

*From Gleanings: Essays on Expansive Language with Prayers for Various Occasions\**

## **Praying Rightly: The Poetics of Liturgy**

**By Jennifer Phillips**

GOOD LITURGY MUST BE VIRTUOUS. We seldom think of worship in that term, which has been thought of historically as the perfecting of the powers of the soul: maturing its reason, memory, will, desire, and intuition; and motivating and training the person to do good. We know that worship aims to praise and honor and thank God. We know that our voices and intentions join in it with the chorus of the heavenly hosts singing "Holy, Holy, Holy." But our worship also shapes and changes us. God and human beings conspire – breathe together – in this process of formation. Worship is moral formation, and not merely by means of its content, but by its qualities as well.

I want to focus on several key qualities of liturgical texts and the moral dimension of these. I will offer nine principles for good liturgical texts, not claiming these to be exhaustive but simply to be essential to virtuous worship. They are not ranked in any order, but are meant to intertwine.

TEXTS MUST BE MUSICAL. As a poet, I like to start here! Good liturgy (and preaching) is shamelessly seductive on behalf of God. It woos the heart of all present for the Bridegroom. It stirs desire and joy. The sound of the texts must move and bring delight, invite attention. Among the five senses, hearing is arguably first for most participants in stirring them toward goodness. We hear the Word – not just its content but the sound of it in our ear. The particularity of that sound evokes emotion and memory, whether it is said or sung.

Language has distinctive rhythms particular to occasion, to geography and culture. Local liturgical practice should allow the music of the neighborhood to find a voice in it. The preacher brings her or his language rhythms to the texts, as do lectors, deacons, presiders, intercessors, and the people as they respond and sing.

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\* *Gleanings*, edited by Ruth Meyers and Phoebe Pettingell (New York: Church Publishing, 2001) pp. 3-11.

The sounds of the building and the street blend with the texts and with the silences in a particular poetry.

Generally, though, a majority of liturgical texts must also express the music of language in the larger culture. The music of language, like any music, may be appreciated across time and space by those with an educated ear. The music of language does change in time and place. Our ears detect the differences of urban or rural pacing, northern or southern accent, nineteenth- or twentieth-century vocabulary and phrasing. To honor the activity of God among the current assembly in the present moment, that music of language must resonate to its own time and place and not sound foreign.

For example, every Anglican recognizes the measured, stately cadences of the King's English circa 1600. Nowhere is this more beautifully epitomized than Bishop Reynolds's General Thanksgiving:

we thine unworthy servants do give thee most humble and hearty thanks for all thy goodness and loving-kindness to us, and to all men. We bless thee for our creation, preservation, and all the blessings of this life.<sup>1</sup>

The long lines and parallel phrases fall gracefully and slowly, defying anyone who would rush through their praying. This is not simple iambic pentameter, however; there is a dance rhythm to it, with trochees and anapests adding their tripping unaccented syllables.

The eucharistic prayer of this same period is, perhaps, less eloquent (note, for example, the multiple clauses and inordinate length of the sentence), but it carries a similar music:

Wherefore, O Lord and heavenly Father, according to the institution of thy dearly beloved Son, our Savior Jesus Christ, we thy humble servants do celebrate, and make here before thy divine Majesty, with these thy holy gifts, the memorial which thy Son hath willed us to make, having in remembrance his blessed passion, mighty resurrection, and glorious ascension, rendering unto thee most hearty thanks, for the innumerable benefits procured unto us by the same, entirely desiring thy fatherly goodness, mercifully to accept this our Sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving: most humbly beseeching thee to grant, that by the merits and death of thy Son Jesus Christ,

and through faith in his blood, we and all thy whole church,  
may obtain remission of our sins, and all other benefits of his  
passion.<sup>2</sup>

To most American ears, especially young ones, the music of this text is cumbersome and convoluted. The sense gets lost between the commas and semicolons. What was in its day a common (if educated) speech, becomes to later ears courtly, and strange, and very English. Some will argue that the historical feel of this language evokes for them the transcendence, kingliness, and otherness of God. Others find it soporific and alienating. In 1936, soon-to-be-bishop Stephen Bayne said of the 1928 Prayer Book General Confession, "I wish I didn't have to ask my people to make this liturgical confession in such high-falutin' language, because I know that the chances of their getting beyond a profound admiration for Elizabethan syntax are very slim indeed."<sup>3</sup> No one could argue that the language of these texts is a vernacular for the American church, a language understood and used by ordinary people here. Yet Anglican liturgical language was always intended to be in the vernacular of those who prayed it, as we read in the preface to the first Book of Common Prayer, by the first architects of Anglican liturgy.<sup>4</sup>

The music of American language is, by comparison to the language of England in the 1600s, brisk and declarative, touched by jazz rhythms and a sense of space and energy. Consider this collect, one of the few entirely new to the 1979 Prayer Book, written by Massey Shepherd for the Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany:

Set us free, O God, from the bondage of our sins, and give us  
the liberty of that abundant life which you have made known  
to us in your Son our Savior Jesus Christ.

Compare the language of the third eucharistic prayer of the English *Alternative Service Book* of 1980 to the first eucharistic prayer of the American *Enriching Our Worship 1*:

Send the Holy Spirit on your people  
and gather into one in your kingdom  
all who share this one bread and one cup,  
so that we, in the company of all the saints,  
may praise and glorify you for ever,  
through him from whom all good things come,  
Jesus Christ our Lord. (English)

Grant that we who share these gifts  
may be filled with the Holy Spirit  
and live as Christ's Body in the world.  
Bring us into the everlasting heritage  
of your daughters and sons,  
that with [\_\_\_\_\_ and] all your saints,  
past, present, and yet to come,  
we may praise your Name for ever. (American)

While the difference is subtle, the American phrases typically have a more irregular rhythm and seem to lean forward by means of their unaccented syllables.

Consider the prayer, "For Rest," proposed to General Convention 2000 and subsequently included in *Enriching Our Worship 2*:

O God my refuge and strength: in this place of unrelenting  
light and noise, enfold me in your holy darkness and silence,  
that I may rest secure under the shadow of your wings.

Effective liturgical texts must be comfortably sayable and singable, with a music that pleases the ear (or at least most ears). Compared to the elaborately spiraling phrases of Reformation English, or the measured tread of modern English liturgy, contemporary American poetic prose likes to stride, even gallop, forward to the point, with only that elaboration and repetition which serves its plain meaning.

GOOD LITURGICAL LANGUAGE IS EVOCATIVE. Having just made a claim for American dynamic plain speaking, I believe that it is also vital that liturgical texts be thick, that is, layered with allusion and meaning. This is where history is drawn in, along with Scripture. The choice of vocabulary and imagery must be rich enough to interest the mind and traditional enough to activate the memory of the community and the individual, bringing out from the liturgical storehouse that which is old and that which is new, and finding them to be organically connected, not separate things. The prayer just cited draws its reference to God as refuge and strength from the psalms, and its expansive, mythological image of protecting wings from the versicle for Compline from the night office of the fourth century, which is itself drawn from Psalm 17. The unrelenting light and noise is the environment of our own

twentieth-century hospital (or urban neighborhood). The holy darkness recalls the apophatic tradition of the medieval contemplatives and Dylan Thomas's "close and holy darkness," not to mention the universal experience of the womb.

When the 1979 Prayer Book was published, many found the modernity of its language striking, and some accused it of having abandoned tradition. One has only to take Marion J. Hatchett's detailed *Commentary on the American Prayer Book*<sup>5</sup> in hand to discover that the vast majority of fresh-sounding prayers drew phrases from many layers of Christian tradition: Sarum rite, Cranmer, previous prayer books, and books from other parts of the Anglican Communion. There are also borrowings from Gelasian, Veronese, Gregorian, Benedictine, Old Roman, Eastern Orthodox (including patristic), and other ancient sources, plus the Anglican divines. Most allude to or quote Scripture. As with the newest texts approved by General Convention in the year 2000, tradition is by no means abandoned. It is thickly layered in.

#### EFFECTIVE LITURGICAL IMAGERY NEEDS VIGOR.

It should be inspiring, thus stirring the will to pray and to act well; that ancient cardinal virtue-fortitude-finds its expression here. Such liturgy fosters strength of soul and helps overcome fear. Practicing the same virtue it seeks to teach, the text should take some risks and offer fresh, even startling imagery, or fold in imagery that may be traditional but has been overlooked or forgotten. In this category, for example, is the evocative expansive-language eucharistic prayer of 1997, with creation imagery drawn from the book of Job – "the morning stars sing your praises" (Job 38:7); "[you] enclosed the sea when it burst out from the womb" (Job 38:8) – and a description of Jesus who gave "himself for us, a fragrant offering" (Ephesians 5:2). The language of prayer needs juiciness and passion, as generations of contemplative Christians have taught us.

#### GOOD LITURGICAL IMAGERY SHOULD FALL BETWEEN

THE EXTREMES. Although we don't want worship imagery that "plays it safe," neither do we want it to go too far afield, becoming either quaint or banal, arcane or trite. To find the mean between the fresh and boring is a delicate discernment. For example, the image from Matthew 23:37 of the hen with her young is touching in the

Gospel context, but when it was introduced into a eucharistic prayer for evaluation in 1987, a majority of Episcopalians found it jarring, even silly. Eucharistic Prayer C took risks in conjuring "the vast expanse of interstellar space" (one of the most satisfying modern phrases to roll on the tongue as a presider, in my experience) and "this fragile earth, our island home." Howard Galley must have had in his mind's eye as he drafted this prayer the view of the earth from space, quite new at that time. "Island earth" became a little hackneyed by the 1980s, but as time goes by it may emerge again as fresh and compelling, and touching our environmental conscience in a powerful way. The most striking images of liturgical prayer often need a few years of "wearing in " before they begin to feel homey instead of strange.

EFFECTIVE LITURGICAL LANGUAGE IS JUST. The virtue of justice renders each its due. Justice first looks to the Creator whose justice is perfect and then to all fellow-creatures, each with its proper dignity as it is created by and images God. Liturgy enacts justice when it is truthful and when it seeks commonweal. Since it will fall short inevitably of perfect truth, it must also be humble. Thus in the choice of the content of our prayers and also in the words we select, our liturgical texts must be mindful of the injuries we may do one another through our prejudices of class and gender and other human difference. By word and mode of speaking we must seek to lift up those cast down, heal those suffering and broken, cry out for those oppressed and abandoned, comfort those who mourn, and remind ourselves of our created connection to all people and to the natural world.

Beauty furthers justice, and justice is beautiful. In the two, we glimpse the right ordering of the creation by its Author. The parts are all related to each other in a proper discipline and mutuality and obedience. Art, by its beauty, communicates the truth of the artist, and of what the artist sees and conveys, to the observer, with the intent that the observer be moved, enter into empathy, experience compassion. A Bach chorale, even to a listener who may not understand a word of the German text, lifts the soul (or at least, most souls) toward transcendence and unfolds a vision of humankind and the world as cohesive, meaningful, joyful, poignant. A lovely eucharistic prayer conveys themes of the story of God's saving love in history, moves those praying to gratitude,

offers images that bring delight and others that stir compunction, repentance, and hope. Our liturgical texts people our imaginations with the lovely faces of the saints. They lead us beside waters, both still and rolling like thunder, and across green pastures, and down city streets. They connect us to people of the past and those to come, and to the person of Jesus, prompting us to do good, to bear suffering, to render our thanks and praise.

**LITURGICAL TEXTS MUST BE HOSPITABLE.** They need to be spacious enough to allow worshipers with many sorts of experience to enter in and find a place. This is one of the reasons silence is so important as a part of texts and between texts. Silence is roomy for the thoughts and feelings and prayers of all. Here, the cardinal virtue of temperance comes to the fore, asking of every creature a measure of self-control and moderation. Temperance is taking only your fair share of creation's goods and leaving just shares for the rest of the creatures to enjoy. Temperance is founded on humble discernment of what one's share should be, given how much there is to go around among many on earth.

Liturgical prayer becomes intemperate when, for example, in an *ad hoc* pastoral prayer, the one praying attributes thoughts and feelings to those on whose behalf prayer is being voiced: "we come to you today, O God, with excitement and pleasure about the results of yesterday's presidential election." In Anglican prayer, there is a certain reserve about claiming to express the feelings of others. The authors of effective texts try hard to put themselves in the shoes of a diversity of people and congregations so as to be hospitable to difference of experience. In a prayer for healing, they ask: what would this feel like to the person in the room who asked for years to be healed of disease and never was, or whose mother just died, or the person who is so bowed down with trouble as to feel abandoned by God? Is there room for each of these people as this prayer is spoken?

**LITURGICAL TEXTS NEED TO EXPRESS FITTING THEOLOGY.** The compendium of our authorized liturgical materials expresses many theological viewpoints, not one, and their emphases shift over time even though there is also much continuity in the central Gospel story and the ideas about God we derive from our Scripture and traditions. No one prayer should be expected to, or can, carry the

weight of conveying the "whole" story. While, for example, every eucharistic prayer ought to speak in some way of Jesus' death on the cross to deliver us from sin, not every one need use the word "sacrifice," or "propitiation," to do so. Some prayers may emphasize creation as tarnished by sin, while others stress its original goodness and the ways God may still be detected at work in its loveliness. All our theological language is approximate, is metaphorical, and must be offered humbly. We do not define God by our words. Theological language is poetic. It alludes to God's qualities as best we can understand and imagine them. It leans toward God. Through our language we glimpse God as through a lattice, with some truth, but not fully or perfectly.

Theological aptness requires the exercise of the virtue of prudence, that is, right reasoning grounded in our practical sense. Augustine described this virtue, saying that one who would "love wisely discerns the means leading to the Beloved amid obstacles which would bar the way." Our texts may constitute a means toward the beloved or may raise some of those obstacles on the way. Because of our diversity of human experience, one person's means is another's obstacle. Therefore, a plurality of texts is helpful in allowing a variety of people to move toward the Beloved in prayer. Negotiation and kindness, forbearance, even humor, helps in community as we try to accommodate our conflicting individual and congregational tastes and ideas, "seeking to keep the happy mean between too much stiffness in refusing, and too much easiness in admitting variations."<sup>6</sup>

The majority of imagery used to convey theology is biblical. This is as true of contemporary texts as it was of the materials from past centuries. As the Anglican Communion has grown into a global community, and each province within it becomes increasingly multicultural and cosmopolitan, old scriptural sources are mined for evocative and fresh insights about God and humanity. Recent texts in *Enriching Our Worship 1* and *Enriching Our Worship 2* have made use of the creation imagery from Job 38 and the depiction of holy Wisdom from Proverbs and the apocryphal book of Sirach (Ecclesiasticus), for example. New collects incorporate such biblical images as God as "shield and armor of light" (Romans 13:12); Jesus as a "fragrant offering" (Ephesians 5:2); God as the one who "spread the sky like a tent" (Psalms 104:2;

Isaiah 40:22); and the Eucharist as "the bread of angels" (Psalms 78:25). New texts tend to use, naturally enough, contemporary translations of the Bible, so that those who pray can hear ancient wisdom in a fresh, accessible way.

**LITURGICAL TEXTS SHOULD BE ELEGANT.** For scientists, an elegant theory or proof is one which is simple and economical, comprehensive, and and truly descriptive. Elegance in liturgical texts means that they have enough words to convey what is intended, without excess. They describe reality as truly as we can manage to do it. They are dignified and accessible. They aim to unify those praying in shared purpose. They cover the ground, theologically, when the many texts are taken together. They point towards God and God's incarnation and Spirit.

**ULTIMATELY, THOSE LITURGICAL TEXTS** that will survive over decades, generations, and occasionally centuries of use are those which touch the hearts and minds of many congregations across differences of place and time, bringing together something universal and something particular, something old and something new. Successful texts are those which are cherished. In times of stress and distress, they contain the phrases which spring to the lips for comfort and strength. In times of joy, their words leap to mind as fitting praise for the God who is good beyond all our describing.

## **NOTES**

- 1 BCP 1662; spellings have been modernized and regularized.
- 2 BCP 1549; spellings have been modernized and regularized.
- 3 John Booty, *An American Apostle: The Life of Stephen Fielding Bayne, Jr.* (Valley Forge PA: Trinity Press International, 1997).
- 4 See BCP 1979, pp. 866-67.
- 5 New York: Seabury, 1981.
- 6 Preface, BCP 1979, p. 9.