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TURNING TO THE LORD

Since ancient times, Christians have turned to the east to pray. Christians looked to the east for the dawning of "the day of the Lord", the "acceptable time", God's new and eternal "day of salvation" (2 Corinthians 6:2), the day first manifest in the rising of his Son from the tomb, and finally to be consummated in his coming again in glory. They turned to one another to speak words of comfort and exhortation, of instruction and encouragement, but when they prayed, they turned to the quarter of the rising sun, in honour of the Lord, the risen Son. After his sermon was finished, Saint Augustine would introduce the prayer that followed with the call "conversi ad dominum", which means both that they should turn unto the Lord and also that they should be converted unto the Lord. Their turning to the east was an external sign of their inward conversion to the Lord in hope and expectation. "My soul waiteth for the Lord more than they that watch for the morning: I say, more than they that watch for the morning" (Psalm 130:6, KJV).

That the inward conversion of the soul, and the corporate prayer of the church, both found their external sign in this cosmic symbolism, is entirely in accord with the teaching of our religion. For it is the explicit teaching of the Scripture that the "the creature itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God", and therefore it waits, as we do, "for the adoption, to wit, the redemption of our body" (Romans 8:19-23). Our turning to the east is a sign not just of hope for ourselves, but for the whole of the world created by God, hope that with mankind, it will find its true end in God. In an age of "global consciousness" and wholistic environmentalist concern, one might expect this cosmic spiritual symbolism to resonate more deeply than ever. Strangely, this is not so.

The great number of historic churches are laid out so that the altar faces (at least approximately) east. (The practice bears the technical name of orientation, from the Latin word "oriens" meaning "rising" and "east"). Even churches constructed long after the Protestant reformation continued to be laid out on such lines, Christ Church on Johnson Square being one such example. Perhaps because of the exigencies of its site, Saint John's is not oriented. Our altar is at the west of the building. Yet this anomaly was remedied by the construction in the 1920's of the reredos on the west wall above the altar, as a memorial to two former rectors, Mr. Dakin and Mr. Strong. It is dominated by a larger-than-life-size figure of Christ, risen from the tomb, victorious over every enemy, reigning from the cross upon which

he suffered, his arms flung wide still in inter-cession, blessing, and invitation. "Come unto me, all that travail and are heavy laden, and I will refresh you" (Matthew 11:28). Though geographically we turn west when we pray, symbolically and spiritually we are turning east - "liturgical east" - for we turn to the crucified, risen, and reigning Lord.

Since the 1960's, orientation - whether geographical or liturgical - has disappeared from most churches, even those with places for the altar at the east of the building. Rather than turning together to face the Lord, it is now the custom in many places to turn to face one another. Since the priest faces the congregation across the altar-table, all standing, the rather startling effect is that he is praying to them. (It is even more startling to see a televised mass, in which the priest is apparently praying to the viewer.) Various anti-quarian precedents of doubtful veracity were alleged in support of the practice, but the real interest was a desire to "build community", and it goes hand-in-hand with the fashion for "community-building" exercises like the exchange of the peace. Group process is all, in a community construed primarily as a network of interpersonal relationships. What is missed is that the processional congregation headed by the priest and facing the Lord is also a community, and one united at a far deeper level than interpersonal relationship, united by a common faith, a common hope, and a common love, centered upon the Lord who comes in grace and glory.

The problem with the current practice is illustrated by a story told by Avery Cardinal Dulles. At a church in which he was invited to preach, he saw an enormous banner, bearing the slogan, "God is Other People". He wanted to take an enormous marker, he said, and put a comma after the word "Other". God is always more than his creation, or his church: the absolute beginning and end of all that is, indeed the absolute "other", never to be confused or conflated with or reduced to that which he has made. When we turn to gaze on one another in prayer, symbolically at least we are turning our backs to the Lord in his otherness, and shutting him out. Either that, or we are shutting him inside our closed circle, reducing him to what this particular community imagines or wishes him to be. Neither symbolism is fitting for Christian worship, and we must hope that Christians who have fallen into that confusion will reform their practice. Yet one cannot but fear that in some cases the "closed circle" is a very suitable symbol for a church that has closed itself against God, or reduced him to the sum total of its communal group experience. Absit omen!

The Rev'd Gavin G. Dunbar



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