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WORSHIP IN SPIRIT AND IN TRUTH

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We reprint from Advent 2008 a sermon for the Nova Scotia branch of the Prayer Book Society of Canada, by Canon Robert Crouse.

"The hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth; for the Father seeketh such to worship him." St. John 4:23

To many of our fellow Anglicans, even to members of the Prayer Book Society, it would perhaps seem an exaggeration to say that the current crisis in the Anglican Communion is about liturgy. In a church which seems lost in uncertainties about the most basic matters of theology, about the authority of Holy Scripture, about the unique lordship of Jesus Christ, and about the principles of Christian moral life, surely questions about liturgy, which seem so often to be questions more of style than of substance, must seem of very secondary importance. And yet, to think of the Prayer Book and liturgy in just that perspective would be to misunderstand

both the significance of liturgy and the nature of the Anglican Communion.

Liturgy is after all the form of the church's relation to God, in penitence, petition and intercession, in thanksgiving and adoration. At its centre is the thankful remembrance of the atoning sacrifice of Christ, and it looks forward with ardent hope to the liturgy of heaven: the new song of the redeemed at the marriage supper of the Lamb. All of these activities also have a place, of course, in the private devotions of every Christian, and publicly in various occasions of prayer and praise. Indeed, they are the daily life of the believer. But the Church's official liturgy is the common form and pattern, and in the liturgies pertaining to various stages and occasions of human life, the whole of our life is uplifted and set within the context of God's justifying and sanctifying grace. And it is within that context that the spiritual life of individuals and communities can grow.

It is important to recognize, however, that liturgy is primarily worship of Almighty God, "our reasonable service". Our own spiritual growth is secondary and con-sequential, a kind of by-product, a consequence of

our focusing our love in

God, and re-ordering all our loves in that perspective. That point may seem obvious enough; and yet, how much of contemporary liturgical theory and practice is predicated on the supposition that the primary purpose of liturgy is the building or improvement of our own spiritual lives or the life of our community, to such an extent that its God-ward focus tends to be obscured!

Increasingly secularized churches aim more at community building and world improvement than at heavenly beatitude, and liturgies are revised or newly-minted to reflect such preoccupations. Heaven fades from the Christian vision, and the new song of the redeemed gives place to the song of the modern city. In such a context liturgy, in so far as it remains relevant at all, tends to be regarded as a device for encouraging psychological and social change.

But that is really not the point of Christian liturgy. The point of our liturgy, the meaning of our common prayer, is our entering, by grace, into the perfect self-offering of the eternal Son to the Father; our entering into that adoring charity which is the life of God Himself.

My God, how wonderful thou art,

Thy majesty how bright!

How beautiful thy mercy-seat;

In depths of burning light!

The essence of our liturgy is precisely that ascent of mind and heart in loving aspiration; and all other aspects of our common prayer – our thanksgiving, our intercessions, our petitions, our penitence – are ancillary; always relative to the central focus of adoration, which is our union with God, our being in God, in and through the risen and Ascended Lord. Our true liturgy resides in that adoring love which is the Son's relation to the Father; and the Spirit sweeps us up into that relation, when we begin our prayer, as Jesus taught us, looking towards "Our Father, who art in heaven".

Liturgy is not, finally, a means to any other end: adoration is itself the end and not a means, and adoration must always be the basic character and focus of our common prayer. "The true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth, for the Father seeketh such to worship him". Thus, as Richard Hooker expresses it, liturgy constitutes a wondrous "commerce" between earth and heaven: "For what is the assembling of the Church to learn, but the receiving of angels descended from above? What to pray, but the ascending of Angels upward? His heavenly inspiration and our holy desires are so many Angels of intercourse and commerce between God and us." God's grace descends to us, and all of creation, and ascends again in prayer.

Thus it is that Jesus, in today's Gospel lesson [St. Luke 5.1], uses the miraculous harvest of the waters to point us towards a different harvest; the harvest of the spirit; the harvest of souls bought to maturity in him: "henceforth thou shalt catch men" – souls delivered from the barren and bitter waters of sinfulness and futility. What we are really concerned with is the everlasting life of the spirit. "Here we

have no continuing city". What is saved is the harvest of the spirit – spirits made deeper in knowledge and love of God, spirits made perfect in adoration. "For the Father seeketh such to worship him".

RDC

Canon Robert Crouse

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