

Chapter 1 Liturgy as Public Expression and Formation of the Body of Christ

Ritual and Liturgy (pp. 6-9)

A vital step toward hospitality and meaningful participation in liturgical practice is understanding the distinction between ritual and liturgy. Rituals depend on familiarity with the actions that are performed over and over again, often in the same place, and even in the same pew. Rituals may be private or public, individual or collective, done alone or in a group. When the world around us seems unsteady or chaotic, we turn to ritual as an anchor.

At its best, ritual connects us with time-transcending truths and comforts us. Ritual shared with others connects those who share it into a certain unity of being. Ritual elements of our liturgy include the *Sanctus*—Holy, Holy, Holy—and the words of institution—“On the night he was betrayed he took bread, said the blessing, broke the bread, and gave it to his friends, and said, ‘Take, eat: This is my body, which is given for you. Do this for the remembrance of me. . . .’” These are words spoken by Christians who have gathered since the beginnings of the church some two thousand years ago. The lifting of the elements at the conclusion of the prayer is an iconic image that even those who have never been in a church would recognize as ancient and sacred.

Liturgy, on the other hand, is always a public work, and is always done by a congregation of people. Liturgy does not depend on familiarity, although it is certainly enhanced by understanding. Liturgy can be designed uniquely for a particular place and occasion. Liturgy often includes ritual and is grounded by it. Ritual within the liturgy provides a stability and consistency that we yearn for and need. Liturgical acts or words often become ritual over time. The aptly named “comfortable words” now found in Rite I of the 1979 Book of Common Prayer (BCP, 332) are a prime example. Generations of Episcopalians could recite them: “Hear the Word of God to all who truly turn to him. Come unto me, all ye that travail and are heavy laden, and I will refresh you” (Matthew 11:28). The words became ritual because they speak a truth we all long to hear: Jesus publicly invites and welcomes us and our burdens.

Words and actions, predetermined and consistent from Sunday to Sunday, season to season, year to year, can become a bedrock, a reliable routine. In a world that is changing at an

accelerated rate, many religious people find comfort in knowing that when they begin the liturgy on any given Sunday morning, they know what to expect. This is why any change in our liturgy is often met with conflict and adversity. Change can be a fearful thing.

Ritual transcends time and location and is the same whenever and wherever it is practiced. Liturgy contextualizes the ritual and varies through time and place. The liturgy in Advent is similar yet different from the liturgy in Eastertide. The liturgy in a cinder-block chapel in Haiti is similar yet different from the liturgy in a grand cathedral in midtown Manhattan. Liturgy is an expression of the people gathered, and the people gathered will be formed by the liturgy—the oft-repeated rituals and the prayers, music, and movement of a particular occasion and location in which they come together.

In settings grand or simple, a liturgy can be life-giving, soaring, or soothing. It can express the beauty of holiness and heal the wounded soul. Regardless of the setting, a liturgy can also be hollow, dry, disconnected, and painfully exclusive, especially to the uninitiated. A liturgy may reflect the mystery of God, but it need not be mysterious itself. This is why we need to regularly reexamine the works, words, and actions of our liturgy.

It is said that in the original Greek, liturgy was a public work done on behalf of the people. It had a certain connotation of *noblesse oblige*, the rich providing for the needs of the public. Today, the idea lives on in the concept of a public works department, providing water and other services for the common good. In the first millennium of the church, the word was adopted with an understanding that the service and worship of the church was also for the public good. The liturgy came to mean all the worship services of the church, and more pointedly, the Mass, the eucharistic rite. The liturgy was understood as the movement, ritual, and words of that rite. With the liturgical renewal movement in the second half of the twentieth century, liturgy was defined as “the work of the people.” It was the work of the congregation, as well as a public work. The current online glossary of the Episcopal Church defines liturgy as “the church’s public worship of God.” It “expresses the church's identity and mission, including the church's calling to invite others and to serve with concern for the needs of the world.”ⁱ

In my own teaching and practice of liturgy, I have incorporated elements of all of these meanings, defining liturgy as a public work, performed by the people gathered, through which

we express what we believe and are formed in what we become. If liturgy is a public work, then the public should know that it is happening and that it is happening for them. This means among other things, that liturgy is about hospitality, and that those who perform the liturgy remain ever mindful of the “strangers” who might be present. If liturgy is the work of the people, then liturgy is best crafted in a way that engages the people gathered as fully as possible. If liturgy expresses what we believe and forms what we become, then those who craft the liturgy and many who participate in it are able to articulate what each action expresses about our faith and how it forms us in our faith.

Scripted reminders, either aloud or in print, give welcoming formation to the visitor and the curious, describe why we are about to do what we are about to do, and encourage the formation of the regular participants. Subtle changes in the Sunday liturgy can alert us to the meaning behind the ritual, revealing things that have been understood previously only by the initiated or the trained, and engaging those gathered in being and becoming the body of Christ.

ⁱ The Episcopal Church, “Liturgy,” *An Episcopal Dictionary of the Church*

<https://episcopalchurch.org/library/glossary/liturgy>.