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The Transfiguration of Christ

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HOW TO PRAY THE SERVICE (I)

How did Jesus know the will of God? In his divine nature, as God the Son, he is the full revelation of God's will, the Word of God; but in the human nature which the Son of God took upon himself from Mary, we know that Jesus "grew in wisdom and stature" (Luke 1.52). That is to say, as a man Jesus did not come into the world with a fully formed knowledge and understanding of God's will. The will of God was something he came to know and understand gradually, as does any other human being. In the one report we have of him in the three hidden decades between his birth and baptism by John, we find him at age twelve in the temple, "in the midst of the doctors" – that is, scholars of the Old Testament – "both hearing them, and asking them questions" (Luke 2.46). As does any other human being, he came to know and understand the will of God by being taught; by submitting his mind and will to the teaching of Scripture.

What Jesus found in the teaching of Scripture was a kind of divine script for the Son of God and the Messiah of Israel to fulfill. "Thus it is written" he would say, "and thus it behoved Christ to suffer, and to rise from the dead the third day, and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem" (Luke 24.46-47). And having learned his Father's will in the doctrine of Scripture, he taught his disciples the same: "And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself" (Luke 24.27). He told them: "all things must be fulfilled, which were written in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the psalms, concerning me. Then opened he their understanding, that they might understand the scriptures" (Luke 24.44-45).

As for Christ, so for his Church: we find God's will for us by submitting our minds and wills to the doctrine of Scripture, under the guidance of Christ's own teaching, example, and Spirit. This may take place through the teaching ministry of the Church, through public sermons and discussions; or through private counsel, encouragement, and admonition. It also takes place through private study and meditation upon the Scriptures, a discipline aptly compared by Cranmer to a cow's chewing the cud, with the result "that we may have the sweet juice, spiritual effect, marrow, honey, kernel, taste, comfort, and consolation of them".

Third, it takes place through the Church's common prayer. The model for this third way is found in the book of Psalms, that ancient

anthology of Israel's praise and prayer. If there was one book of Scripture which Jesus prized above all others, it seems to have been the book of Psalms. Certainly it is the book of the Old Testament most frequently in the New; and it usually is quoted as a book of prophecy about Christ. In the book of Psalms, Jesus not only found God's will for him, the Father's word to the Son: he also found the Son's word to the Father. It is his first word: "Lo, I come (in the volume of the book it is written of me) to do thy will, O God" (Psalm 40.7 quoted in Hebrews 10.7) – and it is his last: "Father, Into thy hands, I commend my spirit" (Psalm 31.5 quoted in Luke 23.46). His use of the psalms indicates to us the importance, not only of knowing God's will set forth in his word, but also of submitting our wills to it, in faith and obedience. Thus the word that comes to us from God returns to him in our praise and prayer.

In the act of worship the Church takes into her mouth and ears, her mind and heart, the words and doctrine of Scripture, as a kind of script to be fulfilled in her through Christ. God's word, having gone forth in lesson, sermon, and sacrament, returns to him through the Church's praise, thanksgiving, and prayer. God speaks to us in his word, and we respond to him according to his word; and thereby the Church wills what God wills. So a sound and healthy form of worship provides us with a kind of script through which we come to the knowledge of, and submission to, the will of God. That is precisely and even literally what the historic Prayer Book sets out to do, and very largely accomplishes. It has been rather well described as "the Bible re-ordered for public worship." And it sets out quite literally a script of prescribed and stable forms of words and ceremonies for priest and people to follow. It not only shows us how to worship God in accordance with the teaching of Scripture in the historic faith of the Catholic Church, but also gives us the words and actions in which to do so.

Such fixed forms of word and ceremony provide a liturgy whose quality is not dependent upon the ability of the preacher, and not subject to the possible deficiency of his understanding, the weakness of his conviction, or the vagaries of his taste. The excellence of these forms is the work of the best liturgical craftsmen and has been tested by generations of the faithful. Such forms also allow the congregation to worship with full understanding and consent, because the forms are accessible to them on the page and can be committed to the memory. Paradoxically, therefore, precisely because the forms are fixed and stable, they permit a genuine worship from the heart without self-consciousness: these words can become ours. Finally, they help those worshiping to realize that Christian worship does not take place in isolation from the rest of the Church, but is always a participation in a process that is much bigger than an individual person, congregation, or denomination. Of course, the forms of worship have to be healthy and sound – which is why, in principle, the revision of forms that are already sound and healthy should be modest and conservative. As traditional Episcopalians have feared, and experience has proven to be the case, if we open the door of liturgical revision too wide, the spirit that blows in may not be the one that is holy and true.

In some other Protestant churches such as the Presbyterian, there is a noble tradition of public prayer either ex-tempore (composed on the spot) or pre-meditated and even composed by the preacher. At its best it can be very impressive and powerful, based on solid doctrinal substance and pastoral imagination. (This is the tradition vigorously

upheld down the street at Independent Presbyterian by Mr Johnson.) But it can also be depressingly mediocre – one cliché after another - and when it is bad (like the little girl in the old rhyme) it is horrid. Anyone who has been subjected to the banality of “wejus” prayer (“We jus’ wanna thank you ...and we jus’ wanna ask you...”) knows what I mean. If that is spontaneity of worship, give me inflexible rigidity every time!

That is a long prologue to a practical topic: how to pray the Prayer Book. But it is a necessary one. It indicates to us in what spirit we should approach those services: as a kind of script for us to know, to will, and to fulfill, the will of God for our eternal joy in Jesus Christ. Just letting it wash over us will not take us far. It requires the investment of the energies of our souls: faith that believes God’s word, and is ready to act upon it in obedience; confident hope in the promises of God’s grace; humility than renounces self-determination, and charity that wills the good of the whole Church and people of God.

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