

REFLECTIONS ON LITURGY, CULTURE AND SPIRITUALITY IN THE NZ CHURCH

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Mark Searle's lectures have highlighted for me an inherent tension between two poles:

- (a) On the one hand, there is "the objectivity of the liturgy" which means that the liturgy is never reducible to our "thing", or our requirements. Of its nature, it takes us up into heaven's "thing", incorporates us into heaven's song, and shapes us in its own image, not it in ours.
- (b) The other pole is that gaping destructive gap, or "split" between religious faith and daily life which the Second Vatican Council identified as one of the most serious problems of our time. (GS n.43) This gap affects our spirituality because a privatised faith is less than holistic and ultimately unchristian. It affects our social responsibility because to marginalise faith and liturgy to the private sphere is to marginalise the rest of life to a sphere separate from Christian faith and conscience; and the gap affects our culture and mental climate just by the fact of separating faith from our perceptions, values, relationships, etc.

So, on the one hand the liturgy is not reducible to its human dimensions; on the other hand we cannot afford for it to be separated from our human lives.

In the sphere of liturgy, the need to overcome this split is implicitly recognised in the 1969 Instruction on the Translation of Liturgical Texts:

The prayer of the Church is always the prayer of some actual community assembled here and now. It is not sufficient that a formula handed down from some other time or region should be translated verbatim, even if accurately, for liturgical use. The formula translated must become the genuine prayer of the congregation, and in it each of its members should be able to find and express himself or herself.

In other words, people cannot pray in categories they don't relate to, and much less in

categories that alienate them. Failure to relate the liturgy to people's concrete lives and experience would be to perpetuate the split to which I have referred.

Our less appropriate or less adequate efforts to relate liturgy to people's lives are witness to how difficult it can be to hold in tension the twin truths that the liturgy is not reducible to an expression of ourselves, and that it is nevertheless ourselves that must be taken up by it.

This tension was sharply focused by Mark's reminder that the liturgy was shaped in the pre-Modern era, while we live and move and have our being in the post Enlightenment, post Industrial Revolution, post French Revolution era, and that the attitudes required to live in the modern world are at odds with the attitudes required to celebrate the liturgy.

Some of the characteristics of the Modern era are rooted in false ideologies (examples later). At this moment, my point is that if our fundamental work is evangelization, then it has everything to do with transforming our culture and not allowing the gospel or our spirituality or our liturgy to be co-opted by our culture's ideological assumptions.

Other features of modernity pertain to authentic human development (examples later). At this moment, my point is that failure to relate the gospel or our spirituality or the Church's liturgy to legitimate contemporary human developments is to alienate the gospel and to widen the "split".

This suggests to me that one of our more important tasks is to identify and distinguish between those features of our culture that are authentically human and those that are not.

The idea of fully accepting everything human, including historical development and cultural diversity, is exemplified in the incarnation itself. The idea of challenging disvalues within our culture is also exemplified in the life of Jesus; (cf Good Samaritan and Jewish exclusivite). A custom or an attitude is not right just because it is deeply entrenched in a culture.

The consequences of failing to deeply inculturate the gospel can result in a mere juxtaposition of the Gospel and an existing culture. G Arbuckle gives an example of this happening in Samoa:

Christianity became acculturated to the existing system of traditional government. The traditional, chiefly rank system became sanctioned and supported by Jehovah himself according to local interpretations of biblical history. When chiefs punished, Jehovah punished. The status quo became utterly frozen, supported now with supernatural sanctions. Little wonder if Christian ministers themselves became equivalently chiefs, wielding considerable power and authority - all in the name of Jehovah. Christianity lost its freedom at a crucial level; became trapped in the traditional authority system. (Inculturation, Community and Conversion, Review for Religious, 1985, p.847).

To fail to inculturate the liturgy is to ensure that the liturgy leaves people and their culture untouched.

Ideological Assumptions of our Culture

It is inevitable that some of the ideological assumptions of our culture will be the same as some which Mark identified in U.S.A. This is possibly true of most of the ones I wish to itemise, although I will view them from the perspective of our own country.

1. The cult of individualism and the privatisation of religious faith. The first thing I want to say about this phenomenon is that although it is a characteristic of Western secular culture, and it is not characteristic of the Maori people of this country. The "split" between religious faith and daily life is alien to Maori spirituality. Likewise, the privatisation of religious faith is alien to the Maori sense of community. And so my first observation under this heading is that right within our own country we have an alternative model to the individualism and privatisation that has plagued Western christianity.

In his seminar, Mark described individualism as an expediency we have developed to make the loss of community into something purposeful for individuals. And he reminded us that the original purposes of liturgical renewal, later ratified by the

Second Vatican Council, explicitly intended to recover a sense of community, out of which we recover also a sense of responsibility for others. More recently, the very word “solidarity” has become part of Catholic social teaching; cf John Paul II, *The Social Concern of the Church*, 1987)

Some commentators draw attention to the connection between this individualism and the damage and loneliness caused by capitalistic-type competitiveness. In this context, it is helpful to ponder comments quoted by Arbuckle in the article already cited, because I think the difference between the situation in the USA and here in New Zealand is only one of degree:

....Historian David Potter....argues that the search for personal freedom, coupled with the rejection of any society-ascribed statuses, has gone so far within the American ethos that people have become involved in a never-ending search through work for improved, personally achieved statuses. The loneliness, isolation, insecurity and tensions, he states, that result within individuals who are caught up in this “status rat race” are enormous and overpowering for many individuals. Christopher Lash claims that in America “the culture of competitive individualism....in its decadence has carried the logic of individualism to the extreme of a war of all against all, the pursuit of happiness to the end of a narcissistic preoccupation with the self”.

In this context one thinks also of popular misconceptions regarding freedom.

One consequence of these is the fear of making permanent commitments, which has serious repercussions for human and Christian lives.

2. In this list of ideological assumptions enshrined in the NZ way of life, I will put next a bracket of “isms” which have their origins in the advent of science and in the naive expectations of the Enlightenment. In those heady days when the human race seemed poised for a new era of self-sufficiency, it was an easy step to making human wisdom and human ability the measure of truth. This assumption, linked to individualism, still gives birth to one of the most pervasive characteristics of muddled thinking, namely subjectivism, and its corollary, relativism.

Also deriving from the advent of the new sciences, are the philosophical assumptions of empiricism, positivism, and scientism which make the methods of empirical verification the only ways of reaching truth, and Mark himself mentioned the negative impact this has on the role of authority and of tradition.

The daddy, (or is it the child?) of all these is secularism, which sums up the assumption that there is nothing to know beyond the horizons of life in this world.

These features of Western society are embarrassingly distinctive of New Zealand. Most of you would be aware of Alan Webster's research into fundamental religious attitudes conducted on the same basis as research in Europe, North America and Australia. It shows that we are the most secularist of all.

I cannot help feeling that we Christians have made a contribution to the development of secularism similar to the way in which the Second Vatican Council acknowledged that our failure to live by the gospel and our distortions of it have contributed to the birth of atheism (cf GS n.19). The way in which I think we have contributed to secularism is by our failure properly to integrate creation and redemption to our religious thinking and practices. I have in mind the pithy dictum of Karl Rahner to the effect that closeness to God and closeness to the world are in direct, not inverse, proportion to each other. We have acted as if they were in inverse proportion, and to that extent we have ourselves to blame for people's impression that religion is the great spoiler of life and the Church is its prophet.

3. Pragmatism and the primacy ascribed to functionality: New Zealanders are proud of how ingenious they can be with a piece of number eight wire. We can fix most things. It is just a pity that for so many of us it goes well beyond that to give credence to the claim of Lipson that in NZ "the natural yardstick and the test of success fills the place that is vacant of principle: (Politics and Equality, Chicago University Press, 1949, p.7).

This pragmatism shows up in a conspicuous conflict between Pakeha culture and Maori spirituality and values. One thinks, for instance, of how land is perceived: by Pakeha it is perceived in purely economic terms; by Maori it is perceived in terms of spirituality, relatedness to ancestors, responsibility for future generations, communal identity, etc. This point was made with characteristic harshness by a Maori activist when she said:

I believe that white people are hell-bent on destruction and the reason they are - they have been so long ripped from the land, ripped from reality, and live in this artificial world they have created from this industrialisation. White people are "thing" crazy.... (Donna Awarere, quoted in NCC Programme on Racism Newsletter, January 1986, p.6).

I think we have to be alert to a purely functional mode of thought intruding also upon our way of doing theology. Whatever else might be said about the question of the ordination of women, the discussion cannot be limited to the fact that women and men can do the same things and depending on circumstances one better than the other. To base the discussion there is to exclude a priori the whole area of symbolic representation which is intrinsic to the idea of sacraments and liturgy.

4. Egalitarianism: I suspect that modern egalitarianism is a reaction to the place of power and privilege in society. I suppose it was most dramatically highlighted in the French Revolution, but I think it has been accentuated in New Zealand by our colonial history; most of the early settlers came here to leave class distinctions behind. I suspect we must look there for the origins of our cult of "the average Kiwi" and "the great clobbering machine" that can be used so effectively against those who want to be different or strive for excellence. One commentator on this phenomenon in NZ has described it as "the sacrifice of talent for the worship of averages in a world made safe for mediocrity (Lipson, *ibid* p.5).

It manifests itself in a blind, even bigoted, commitment to conventional opinions, a kind of anti-intellectualism (though I think this might be breaking down) and in

ideological opposition to such things as private schools, private hospitals, etc., the assumption being that people are only equal if they are equally dependent on the same institutions, etc.

I ask whether this same phenomenon might not be reflected also in the kind of objection taken by the editor of a Catholic newspaper to the views of a certain bishop on the grounds that the bishop's views did not reflect the wider Catholic population (NZ Tablet, April 5, 1986, p.7).

This kind of egalitarianism is what produces conventional Christianity with its social pressures towards uniformity and conformity, and which is not conducive to the internalisation of gospel values by individuals. What then happens to people formed in this kind of environment is what happened to many of the Irish who left their homeland to live in more secularist and pluralistic societies (cf Arbuckle, op. cit. p.845).

Whereas a proper understanding of equality includes and rejoices in diversity, naive egalitarianism seems able to perceive equality only in terms of sameness - sameness of treatment, sameness of functions, etc.

In this context one thinks also of ethnocentrism which is so common and so oppressive, and is a feature of the culture of most New Zealanders.

5. Consumerism: If I single this item out for separate attention, it is because I think it underlies a reductionist way of perceiving and providing education. The 1969 Rome Synod of Bishops complained that education in Western, capitalistic societies is narrowly perceived in terms of reproducing people made in the image of the existing social and economic order. This is in contrast to education perceived in the light of the gospel, which presupposes that education should form people to be capable of transforming society into something more authentically human.

6. Machoism, patriarchy, etc.

Research (in Australia and elsewhere) has shown how the suppression of normal human emotions can do so much damage to the lives of people including men. The same is true, I suggest, of the oppression resulting from patriarchal assumptions. But education is fast catching up with these aberrations and I shall not comment on them further, except to say that a more holistic way of interpreting human situations, drawing on the perceptions of women, must necessarily involve perspectives that are absent and unforeseen in the meantime.

7. The cult of intimacy: Mark Searle described the cult of intimacy in terms of people's efforts to cope with the breakdown of social bonding in a society that has become impersonal, bureaucratic, highly mobile and impermanent. If the "alienation" created in this kind of society has its own problems, so does its opposite, the cult of intimacy. Gospel spirituality reminds us that we only find our true selves by "dying to ourselves", and both our tradition and our liturgy invite and summon us to be formed by something not of our own inventing - something bigger than ourselves.

8. Situation Ethics: this is a vast topic which I merely mention. But one cannot underestimate the extent to which people act out of the assumption that motives on their own, or outcomes on their own, are the sole sufficient criteria of right and wrong. In recent New Zealand history this has manifested itself in assumptions regarding the application of technology to human beginnings; also in the readiness of people to commit injustices against persons in the very course of opposing injustices. Morality has become separated from meaning.

9. Legal Positivism: one of the ways we have actually produced a form of moral immaturity is by our failure to represent our own wholesome tradition regarding natural law. The direct consequence of this is that people develop an unhealthy dependence on the written law and the legislator. In another context I have recently explained that

Mere promulgation by the law-giver is not sufficient on its own to make valid law; repeal by the law-giver is not the only way a law ceases to bind or even ceases to exist; and departure from a law which has ceased to bind in particular circumstances or ceased to exist is not disobedience.

It seems to me that false assumptions of the kinds I have named not only hinder our pursuit of the truth, but also our moral maturity, which is why I have itemised at some length the kind of fallacies and ideologies which are pervasive in our culture. The point is that they matter, and that they are able to be so destructive precisely because most New Zealanders assume that they don't matter. Perhaps this is the point at which I should mention another characteristic of our culture, namely romanticism. We have all been reminded from time to time by Bishop John Mackey that we live in a romantic era. I'm never entirely sure that he means, but I think it has something to do with the assumption that hard intellectual work can be dispensed with. It is often replaced, cavalierly, by mood and feelings.

I mentioned at the beginning of this talk that there are other features of our culture which are not distortions at all, but rather legitimate developments. One of the most significant of them, even affecting how we understand our faith, is pluralism. One of the most dramatic debates of the Second Vatican Council centred around the claim that persons, just by reason of their dignity as persons, had the right to follow the sincere convictions of their conscience, even if they were in error. This required a complete turnabout for those who were not used to regarding the rights of persons and personal self-determination as higher values than conformity in belief and practice. Even though the new position was adopted by the Second Vatican Council in its Decree on Religious Liberty, the full implications of this radical shift are not yet fully worked through.

The same is true of inculturation, and also of devolution from highly centralist and uniformist tendencies in the Church towards a better appreciation of the role and competence of the Church at local level. All these matters have implications for the way we live the gospel, shape the Church and celebrate the liturgy. So do popular aspirations for more authentically human ways of living - greater simplicity, less competitiveness,

environmental consciousness, participation, and so on. If we read the signs of the times correctly, we shall move towards fuller Catholicity.