

4th November 2020

Liturgy

“It hath been the wisdom of the Church of England ever since the compiling of her Publick Liturgy, to keep the mean between the two extremes, of too much stiffness in refusing, and in too much easiness in admitting any variation from it.”

Book of Common Prayer, Preface (1662)

A day or so ago I touched on a spontaneous “high five” offered by a child to a priest during worship, and questioned in passing whether there might be a liturgy for that. And I got to thinking ... Liturgy in a religious group offers a familiar communal response to a particular event or issue. Some liturgies are formal and elaborate, others short and simple. But all liturgies offer a set of words to be replicated over and over again. My Presbyterian structure is less involved with liturgy than the Roman Catholic or Church of England traditions. Yet we too look for pre-prepared words. In a recent on-line discussion forum, a minister posted that she’d been invited by the Council to dedicate the opening of a skatepark. “Does anyone have a liturgy for *that?*” she enquired. Well, no, not in my book of liturgies ...

We can become so trapped in expected norms that we don’t allow ourselves to be spontaneous and creative. Of course we could prepare words for *every* eventuality. But then, what about the skatepark or the high-five? A liturgy for everything? “Go to the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer* and all will be well!” some might say. But did the preface quoted above not tell us there’s a *middle way*, to “keep the mean” between “too much stiffness” and “easiness in admitting any variation”? It’s not either/or. It’s both/and. It’s the value of liturgy *and* freedom of expression.

In the New Testament, the word that gives us *liturgy* is the Greek *leitourgia*, which describes service spontaneously offered, but also that service which the state lays compulsorily on its citizens. It encapsulates both compulsion *and* desire, expectations *and* freedom. So, don’t let liturgy constrain us. Let’s keep working on our freedoms in our response to God and in our service to others. Let’s keep offering the “high-fives” that don’t need liturgical words or explanations to make them right.

A prayer for today

Me: *I've got nothing to say. What words should I use with you?*

God: *No need to worry. Just rest, be still and wait. That speaks volumes for your devotion.*

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