

A SPACE FOR FREEDOM

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THE DISTANCE FELT between the taste for liturgy and the taste for social commitment is notorious. The number of articles, like this one, which show that so far from being incompatible, the two are mutually entailing, is a witness to it.

For articles show the power of the stereotypes which our imagination produces, but rarely draw their sting. And the caricatures of the 'liturgy person' and the 'social justice' person come easily to mind. The former is concerned only for the trappings of the liturgy, with appropriate music and formal order. The latter is alienated by the tidiness and antiseptic beauty of liturgical celebration, and is too anguished to fall unselfconsciously to his knees. The cassock and soft hands of the former are as alien to the world of the streets as are the dirty hands and torn clothes of the latter to the sanctuary.

That these are caricatures needs little proof. We need think only of the lives of those touched in the nineteenth century by the Oxford Movement. They combined a radical social commitment with a high taste for liturgy. And the Dominican students at Le Saulchoir were later encouraged by mentors like Fr. Chenu both to celebrate the liturgy with appropriate style and to work in the mines. But these examples do not exorcise the caricatures. For their power lies deeper within us. We commonly experience a tension between the poles of orderly celebration and of honest and practical involvement in disorderly life. For many wounded people the church is the holy place on the hill, too high for wicked people like themselves. And those who work and live with them, trying to change the unjust order which condemns them to live on the plain, easily become alienated from what goes on in the church upon the hill.

Because the tension between liturgy and social commitment is born in experience, I shall not try here to show that each, correctly understood, demands the other. The conclusion would be true, but the argumentation would inevitably fail to touch the experience which engenders alienation. In this article, I would like to begin

by describing an experience of liturgy in which the harshness of life at its extremities was met and celebrated in appropriate ways. This experience of liturgy spontaneously leads to several areas of reflection.

Some moments of this liturgy have been caught on a video clip. At the end of 1984 Vietnamese soldiers attacked the Cambodian refugee camps near the Thai border. The Jesuit Refugee Service had sponsored a film crew from Taiwan to make films of life in the camps at this time, and one of these videos includes sections of two Masses. The first was celebrated in the Vietnamese section of Dang Rek camp a week before it was shelled, and the second in the fields of the evacuation site on the following Sunday. Both Masses were celebrated by a French priest speaking in English, which in turn was translated by a young Vietnamese interpreter.

The first Mass took place in the camp church—a bamboo building, handsomely decorated for the Christmas season in the plastic and coloured paper available in the camp. The choir sang in practised harmony, and the celebrant took up the Christmas theme of God's presence with us. He acknowledged the anxieties of his congregation. By this time the other camps along the border had been destroyed, and the Vietnamese refugees, many of whom had deserted from the army, were particularly afraid of being captured.

The second Mass was celebrated in the open air by the same congregation and priest. The camp had been shelled during the week with a heavy loss of life, and the people evacuated to an emergency site where they suffered from inadequate shelter, food and water. Only a plastic sheet for the altar and a stole for vestments remained from the camp. The Mass again touched on Christmas themes, with the congregation celebrating the poverty of Christ in which they had come to share more deeply. The video clip concluded with all saying together the *Confiteor*, with the questions, like ripples in water, moving from participant to viewer, from the sinful heart to the sinful structures of the world.

In these liturgies the tension between ritual and the cry of the poor seemed to disappear. The liturgy celebrated the threatened lives of the refugees, and it expressed simply and appropriately their hope for liberation. But these Masses were instances of the more general fit between liturgy and the life of the poor which is characteristic of liturgy celebrated with refugee groups. A priest who has spent many years working for refugees caught the quality

of good liturgy when he described it as *making a space for freedom*. While he spoke directly of liturgy celebrated with groups of refugees, his words have a wider application, suggesting the qualities of any liturgy which brings together properly ritual and poverty. I would like to explore some of the implications of this description.

First, if liturgy is about making a space for freedom, it supposes that we recognize the lack of freedom and misery within which it is celebrated. Liturgy celebrated with refugees almost always brings to mind the painful reality of refugee life—the lack of freedom, the isolation from home, the alternation between hope and despair. Any still time brings to awareness the anxieties of daily life, both those of the refugees and of the people who work with them. The need to be healed, freed and forgiven is constantly felt.

It is difficult, of course, to experience the need for healing and freedom at this intense level in less harrowing circumstances. And we should pray to be delivered from the kind of situation in which the need would be thrust upon us. But if liturgy and social commitment are to come together, they demand an awareness in the congregation of the need for freedom and the desire to express it in the liturgy. The penitential rite must express an experience of human poverty that is shared. Where liturgy begins with less than this, it easily alienates those whose needs lie deeper.

Secondly, to make a space for freedom presupposes that we mark out boundaries within which freedom can be born. The liturgy in refugee camps has everything to do with physical boundaries—the separation of the baptized from catechumens, the separation of the congregation from the crowds of curious onlookers and children, the separation of the church from the other buildings of the camp. And in the fields, the separation by blue plastic of the altar from the meeting place. Boundaries need to be marked out and patrolled.

The more important boundaries, however, are the inward ones which liturgy demands. In liturgy, the critical boundary lies between the paths of our lives that are open to the mystery of God and the paths which lead to places where we can speak and act only in superficial ways. We must make a space in which freedom can grow, and that space will be marked by seriousness. Liturgy separates the serious from the trivial, not in the sense that it excludes the everyday and the humorous, but in the sense that the celebration is always open to the mystery of God. Homeliness of style must not be a defence against mystery. The boundaries

between triviality and seriousness will be drawn in different ways within different cultures. In some cultures the sense of God's presence is closely bound to ceremonial dress, to solemn forms of address and to elaborate ritual. More familiar gestures and language are an index of triviality. For other people, God's presence is sought and found in the everyday, and a liturgy which makes a space open to God will not exclude the everyday.

Boundaries are marked out by ritual. Ritual gives order to time and creates a space for meaning and freedom within time. In refugee camps, time is the great enemy. It hangs heavily as each day spent in the camp takes the refugee a little further away from the traditions and practices which gave meaning to life in his home. And each day takes refugees a little closer to death to end a life in which no future can be seen. So, to order time in a way which asserts continuity with a rich past, demonstrates the conviction that the present chaotic patterns of life bear meaning, and establishes hope in a blessed future, is a gift for people who live precariously.

Ritual associates uprooted people with a tradition. This is important because their own sense of their past and its value has been eroded, and where the ritual of the liturgy picks up the words and gestures of their own culture, they can appropriate again their own past. But even where the ritual is drawn from alien cultures, as it is in much of the liturgy, it is important because it allows people an undemanding entry into the difficulties of their own lives. The *Confiteor*, for example, allowed both refugees and volunteers to enter the horror and sinfulness of their own lives at whatever level of attentiveness they could muster, and through the formal words of the prayer, enabled them to deal with the unaskable questions and unspeakable answers which their experience suggested. Ritual enables people to bring what they have suffered and what they are to liturgy, without having the obligation to construct actions and find words which would do precise justice to their situation. Ritual enables people to participate at a level beyond their capacity for explicit response.

The importance of ordering space and time can be seen in the stories of the gospels. In the story of the feeding of the five thousand, for example, the eating is ceremonial. The people are invited to sit in rows, the food is distributed by the apostles, and at the close twelve basketfuls of scraps are collected. As in all good ritual, more goes on than people realize, and the ordered

character of the feeding points to the ways in which the story of Exodus is re-enacted. The ritual makes it possible to see in the event the creative and caring activity of God who has cared for them throughout their history. At a more intense level, the story of the Agony in the Garden presents the same ritualized surface. Space is carefully ordered: the twelve are divided, with the majority left outside the garden and three taken inside. The three are then left to wait, while Jesus goes a little further. Time is also ordered—the time in the garden amounts to an hour, at the end of which Jesus's hour is to come. Moreover, the hour is divided into prayer and Jesus's periodic return to the disciples when he finds them asleep. The ritual of the story enables Jesus to face the fearsome and to name the unnameable, and in doing so to find a space for freedom. For the reader, even Jesus's prayer is ritual, as it repeats the petitions of the Lord's prayer.

Boundaries also need to be protected. The chaos of camp life always threatens to overrun the liturgy there, and the trivial always encroaches on the serious. The function of liturgical law is to protect the boundaries which allow space to be made for freedom. This is the function to which More drew attention in Robert Bolt's *Man for all seasons*:

This country's planted thick with laws from coast to coast—man's laws, not God's—and if you cut them down—and you're just the man to do it—d'you really think you could stand upright in the winds that would blow then?

The institution of the Sabbath in the Old Testament demonstrates both the important place of law and the risk of its corruption. The Sabbath created a space for freedom in the middle of the pressure of constant work and of oppressive relationships. The space created gave them freedom before God and their fellow Israelites. To protect this space, they evolved a rigorous and detailed law. But the debates in the New Testament indicate the possibility of law being corrupted—it can be subject to a casuistry which undermines the intention of the law, while making its details bear more oppressively. A law which was about freedom is experienced as oppression, from which its interpreters can free themselves by subtle casuistry.

Liturgical law has a function analogous to that of the law which hedged in the Sabbath. Its place is to ensure the conditions under

which a space can be made for freedom. This is comparatively easy in societies in which the distinction between what is open to God and what is everyday and superficial is made in terms of the sacred and the secular. In the religious view of the Australian Aborigines, for example, the sense of the sacred draws on a reading of the land as the place of divine presence and visitation. Here, ritual is associated with clear and obvious places of God's presence, and liturgical law only codifies what all perceive and experience. The same may also be true of liturgy as it is lived and practised in monasteries or in environments where one lives and works in a world that is unquestionably Christian. Here, liturgical law can be identified with the nature of liturgy. But in societies which do not recognize the distinction between the secular and the sacred, liturgical law will have a more limited function of protecting the space which the liturgy must allow for freedom and the part which ritual has in making that space. The more tentative tone of the rubrics of recent liturgical books will be more appropriate than the simple prescriptive tone of earlier rubrics. The latter are consistent with a view, a view of liturgical 'aberration' as anything which departs from the prescribed form, natural in societies where there is a sharply defined distinction between the secular and the sacred. The former approach to rubrics is consistent with a view of 'aberrations' as words, gestures and styles which fail to transcend the everyday to point to the ways in which it is open to God. This view of liturgical law commends itself in most places in which the liturgy is celebrated with the poor.

Thirdly, liturgy is not simply about the marking out of boundaries for their own sake. The boundaries are to allow space for freedom. Freedom is the content of the space which is made, and the reconciliation of the tension between liturgy and social commitment is made in the measure that freedom has the opportunity to grow. What then are the conditions under which freedom can grow?

Part of the way in which good liturgy creates freedom lies in its capacity to name the powers that threaten and diminish freedom. In the liturgies which I described, the beginning was taken up with naming the fears of the congregations: their fear of imminent attack, their anxiety about losing even their temporary home and their defencelessness. The correct naming of the world is central both in Old and New Testaments. The prophets give correct names to situations in which peoples' real needs and dismays were hidden

from them, and events like the Exile and Roman occupation forced people again to name their situation in more discriminating ways. Similarly, the events of Jesus's life forced the early Christians to name their hope in ways that accommodated the failure of Jesus's mission and his crucifixion, and encouraged them to name accurately the failures and sufferings of their own communities. Liturgy is properly celebrated when those celebrating name their own weakness, vulnerability and need in its personal and social dimensions.

But the naming of the human predicament alone, however accurately it is done, does not of itself enable freedom. The heart of the freedom which the liturgy is about lies in hearing God's word. We can bring our bad news to the celebration of the liturgy because we can join it to the good news which we hear. The hard stories of our own lives are juxtaposed to the stories of the gospel, and out of the juxtaposition our own stories find meaning and are blessed with hope.

The Masses celebrated in the refugee camp indicate how complex is the juxtaposition of stories that good liturgy enables. There, the precariousness and destitution of the refugees was acknowledged and immediately associated with the poverty and exile experienced by Christ in his birth. But the story of Christ gives hope only if it is followed through to the end—his life leads to suffering, death and resurrection. So, the poverty of his birth is the source of hope because it is part of the broader story of God who has shared our condition and found and given life through sharing its extremities. So, the word of God which is heard in the liturgy does not minimize the suffering which we bring to the liturgy by representing a hope which makes our sufferings of no account, but by accepting the reality of our sufferings and offering a hope which takes us through them. Our bad news is taken completely seriously, but is discovered to be the seed-bed of God's good news.

Perhaps this quality of good liturgy underlies the fresh discovery of the power of God's word in so many churches today. The gospel discussions that form part of the Renew programmes which have proved so beneficial in many countries, and the sharing of the word of God in the base communities in Latin America and elsewhere, both combine the naming of the reality of human life and the hearing of the gospel stories which allow space for hoping for and even working for freedom. The exploration of life against the background of the gospel stories can lead to acceptance of the

fact that one does suffer and the courage to dream of and pursue new possibilities. Perhaps it is not accidental that the Magnificat has come almost to be the emblem of the gospel for many communities. The recognition in the song of the part which pride and might have had in shaping the world, and the hopes enunciated for a transformed world through the birth and mission of Christ, when set against the poverty of Christ's birth, are sources of hope and freedom for deprived people who meditate on the words of the prayer and reflect on their own lives in its light.

Liturgy, however, does not involve only hearing God's word in the light of our own story, but also enacting it. We make space by doing what Christ did. This is true in the sense that in the Eucharist we recall and make present through our symbolic activity the death and resurrection of Christ. But it is also true that in the liturgy we live out our own death in union with Christ, and celebrate our hope for his life through it. And it is also true in the senses that the liturgy calls us to act out of the freedom which we find through it. Our activity in the Eucharist includes both what we have suffered and also the action to which we are called in freedom, and in all activity we enact the word of God as we hear it in Christ.

The link between the freedom which the liturgy provides space for and the life we are called to make in freedom means that the liturgy can never be seen simply as the re-enactment of the past. Liturgy is creative. This is clear within the history of liturgy itself. The development of the seasons of the year and particularly the celebrations of the feasts of the martyrs demonstrate the power which the enactment of Christ's death in our own situations has to introduce novelty into the liturgy. And the more closely we share in our own lives the passion of Christ, the more creative we should expect liturgy to be. This creativity can be seen in cultures where ritual is seen as a living structure. In Cambodian weddings, for example, the bride's service of her husband is enacted through several symbolic gestures. She peels a banana for him, and more recently, lights a cigarette for him. We should expect the same kind of creativity in Christian liturgy where the reality of our lives echoes and is felt to echo Christ's passion.

I have claimed in this article that the task of liturgy celebrated with the deprived is to make space for freedom, and that this concept offers a rich understanding of all liturgy. When liturgy is

conceived in this way and the conditions are realized, the gap between liturgy and social concern is no longer felt.

The conditions, however, are not easily realized. While it may be ideal to come to the liturgy aware of our personal neediness and sinfulness, as well as of the miseries to which the organization of the world condemns people, it is difficult habitually to have more than a notional awareness. And this lack of immediacy in the way we appropriate the depths of our own story and that of our world will mean that we shall enter only hesitantly the space which the liturgy creates, and that the juxtaposition of our story and that of Christ will be perfunctory. When this is the case, we can be led to adopt one of two approaches to liturgy, both of which will leave a gap between it and social concern.

The first approach will be to see the liturgy as occupied with the spiritual world or inner world in such a way that it does not touch the earthy reality of our weakness and the sinfulness built into the institutions of society. Liturgy becomes the antechamber to heaven, and the freedom which it speaks of will be seen in a way that ignores the way in which we must participate in finding it by naming and experiencing our misery. If the realities with which liturgy has to do are seen as supernatural in a sense that divorces them from our political, economic and social life, then the ritual will be designed in a way that evokes those heavenly realities. The gap between liturgy and social concern will be unbridgeable.

The second approach will be to conceive liturgy as creating freedom, rather than as making a space for freedom. This is to take an instrumental view of liturgy. Liturgy is to be structured to make us free or to push us to build freedom ourselves. We begin and end with our own situation. If liturgy is seen in this way, then the story of Christ will be seen in predominantly inspirational terms, and the marking of boundaries will make little sense. Again, the gap between social concern and liturgy conceived as openness to the presence of God will be unbridgeable.

But with these two approaches I end, as I began, with caricatures. These are the positions we accuse one another of, or perhaps the contemplative and the committed sides of ourselves engage in polemic about. The resolution of the tension relies finally on our entering liturgy with dirty hands and going to the poor in friendship with empty hands.