

# **ORTHODOX BOOKLETS**

**Basic substantial teaching on what  
Orthodox Christians believe**



## **7**

### **WHY LITURGY?**

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## **WHY LITURGY?**

Whether we are English, Irish or Scots we are likely to think church services are boring. We may have been compelled to go to church as children, and having been thoroughly bored and restless. We just could not wait till the service was over and we had our freedom. We got heartily sick of the whole thing.

If you were like me, it took a long time for God to persuade me to enter a church again. In so far as I had found some faith and understood that, if there was a God, he did something, I regained a little interest. But the communion service I attended was usually short, the priest said it quickly, and so it was not too bad - and anyway breakfast quickly followed.

Christianity and liturgy got a toehold in my life in this way. But when I met people who had a pop at 'liturgy' because it was 'traditional', 'boring', and 'repetitious', I had little with which to counter them. Given the non-conformist background that I had, when others said there was neither liturgy nor clergy in the bible I instinctively assented. 'Why liturgy?' has therefore always been a pertinent question for me. Why did they do it this way? Who invented the idea in the first place? What exactly is the point of it all?

### **Visible unity**

Then I found in a book – I cannot remember where – it said that liturgy was unique to the Jewish tradition – and thereby to the Christians who took it over from them. The reason liturgy meant so much to the Jews was that,

because the liturgy uses words and prayers which have been unchanged from time immemorial, therefore every Jew who had ever lived was felt to share in the worship. The Jews were one people with a sense of the unity of worship throughout time, embracing every generation in the past and embracing every Jew alive in the world. Liturgy is a unique way of expressing that all are one. The words are always basically the same. Every Jew knows them and sings them. All past and present throughout the world are united in the same voice, in the same heart, in the same spirit before the God before whom they stand.

The early church appreciated the same communal and unifying dimensions to its worship, as the church in each place gathered together at one altar around the bishop. Since then liturgy has developed as prayers have been added, hymns have grown, and rites expanded. Nevertheless Orthodox everywhere have a real sense of being the one and the same church as that of the apostles in Jerusalem. They see their church as going back substantially to that first congregation gathered round the apostles, having the same faith, being the same community, celebrating the same Eucharist, and praying the same way together. 'Founded in 33 AD' maybe a slogan but it makes a point.

Orthodox will speak of the continuity of their bishops with the apostles not because this constitutes a mere line of contact but because they visibly represent the fact that the community is one and the same without significant change, alteration or deviation. Christians pass away, new ones are baptised but the unity of life is the same. The church everywhere is doing the same thing –

receiving the divine life of Christ into their hearts, becoming one body with him through obedience to his Word and through the sacraments throughout time, the same yesterday, today and for ever.

Liturgy may be described as 'what the whole people of God – do in unity together'. This includes everyone – in heaven and on earth and everywhere throughout the world. Liturgy uniquely expresses this tangible communion for everyone of all time. It is the only appropriate mode by which the church of Christ celebrates what it is and what it is for in the purposes of God.

'Keeping the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace' does not, for Orthodox, mean there can be a spiritual unity separate or apart from the real bond of living in the same body. 'There is one body and one Spirit' Paul continues, 'just as you are called in the one hope of your calling'; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and father who is above all, through all and in you all'.

Unity is specific, even concrete: we partake of the same body at the same altar under the same bishop in each place. This was how the early church lived and understood its life. Orthodox do not seek anything different.

The corollary is that if anyone thinks to 'have communion' any other way they will have a different – and very inadequate - understanding of what it means to be the church.

Visible unity is important for this reason: the church is one and becomes one every time the church gathers round the altar to partake of the unique Body and Blood

of the one divine saviour Jesus Christ.

This is not a ritual, nor is it a boring repetition. It is the mode by which the church as a body is able to become more like him in holiness.

## **Holiness**

The words of the liturgy have been prayed by thousands of saints. This fact should inspire us enormously. God answered their prayers and made them holy. We pray the same prayers and he will make us holy – a true ‘communion of saints’.

If anyone looks at the liturgy and the church apart from growth in holiness and the transformation of human life by Christ’s divine life, there might not appear much happening. That view is, in scriptural language, simply the view of the ‘flesh’, the merely natural point of view. What makes every service different is the fact that God is changing us all ‘from grace to grace and from glory to glory’, not in some grandiose sweep of imagination, but specifically liturgy by liturgy, walking in a growing obedience week by week, or even day by day, as Christ draws all things to himself.

The essential link between liturgy and the way of holiness in Orthodoxy alone makes sense of everything in church life. Without the growing in holiness all else will, for sure, fall flat and ‘as dull as dishwater’.

The church in the West, through time, suffered a most unfortunate separation of liturgy and life, of liturgy and prayer, of liturgy and spirituality, of liturgy and contemplation. To be sure, Orthodoxy itself has not always been free of this. One of the most significant

recoveries of our times has been the realisation that in the early church liturgy and prayer, liturgy and the mystical life, liturgy and contemplation, far from being opposites coincide. It needs to be said clearly: liturgy can lead us to the heights of contemplation.

Recovery of this awareness, itself not altogether widespread, is connected to the publication and translation in our times of many of the works of the Fathers. It has become possible to articulate with clarity the continuity of one great tradition of holiness from the very first Fathers through successive generations and in different countries until now. Forty years ago it was very difficult to delineate this tradition accurately for the dearth of sources and lack of knowledge.

To read the Fathers and to understand how, for them, there was no separation between doctrine and spirituality, between theology and contemplation, between life and prayer, between sacraments and the vision of God, has become in our time a powerful movement of the Spirit blowing away the cobwebs. The same Spirit is now invigorating a new generation to have much more faith, hope and courage to take the Fathers as true guides for our own lives.

The Spirit makes one thing clear to us: that this new life does not come about through our own thinking, through trying to work things out in our head, merely through studying, more courses and more 'training'. The response must come from our heart, not as a display of emotion, but through the effective daily surrender of the whole of ourselves to life-giving repentance.

If anyone wants to follow Jesus, to be his disciple, to

apply the Gospel to life there is no alternative whatsoever to discovering effective repentance. The Gospels say this, the whole tradition says this, the scriptures maintain this, every Father of the church teaches this. The liturgy itself says this. How could we miss it?

The liturgy of Baptism – the rite so easily assumed or taken for granted - is wholly focussed on the act of divine initiative to be met by a commitment to actual and radical repentance. The whole focus is on the divine act. In the same way, in the Eucharist, God meets with us.

However things have gone amiss even in countries with a long history of Orthodoxy. The performance of the liturgy has at times been obscured by aestheticism, or by a 'keeping of the rules', or by ethnic considerations. However if the liturgy becomes exotic, obscurantist, or characterised by separation and exclusion, it becomes unreal.

Historical circumstances have had their impact. The attempt to have confessions heard before communion, in order to make people to take what was happening with sufficient seriousness, led to further decline in frequent communion. 'Attendance', not personal participation, became the norm. Worse still, with the development of symbolical modes of interpretation of the liturgy which were divorced from the real action of the liturgy, obscured and distorted the structure and action of the liturgy.

Many people will not aware of these changes. However as focus shifted to the often hidden actions of the priest the peoples own actions, singing and participation diminished, thus reducing their role to watching and listening. Awareness of a unified corporate act

correspondingly diminished.

At other times, in Russia, the lack of churches and of priests, led to the use of 'Prayer Books'. These were important for laypeople to continue a life of prayer. But they are no substitute for liturgy.

We must hope that in our time there will be a recovery of liturgical life in the church not by change so much as by using what is already in the liturgy more sensitively and intelligently.

## **Preliminaries**

The most obvious thing about Orthodox liturgy is that we stand.

Modern society is so comfort orientated. The liturgy is not. Standing registers that we are about something important: we are standing before almighty God himself and nothing else is appropriate.

God made us to stand before him in the midst of creation as the ones entrusted by him with all that he has made. He invites us to tend and care for it and to offer it back to him with thanksgiving and love.

However this is not said lightly. We have to take responsibility. We have to render an account.

Liturgy therefore tells us what life is about. It teaches us that there is an appropriate 'response' to life. Those who think life is entertainment, that life is a beach, are in for a rude awakening. Liturgy enables us to face what life is about before it is too late, before we meet God face to face.

Our generations don't want what they call the 'old



headmaster stuff'. But in truth it is not like that at all. The Father gave his Son that we might come back before him 're-instated', washed, clothed with a right mind (with the truth) and with a ring on our finger. The Father now embraces us with love when we come before him. He receives us at the banquet prepared. He would feed us with the Word and Food of Life. Liturgy truly is celebration. Liturgy prepares us for joy.

In liturgy we do not stand there like dumb animals. We are not mere 'spirits'. Both bodies and souls have to get into the action – without that we shall not embrace God.

I once told a friend I had become Orthodox. 'Oh', he said, 'isn't that ritualistic?'

My friend had plucked a term once coined in Protestant-Catholic polemics and applied it to a church that has never been part of that polemic. In his ignorance he simply took it for granted that any act performed by the body instead of 'in the inner spirit', was merely 'ritual', by which he meant an 'empty gesture' and could not possibly have any 'real' meaning.

I was taken aback by the ignorance. But this is what understanding liturgy is up against in the world today. Sadly life today is full of empty gestures. Religion, if it is allowed any place at all, is only another empty gesture.

Orthodox have to tell things as they are whether people like it or not. Signing oneself with the sign of the cross is not a ritual. It is, or becomes, the willing surrender of ourselves to the life-giving mystery of the cross. In the surrender something happens: silently and secretly we step so to speak into another dimension: we let eternal life in. Grace enters us.

The same thing happens when we prostrate ourselves. We gladly 'throw ourselves away' in deep humility and reverence and at other times penitence. Grace enters us.

How does one discover these things? God has to reveal these things to us. You should ask him to do so.

Standing and singing is the normal mode of Orthodox prayer. Some places may not allow us to sing, and that is sad. If that is the case try standing and singing the introductory prayers at home, or even parts of vespers and matins. Singing opens us up. It gets the whole of us moving as we are meant to move, heart and mind from head to toe. Standing assists this; sitting or kneeling impedes it. We are meant to sing. There is so much more of us functioning when we sing – not singing noisily but with a certain stillness of heart and mind so that our whole responds with the sound. Surely we are made for this. God wants the whole of us in the offering.

That is why it is good to get to the liturgy well before it starts. We need to get our minds still and our hearts moving with the Spirit. On a cold day we may start a car up to get the pistons warm before we start on the journey. It is rather like that with us. We do not want to cough and splutter when the Blessing is given. If our hearts are warmed already by the Spirit we can move off straight away with attention and expectation.

## **Stillness of heart**

Some degree of stillness is vital. God does not want our minds to be whirring away 'doing its own thing'. That is the activity of the self functioning apart from him. Liturgy requires no mental activity other than to rest in the action, the singing and the words provided. Prayer understood

as finding our own words and a 'sincerity' to accompany them only exhausts the human heart and mind. The words of the liturgy have been crafted and the singing designed so that, with heart and mind together, we can sustain prayer with deep attention over a long period. The words are more than enough to express what we need.

Someone once said to me, on coming out of attending their first liturgy, that what struck them about the liturgy is there is no place for the 'self'. Exactly. All true prayer requires that we ignore the stream of chatter and negativity which comes from the self. To grow in prayer and holiness we need to practice such standing against the intrusions of the self, daily, hourly, consistently every day. When we gather in church we need to connect with God through a heart at peace and a mind that is still, that is, with a unified heart and mind. This is where liturgy and growth in prayer come together

Orthodox liturgy provides an abundance of worship, repentance, prayer and intercession. We are caught up with the universal apostolic community down the ages as it has learnt to stand before God. What began as the liturgy on one day of the week evolved into the liturgical year. This makes it possible to enter into the mystery of God and his dealings with humanity on a much fuller scale through the many feasts, great and small, including those not only of the Saviour but of Mary his Mother and of the angels and all the saints. The presence of this unity and holiness is put before us, in the traditional style of its Orthodox building, in the frescoes and icons, a presence which we own as we kiss the icons and light our candles.

There is the well-known story of how Russian envoys from Kiev came to the liturgy in the cathedral of Sancta

Sophia in Constantinople and declared on their return home that they had not known whether they were in heaven or on earth. The same should be true of every liturgy – with or without a Sancta Sophia.

Each liturgy is unique because every time the people of God gather together round the altar God comes to gather us to himself. The Eucharist makes, and continually remakes the church what it is, his body and his bride. With God it is never a matter of ‘here we go again’. Each liturgy takes us up in the ascent to where God is and moves us on in holiness.

The opening of the liturgy sets up an essential dialogue: God with us. When the bishop is present he sits on the throne behind the altar ‘in the place of God’. Even though we do not often have a bishop with us and even though unfortunately the people often cannot see the throne, it remains true that the liturgy reflects the fact that God sits on his throne and calls us to himself, through his Word and through the Eucharist.

## **Learning to Make an Offering**

Liturgy is about entering into the action of God. It is not about what we do, or think or feel. It is about the wonderful discovery that it is not about us at all. It is about God and his humility in coming to embrace us and change us.

To get into liturgy we must learn how to make an offering. Christians who do not have liturgy have more or less lost the knowledge of how to do this. To make an offering to God is the deepest religious instinct of mankind. But with Christ there is another dimension present: Christ takes our offering and unites it to his own in heaven: in the

liturgy we move step by step to meet him there.

We have to prepare the offering first. This is not as simple as it appears. It involves bringing, listening, repenting, obeying and praying with effective intent. The Lord will receive such an offering and something will happen as a result.

Putting a prosphora, accompanied with your name, into a basket is just about all that is left of what long ago was a much fuller action when people would bring their basic subsistence of bread and wine which they themselves had made. These were received by the deacon at the door of the church to begin the process of 'gathering together' as the people of God.

Times have changed and we do things differently – a member of the congregation bakes the bread for us all. But we must still understand that when we gather together, together we bring the whole of creation and the whole of (our) life. We bring our bodies and souls, our hearts and minds, and all that is in them for good or ill. We bring all that we are and all that we do day by day. We bring all those people and places with whom we are connected in our daily lives. For it is not only in us that God wants to bring about change but also out there where each day we function in the world.

If we lose our connection with the world we lose liturgy. Part of making an offering is the knowledge that we shall come back again and make another one. But it is not a 'repeat'. When we come back God will look at what we have done with what he gave us at the last offering. He gave us the Bread which is always at work and never perishes. He will want to see how the leaven is working in

our 'lump'.

Christ made it quite clear that he expects us to 'trade' with the talent he gives us. This is not because he is a 'hard' man', but because he loves us so much. He knows that we can only 'have life' by growing. Life and growth are synonymous. Stop growing and we have 'arrested development'. When we have grown to the fullness of him he knows we shall be overflowing with happiness.

The act of regular offering gives our Christian life its necessary dynamic. Through it we are brought directly into God's own working out of his purpose. We are brought directly into the sphere of his grace not only during the liturgy but at all times, in all the circumstances of our life. We are brought into the rhythm of the very universe.

This is not exaggeration. Modern people find themselves strangely alienated from the world in which they live and disconnected from other human beings. Entering the liturgy does not take us into a false world but we enter truly into the real world. The human beings around us become important, everything we touch in the world around us becomes significant, we become connected with all the creatures of this world, human, animate and inanimate. What we do, how we act, what we say, what we think, how we live and breathe all becomes an essential part of our offering. Every real thing becomes an indicator of whether we have 'seen the true Light' as we sing at the end of the liturgy.

The world sees things through fear, anxiety, judgement, anger, resentment and misery, and uses everything for endless gratification. Or we can turn everything around

and bring all these things within the sphere of the liturgy: 'Blessed is the Kingdom..., now, and for ever and unto the ages of ages'. Then we learn to look at everything differently, through the eyes of God who gives us all things, and who gives us new eyes with which to see and understand the nature of the world.

We bring the whole creation for God to take and consecrate. When God blesses something he brings it into line with his purpose, he puts grace into it that it may function within its proper place in the universe. Adam was blessed by God to bring the creation into God's kingdom. What he failed once to do, we do now in Christ, the new Adam. Adam threw away his priesthood; in Christ we recover it.

After the blessing comes the call: 'in peace let us pray to the Lord'. We learn to pray in peace, without fear, anxiety, anger, judgement, resentment, misery and so on in our hearts, we are praying within his Kingdom.

Several times in the liturgy we also hear 'Peace be with you'. This is not sentiment. In the liturgy, in the sphere before the throne of God, we bathe continually in his peace. We need to. We all know how the thoughts of our hearts and minds keep re-surfacing. We all know what a battle it is to keep our attention on God. We have to be resolute, within and without the liturgy, to stand against all that is not of God. We have to abandon everything that is not of peace. This includes the 'self' which does not want peace with God but only a self-centred 'peace and quiet' over against everyone else.

If we want peace with God we must also be at peace with one another. We must be reconciled to our brother. This

is of particular importance in the Church. The religious world has got used to thinking of 'just me and my God'. That is not Christianity. Christianity is a lot more realistic than that. We cannot have God's peace unless we let go of all the hatred and criticism in our hearts towards one another. If Christians do not grow, often it is because they have not begun to do this.

The liturgy offers us something of an entirely different order. It offers us the possibility of the hearts of all of us being moved together in peace by the Holy Spirit so as to lift up the stricken world to God. The only way he will be in our prayer is when together our hearts and minds are surrendered to his will.

## **The Gospel**

We prepare the next step by getting ourselves ready to hear Christ speak his Gospel. This is not as easy as it seems because we have to hear him with our hearts. Our hearts are frequently not in the right place. We need qualities like humility, poverty of spirit and stillness to hear him. Our culture however cultivates knowledge through the head so it is difficult for us to discover how Christ speaks to us in depths beyond words. We may feel blank at first but if we persevere, in time we find his words somehow slip in and impact our hearts in a way we will never understand.

At the entrance the Gospel is raised aloft. We cry out: 'O come let us worship and fall down before Christ'. This is not pantomime. We cannot say more strongly: Christ is here.

The Gospel is Christ. He is the Wisdom and Word of God. Of course I sing 'Holy God,...Holy Mighty...Holy



and Immortal... have mercy upon us'. Of course I repeat it again and again. These are deep mysterious words. They carry our cry: God I want to see you, I want to hear you...have mercy.

The Gospel is not read to remind us of what we know already. It is not a formality however many times we have heard it before. We must always try to hear Christ and expect him to challenge us. Often we hear the words but we do not hear him speaking to us. The reason so often is that our hearts are elsewhere and our minds anywhere. We are obliged to catch them and make them listen.

I have often wondered what it would have been like to have been in Galilee and hear that Christ was entering town. I would undoubtedly have been excited. What would it have been like to see his face, to catch a glimpse of him as he moved towards someone to speak or act. What expectation there would have been to see him manifest the Kingdom.

The deacon cries out 'Let us attend!' He comes to us now as the Risen One. For us, as the deacon reminds us several times, the key is attention. We should be in awe. He wants to touch us, change us, that ultimately we may see his face and live.

To show you what I mean let me speak of icons. Icons are Christ, Mary, Raphael, Seraphim, Silouan and so on. Do not worry about the wood, the paint or the paper. God doesn't. The people represented are truly there before us. At times I cannot raise my eyes to see their faces. The holiness of God and of all the holy ones with him is a 'fearful' thing. I fear to come before them in my present

state because I get the sense that I shall fall apart and be burnt up. Sometimes, just sometimes, my spirit feels it will melt...

It is the Spirit which gives life. We cannot make such experiences happen; and much of the time we do not experience things so intensely. But nevertheless God trains us in the liturgy to attend to what is before us and to challenge us always to grow in faith and hope. He will reward us.

Face to face with the Risen Christ we have to expose ourselves, so to speak, so deeply that we no longer have control over ourselves any more. Then he takes control of us, and our life becomes hid with him. He wounds us with his love so that we can never do without him. Our being does not rest unless it is resting in him. Therefore we will not allow anything, on earth or in the universe, however slight, to get between him and our spirit. We willingly 'die' for the sake of our union with him.

This goes against everything the world has to teach us about survival. It is strange being so out of our depth. But the mystery of Christ becomes real. It is like being face to face with an unseen person, a person who lives beyond time but who enters into it and strangely affects my heart. Sometimes I think I can't take any more. But he leads us on, into the ascent.

## **More on the Gospel**

The priest prays 'O Master who loves mankind, make the pure light of thy divine knowledge shine in our hearts, and open the eyes of our mind to perceive the message of your Gospel. Implant in us, also, the fear of thy blessed commandments, that trampling down all the

desires of the flesh, we may follow a way of life that is spiritual, both thinking and doing all those things that are well-pleasing to thee. For thou art the illumination of our souls and bodies, O Christ our God...'

Belief in the right of the individual to do or say whatever they wish is the world-view of our day. But Christ does not tell us to do what we wish. Nor does he tell us to do things which all contradict each other. Experience indicates that in our time the church does not have a very great sense of corporate obedience. Or, to put it another way, church communities seem to experience great difficulty in agreeing on the will of God and obediently doing it together. Such churches have yet to allow themselves to be formed fully by the liturgy.

In this country, as elsewhere, the interpretation of the Scriptures has been brought into extreme disrepute by preachers who confuse the Gospel with their own ideas and who give us slop instead of Jesus. Any church therefore in which the priest is able to interpret the Gospel in the light of the church's one tradition of the way of holiness should count themselves fortunate. But the issue for us all, priest and community, is whether we as a church surrender and apply ourselves with any real sense to commitment to follow Christ in all his ways.

The commitment to obey is the inherent prerequisite of the act of communion.

Having turned our hearts and wills more deeply in the direction of God, we continue to bring the world to him. For we are part of it and it forms a big part of us. 'Let us all say, with all our soul and with all our mind' the deacon calls. We know we are connected in the global economy

but we are connected spiritually too. It is essential to the well-being of the world that in all these litanies we bring everybody and everything to God. For who else can?

It is essential for us also. We pray to a Christ who himself bore the burden of the world. He asks us in our measure to do the same. Any theology or spirituality which sees Christianity as other than 'for the world' is devoid of priesthood, and doomed to futility and sterility. I did not realise for a long time just how the church needs priests to live this out in their hearts and help the church of God to do the same.

God lets us come, together, step by step, up before his heavenly throne. This upward ascension is greatly demanding on our hearts and minds. At the great entrance we ascend with the angels around the altar and the throne.

'We who represent the Cherubim sing the thrice-holy hymn to the life-giving Trinity, let us now lay aside every care in this life'. How amazing. Again the liturgy teaches us what we are about and where we are. This is serious stuff. To ascend we have to lay aside every anxiety and care. Yes. This is absolute. Don't focus on anything apart from God in heaven, don't touch your stuff or your darkness, if you wish to behold the mystery before you.

Everything has to be put aside – what we like, what we don't like, whether we like the people, the service or the sermon or whether we do not and so on. God's work is not accomplished by us. He does his own work. Our part is to make that surrender in our spirit, 'that we may receive the King of all, invisibly escorted by the hosts of angels...'

We soon chant the creed with fervour. The church should reverberate with the mystery of faith. This is what separates us from the world. The world can never understand. The Spirit rests on us. This is the mystery of peace.

The whole church is now gathered up and laid on the altar. The earthly altar becomes the heavenly altar. That first century document, the Didache, speaks of the bread 'gathered together from the four corners of the world' to enter the Kingdom. The priest has already prayed (in the Preparation) 'O God, our God, you sent forth the heavenly bread, the nourishment of the whole world, Our Lord and God, Jesus Christ, to be our Saviour, Redeemer and Benefactor, and blessed us and sanctified us; O Lord, bless this offering and accept it on your most heavenly altar. Remember those who offer it and those for whom it is offered, for you are good and love mankind; and keep us blameless in the celebration of your divine mysteries...'

The deacon says 'Let us stand aright; let us stand with fear; let us attend, that we may present the holy offering in peace'. Again the liturgy teaches us the truth. The prayer of thanksgiving is a sacrifice of praise because the world does not think itself blessed and can only offer complaint to God that things aren't better than they are. So make sure that you are thankful in everything in your life because there is nothing else in heaven but unending thanksgiving, 'singing, crying, shouting the triumphal hymn and saying, 'Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord of Sabaoth; heaven and earth are full of your glory'. Yes from here even the earth is full of God's glory because Christ has already overcome the world.

We remember not only the Cross and Tomb, the Resurrection and the Ascension but also the Second and glorious coming. We remember what Christ has done – and there is a sense in which in him the second coming has already happened. In this light we remember everyone, saints, living and departed, that Christ may always and eternally remember us. Finally before the throne of heaven – in his very presence, if we have ascended with heart and mind – we are able to say in the only real place to say it: 'Our Father, who art in Heaven, hallowed be thy Name, thy Kingdom come, Thy Will be done, on earth as it is in heaven'

'Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us'.

Christ gives us himself and all that we need for holiness, love and peace for one another. That is the real challenge of the liturgy to faith.

If we want the holiness of God to touch our lips in the liturgy we must want the same holiness after the liturgy. Holiness and life are indissoluble. We must not play the double game, of wanting one and not the other.

The mystery of communion is almost overwhelming. Christ himself is here, the Body and Blood, the whole Christ. The gift is overwhelming, the reality too much to contemplate. But I want it. I want his Body, in its mysterious way, to move my body, his Blood to course in my veins that I may be cleansed and free and alive in him. By night and by day I seek in prayer to be one with him, to obey him, to so live in him that he, not me, may touch the world around me with his love, his mercy and peace.

When we receive communion Christ unites our inmost being with him. Do not go by your feelings, hear the truth. This is awesome. But we can only live on this height only for a few moments. Like the disciples on the Mount of Transfiguration, we have to come down the mountain to the daily circumstances of life, daily trials and temptations, to those God-given challenges that come with meeting others. I can scarcely cope with meeting so much God 'in my face', but I would not have it otherwise. But I would not miss those moments on the mountain. My life sings because of them.

Liturgy makes us face life. Liturgy forces us to think again about everything. Liturgy humbles us, brings us 'to our knees'. Liturgy makes us cry out with awe. Boring? You must be joking. Liturgy lifts us up to behold God's glory.

Do not be mistaken. Liturgy is about entering into glory. God's presence is full of glory, God's holiness is overwhelming glory. Christ took our humanity and clothed it in glory. That is what he sets out to do with you and me. Where so many Christians fail is that they do not actually believe it.

Liturgy prepares us. He comes to us, he comes inside us, makes us all one body, makes us his Church. We scarcely know what we do. We bring our bodies and souls along to the liturgy and they are slowly touched with light and glory. This is necessarily a slow process, for otherwise we would disintegrate. We scarcely notice the process at first. But the passage of time helps us adjust till one day we wake up to the fact he is indeed changing body and soul to cope with his glory.

## **The Final Offering**

Christ gives himself to us but we still have much to do. There will come a day when the spirit slips free of the body. What we do between one offering and the next will make all the difference when that day comes. I want to slip away easily. I do not want my 'self' to stage a protest, or my body do a 'wobbly'. No thanks. The liturgy helps me to sort all that stuff out now. Both spirit and body must be made ready for the final offering.

I am seized therefore with the seriousness of life in the body, what I do with it, what I put into it, how I use and abuse it. Everything gets honed down: we need the glory; we can do without everything else.

God teaches us the way of detachment. Our inmost being kicks away the crutches of life. Our minds finally accept the way of not-knowing. Something strange begins to happen: he is holding me together, not I. As we get used to this and learn to work with him, all the human energies of body, mind and soul get drawn up into the 'vertical'.

We realise that as we stand with Christ – in liturgy and in life – he is holding us in his victory over sin, over death, over the self and over the world. He is holding us in the victory of his Cross and his Resurrection. When we realise this, union with him is becoming an effective reality. All within us which once rebelled, melts and changes.

So it goes on, liturgy by liturgy, day by day. We let him take our energies and unite them all to him. Liturgy by liturgy, day by day, he draws more of us up into the vertical. The gift of contemplation begins, grows stronger, more steady, more stable. Prayer becomes great stillness



and enters into great silence, beyond all words, beyond all image, beyond all capacity of the self to intrude. Prayer is now energised by God himself. And we begin to experience the awesomeness of our calling.

I didn't mention incense. How I love to see it ascending, how I love the fragrance. Incense is no mere symbol. In reality, beyond all words, beyond imagination, there is a world which is being drawn, borne by the Spirit, ascending, to God. Long after the incense is finished, there is that indefinable difference in the air. However there is now also a difference in our lives, a fragrance in the world. It is us, it is you, it is me, it is the church. In the church, in the liturgy, our whole being, our whole life, becomes caught up into Christ's all-sufficient sacrifice acceptable unto God. And in the process you and I become acceptable to God, like God, one in God and with God.





# The Booklets

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