is not rescued by God but suffers death at human hands. Humankind kill Jesus. God does not. Neither does God act like a puppeteer finding human's who will do the work for God! Our liturgy remembers the nature of sacrifice. The altar, the priest, the offering are all sacrificial words. But now we do not bring an animal to be sacrificed. We offer ourselves, our souls and bodies. We are the living sacrifice. We are to become like Christ the one true sacrifice, the one perfect human being who offers himself for us in life and death and resurrection. Christ is God with us. At the heart of God is love that is always self-giving and therefore self-sacrificing. When we drink the poured out blood and eat the broken body we are asking to become like Jesus, blessed, broken and given for the life of others, the life of the world.

### **Eucharist as Transformation**

We don't come to church because God requires it. We come to church because this is the place where we can be made new. The altar is the work-bench of God's new creation. When we gather together we pray the collect of preparation: 'Almighty God to whom all hearts are open all desires known'. We come here into the presence of the God who knows us through and through, who knows who we are and where we are and who knows what we might become. This prayer helps us come and stand before God and be ourselves, the person we are when we take off our masks, when all the games stop. So we come and pray that God who sees us as we are will help us to see ourselves as we are. We pray to God to 'cleanse the thoughts of hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit'. So we come into this place and ask and expect an encounter with God, through the Spirit. The penitential rite helps us further as we confess our sins, or as we focus on the places in our lives where we have prevented ourselves or others from becoming whole, from living the kingdom now. When we listen to the scriptures, the Spirit moves in our hearts and minds so that the story of faith intersects with our lives here and now. The gospel speaks the 'good news' of Christ to us and we listen together to hear the word that comes to us through the Word made Flesh. We make peace with those gathered with us and again proclaim the possibility of God's kingdom, God's redeemed creation and then we gather together around the altar table. We offer bread and wine and ourselves. Bread comes from grain which is ground into flour and transformed into bread. Wine comes from grapes that are crushed and transformed into wine. Bread and wine are transformed into the Body and Blood of Christ. This transformation need not be thought of in a crudely literal way – we don't look for flesh and blood in that sense. But it is a real transformation. The bread is no longer just bread. The wine is no longer just wine. "This is my body. This is my blood. Do this..” We take into ourselves the life of Christ, his very self and being and we become like him. This is the transformation that we come to church to engage in. We come to meet with the life-giving God, our creator, our saviour, the One who meets us where we are and sharpens our sight, and opens our hearts, and speaks to our minds so that we can be revealed to ourselves and so that God can take us and break us and bless us with new insight, a new heart, truer beauty and closer likeness to Christ. In a word we are being deified or divinised made over in the image of God. Do we have the slightest idea of the power we invoke just by coming through these church doors? The very ground is holy, every person here is holy and the Holy God is here. We may not need crash helmets but we should be overcome with awe, gratitude, wonder, love and grace.

O Christ, Master Carpenter,  
who at the last, through wood and nails,  
purchased our whole salvation,  
wield well your tools in the workshop of your world,  
so that we who come rough-hewn to your bench,  
may here be fashioned to a truer beauty of your hand.  
We ask it for your names sake.  
Amen