

St Mary's, Barnham
JULY 19th 2020

The purpose of all Scripture is to reveal the words of God as understood and interpreted by humanity, but also to apply a methodology of our Creator's purpose for us. Perhaps that is why there are episodes in the Old Testament that range from the eloquence of a poet conveying descriptions of both the world around us but also those memorable stories – be they fables or real events that bring to us an understanding of the presence of God.

From the splendour and magnificence of the glory of Solomon to the evocation of the natural world through the seas and nature we have the beauty of the world to admire and, most importantly, to respect. But there are also the failings and weaknesses of people - the disobedience of Adam and Eve, the seemingly inherent cruelty of retribution invested within man against man. But this is balanced by the example of obedience in Moses bringing God's people into the Promised Land and much later through Christ's example to be the Incarnate God who brings the promise of eternity to the faithful.

Whilst, perhaps like you, in recent months, I have waited for some wise words and teachings from the House of Bishops – I waited in vain.....therefore I offer this simple passage to at least have something to hold onto – the thread of the liturgy.

Across four months and through the technical joys of computer literacy we have been presented with a varied selection of forms of the liturgy, and whilst the settings have varied from Study's to Dining Rooms, the voices ranged from the North, South, West and East and yet the liturgy has been the common thread that bound so many people together as one congregation – a true showing of the ecclesia of a church without walls.

The pandemic crisis of COVID-19 has actually placed us closer than we realise to the secretive gatherings in Upper Rooms, caves and clearings in those early decades and centuries when the Christian faith was taking root and evolving into a formative entity, the ecclesia of the people of faith, As disparate as the gatherings were there became a need for something to hold the believers' faith in one common expression. It was to be many hundreds of years before a Church, as we would understand, would be formed, but in those early years an expression of faith had to be unified – a liturgy had to be written.

There were many attempts at a common-to-all liturgy but, inevitably, preferences and individualism expected different emphases and, often, wordings. In time, prayers, scriptures, creeds and Eucharistic adaptations of Christ's words became acceptable to differing traditions and cultures. But the Church is a slow learner and it took a thousand years of schism until at one Anglican Archbishop's enthronement the Orthodox church's creed was used and in a Papal setting the wound of historic separation began to heal with open gestures and words of reconciliation.

Whilst there were both cynics and supporters for these and other expressions of unity no-one should be surprised, because that is the purpose of liturgy – to unite all believers in their mutual expression of faith and unity in pursuance of God's will as their, as our, gift to the world.

Although the Anglican Church has gone through an extraordinary number of revisions – who can recall the spiritual deserts of Series 1, Series 2, Series 1 + 2, Series 3, the Alternative

Service book before we eventually arrived and settled at Common Worship. Ah, the plains of Nirvana couldn't have refreshed us more!

It often occurs to me that the liturgy we adhere to and find solace in can all too easily be taken for granted. Of course, after such a long time for the church to have endeavoured to minister under the strange months of lockdown has, for me, heightened the words of the liturgy with a new incentive. For these past months they have been words on the page, but today they are the words which have expression and we listen to – the sound of which brings to the surface emotions which empower the heart and soul to go out and serve the Lord.

As I was preparing this address there is a thread which runs through the whole of today's liturgy could encourage us after the spiritual desert of COVID-19 we have wandered through since March. Whilst the past four months could be described in the words of St John of the Cross as the dark night of the soul, so too could the evolution of the church's liturgy as it seeks always to enlighten the faithful with a liturgy that reveals God. At the end of the journey, through this pandemic, the practice of the faithful at worship and as St John writes of the three stages – the dark night that abut engulfs us, the glimpse of light which signifies God waiting for us at the end of the night, with the third stage being the mystical union of a soul at one with God

Introit: I have God for my help. The Lord sustains my soul.

I've had much truck with people who say that you don't need to go to church to be a Christian, because I so fundamentally disagree and point out – but that's what Christian's do in order to live a Christian life. Yes, we have the Ten Commandments and Christ's reduction to two commandments but part of our ability to adhere as best we can to those commandments is to seek sustenance and that is exactly where the Church's liturgy has its' purpose. Wherever the practice of Christ's thanksgiving, His Eucharistic offering of Himself that is where Christian's need to be.

God in His holy place and that holy place is exactly where we are, from Cathedral to Parish Church, from the Study's of Zoom enrolled Congregations and, yes, even to the Archbishop's kitchen – I'm expected to believe. Scripture through the liturgy makes it quite clear that as we begin our worship, wherever we are – this is God's place. The very purpose of liturgy is to bring us out of ourselves and be at one with God, for through our faith in the liturgy we look ahead to make real that faith, not to look back and assume we can go back.

Collect: Show favour, O Lord, to your servants that, made fervent in hope, faith and charity, they may be ever watchful in keeping your commandments.

The thread of the liturgical pattern of the church has created many styles and images – all of which are fastened together as one by the central words of Christ, and followed by Scripture. It may well be more than my life is worth to be overly critical of the Book of Common Prayer within these walls, nevertheless, whilst there are parts which could be called into question, there is no doubt, Cranmer and Coverdale's work does lend the Anglican liturgy some of the most eloquent and inspiring writings and today's Collect is one such piece. Rather than see it in isolation, it is important to acknowledge that it is a prayer book which is derived from the Breviary and, in itself, inspired the revisions that followed more suited for Anglican sensitivities.

The Collects in their original wording are prose-like poems, or poetic epithets – call them what you will, but in the most unequivocal language provide us with sure and deeply

profound passages. Just like the Nicene, or Apostles Creed, the Collects become a creedal statement of the place of God within our lives and establish in words the basis of faith in the practice of our life of faith. Hence, the underlying intention is to clarify our hope, strengthen our faith and make real our charity, our Xaritas, our compassion and love for one another. As Christians, that can only be received through the action of the liturgy of the Eucharist, or at least, prayer of Jesus' name.

In the book of Wisdom, the seeker of God's favour must first acknowledge his or her weaknesses and all too often our guilt therefore we seek the repentance that only God gives. As the Psalmist says "O Lord, you are good and forgiving."

Although this time of lockdown distracted us from a full and close pilgrimage into Jerusalem, along the Via Dolorosa and up to Calvary, we have enough reminders around us to bring our eyes to gaze upon the Crucified Christ and recall His first words from the Cross "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do"

The thread that winds through the church's liturgy is virtually summed up in those words, from the Act of Confession to the central theme of the Eucharistic Prayer – we should seek forgiveness from one another and then of God.

Today, the Gospel illustrates brings us all the familiar imagery of a sower sowing the seed with its comparison being the kingdom of heaven. But tucked away in the middle is a verse easily overlooked: Jesus told them still another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into about sixty pounds of flour until it worked all through the dough."

It is all too easy to forget that like the ripples in a pond, our actions always have an effect and the good that we are capable of can both change lives and last forever.

The liturgy of the church has a purpose to bring us together as the people of God and perhaps, see each other more clearly after the darkness of the soul's night. But the liturgy is also evolving and enlightening us in different ways – certainly to experience the church without walls at worship these past few months has been an empowering of the faith of many – that I'm sure.

We are bound to the past by the very history of the church and humanity, but like a stepping-stone through the waters of chaos, the liturgy of the Church brings us out of the darkness and into a new light of hope and anticipation for achieving God's Will.

Although the COVID-19 pandemic obscured March, April and May - the normal season of Spring has felt more like an Autumn and Winter of discontent; let us now pray that the church will discover within the new and exciting expressions a revitalised commitment to its' liturgy.

Like a chrysalis that has awaited its moment, let us hope that the new Incarnation will not be the darkest of moths that spoils the fabric of the Christian faith, but a rainbow-coloured butterfly emerging which brings a new sense of mission and purpose to us all.

AMEN