

# The Sunday Morning Crisis: *rethinking the relation between liturgy and mission*

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Why have most of the baptized given up on Sunday worship? While church authorities argue about the way worship should be conducted and what kind of music and preaching should be featured, many of even the most informed and conscientious Christians have apparently concluded it's not worth the trouble. It's not that they have stopped 'doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with their God' (*Micah 6:8*); it's just that confusion about the purpose of Sunday morning has taken its toll.

So now, our churches are again trying to be apostolic (although today we call it being 'missional'). We know we cannot continue as a private club for members only; we must make ourselves useful, or we will be written off as an outdated institution. We have awakened to the fact that our business is *not* just on Sunday morning but all week long: liturgy *and* mission. *But what is the relationship between liturgy and mission?* Is liturgy our formation for mission? Or a 'pit-stop' in the midst of our mission? Or should liturgy motivate people for mission (or at least begin to recruit people for mission)?

Or perhaps there is no relation between the two — we are simply providing Sunday worship for those who like that sort of thing.

One of the assumptions contributing to this confusion is that liturgy is inescapably sectarian and specific to our version of faith, and thus can only serve individuals in their private quest for spirituality or salvation. That is what our modern culture devoutly believes about religious faith, and we have learned to behave as if it were true; we practice this private faith amongst consenting adults behind closed doors. Yes, we welcome visitors, and we hope they will find it helpful and not too mystifying or offensive; we try to make it easy for them to follow, hoping they will join in and help keep the club alive. But fewer and fewer are convinced that it is worthwhile.

What we have forgotten is that the Greek word *leitourgia* (liturgy) originally meant 'public service for the common good'<sup>1</sup>. We know we must be serving the common good, but we think of that as *mission*, not liturgy.

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<sup>1</sup>From *leit* public + *ergon* work, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*.

Lesslie Newbigin pointed out that the earliest generations of Christians referred to themselves corporately as '*ecclesia*', adopting "the word which in normal secular use referred to the public assembly of all the citizens gathered to discuss and settle the public affairs of the city. In other words, the early Church did not see itself as a private religious society competing with others to offer personal salvation to its members; it saw itself as a movement launched into the public life of the world, challenging the *cultus publicus* of the Empire, claiming the allegiance of all without exception."<sup>2</sup>

How then can Sunday worship be a 'public service for the common good'?

### "A Living Memory with a Future Orientation"<sup>3</sup>

The Acts of Apostles describes an evolving pattern in the life of the first disciples of Jesus, the people of 'the Way' (*Acts 9: 2; 19: 9, 23; 22: 4; etc.*), which is entirely plausible: while they continued their Jewish practice of praying in the Temple, they also gathered in one another's homes on the first day of the week, the 'day of resurrection', to break bread. They could not help but recall the last meal together with Jesus just before his death, or his words, "This is my body... this is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." As St Paul reminded a later generation, "As often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (*1 Corinthians 11:23-26*).

In other words, when they gathered at table on 'the Lord's Day', proclaiming his death, *they were the living memory of God's way of healing the world* — something the world is still hell-bent on forgetting!

The reason our world wants to forget 'the Lord's death' is that the message of the cross still seems like foolishness because we still believe the only way to deal with people who threaten what we hold sacred is to get rid of them, like we did with Jesus (*1 Corinthians 1:18-25; 2:7-8; John 11:47-50*). According to the opening chapters of Acts, what followed the crucifixion of Jesus was the insistence by the authorities that public security had been restored, and the dangerous fantasies of the Galilean prophet about the 'kingdom of God' had been quashed. Their one remaining concern, therefore, was to silence the witness of the apostles. "We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and you are determined to

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<sup>2</sup>*Sign of the Kingdom.*

<sup>3</sup>Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being.*

bring this man's blood on us" (*Acts 5:28*). They refused to face the truth of Jesus' warnings about the future (e.g. *Luke 13:1-9, 31-35; cf. 19:41-44; 20:9-19; 21:5-6*), and chose to silence him instead.

In our own time, as René Girard observed, "What is frightening is the conjunction of massive technical power and the spiritual surrender to nihilism. A panic stricken refusal to glance, even furtively, in the only direction where meaning could still be found."<sup>4</sup> When we gather to remember Jesus' death, we are the living memory of God's way of healing a dangerously conflicted world.

But the people of 'the Way' not only remembered his death at table, for it was in the breaking of the bread that the risen Jesus was made known to them (*Luke 24:35*); so they were also unable to forget those earlier meals they had shared with him during the days of his Galilean ministry, in anticipation of the heavenly banquet to come. Jesus' agenda throughout his ministry had been proclaiming the coming of the kingdom of God, reshaping expectations of its character, and forming a community of disciples that lived its values and celebrated its nearness. Thus a weekly meal evoking both the memory of his death and the character and values of that kingdom, shared on the 'day of resurrection', became a defining activity of the Jesus-movement. *They became a living sign of the world's true future.*

The Letter to the Ephesians explores this revelatory aspect of the life of the Church, acknowledging that God "has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and on earth" (*Ephesians 1:9-10*). And so, God has chosen "to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things, so that *through the church* the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places" (*Ephesians 3:10*).<sup>5</sup> For too long, Sunday worship has been more about the Church's past than the world's future. Nostalgia for the golden days of the Church's glory has cancelled out the dimension of hope. We have much to learn from our past, but too often it becomes an idol. Celebrating the eucharist together means anticipating the reconciliation of the world through our union with the forgiving victim who has made peace by the blood of his cross and is drawing all humanity to himself (*2 Corinthians 5:14-19; John 12:27-32*). He continues his work of making disciples of us, the people of 'the Way'.

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<sup>4</sup>*Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World.*

<sup>5</sup>The 'mystery' of God's ways is revealed not just publically, but to the reigning powers; cf. *Ephesians 6:12*.

We share in his Spirit — that power which is making all things new. We become a living sign of the coming kingdom of God.<sup>6</sup>

There are so many ways we can serve the common good, but these two critically important ways of serving the common good — *being the living memory of God's way of healing the world, and becoming a living sign of the world's true future* — cannot be done in any other way than through our public celebration of Word and Sacrament. Our Sunday worship is our most vital service to the common good.

Aidan Kavanagh put it best: "The Church cannot be regarded as merely something benign stuck onto the world from without. It is, instead, merely the world made new... Stop asking how the Church might better serve the world; the question is how the Church might better serve the imperative of the Gospel, and consequently aid this world in discovering itself made new in the Church itself."<sup>7</sup>

There are, of course, a number of huge suppositions underlying this claim, not the least of which is the expectation that worshippers on Sunday morning are coming to terms with who and what they are through their regular immersion in the story of God's ways.

If the Sunday liturgy does not regularly reinforce our sense of baptismal identity and calling through our identification with that story, it is failing.

## Public Service for the Common Good

In order for Sunday worship to become once again a public service through memory and hope, we will need to attend to four major tasks. First and foremost, we will have to come to terms with that fact that the Good News, the story of God's way of healing the world, has critical implications for all political arrangements, and for every religion and culture — *including our own politics and our own religious culture*. This story does not offer us the luxury of a merely individual salvation; that is not what the Gospel is about.

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<sup>6</sup>This is not meant to represent a whole and entire understanding of the Eucharist, but merely an answer to the question, 'How can the Eucharist be a public service to the common good?'

<sup>7</sup>*Christian Initiation: Tactics and Strategy*, in *Made, Not Born*.

Second, we will have to stop practising baptism as if it were magic, and treat it as a celebration of being conformed to the way of Jesus, in response to the Good News. Baptism is the sacrament entrusted to us for the purpose of making disciples, but it will not do this until we end indiscriminate baptism, restore a form of catechumenal ministry, and recover the courage to invite newcomers to discipleship.

Third, we will have to take both story and symbol more seriously. Regarding story, Thomas Boomershine has remarked, "We need to be done with treating the public reading of Scripture as a 'dead time' in our weekly Christian worship. We would never mumble through William Shakespeare or Maya Angelou in the same way. We would never treat any other piece of poetry, story, or literature with the same amount of indifference that we do the Bible every week. It's an abomination, what we do with the living Word of God."<sup>8</sup> The baptized need help in developing a general sense of the arc and reach of the biblical story. They cannot be expected to appreciate scripture selections for which they have no sense of context; and preaching the lectionary without filling in the larger story turns scripture into a random collection of mystical oracles. As for symbols, they have fallen victim to cheap grace and the reductionism of efficiency, with the result that they no longer speak with power or transparency; and they have become the exclusive business of the clergy. It is essential that the baptized have a personal investment in the celebration of both Word and Sacrament.

And fourth, we will need to renounce that doctrine of the atonement which blames God for the death of Jesus, and learn how to appreciate the original ways in which the Church described the paschal mystery. Jesus was well aware of the way religious people try to justify themselves by blaming someone else (*Matthew 23:29-32*). The doctrine of penal substitution, which has made the whole issue of atonement toxic for many of the faithful, imputes to God a vengeful legalism. God does not have a problem with forgiving us (*Luke 15:11-32*). If anyone was being paid off by the crucifixion of Jesus, it was the one who held us captive (*Mark 10:45; Hebrews 2:14-15*). It was *we*, not God, who killed Jesus (*1 Corinthians 2: 6-8; Revelation 1:7*), and only when we come to terms with this fact will we be able to recognize the immensity of God's love in entrusting his Son to us (*Matthew 21:33-40; Galatians 2:19-20*).

But how could the Sunday service ever be *public service for the common good*? What impact on the world at large can there possibly be from this thing we do behind closed doors?

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<sup>8</sup>"Founder's Talk" at the Festival Gathering of the Network of Biblical Storytellers, August 2014.

We must remember that most of those doors enclose worship spaces that were originally conceived as public spaces — within a culture dominated by the institutional church. This was just one aspect of our disastrous distortion of *ecclesia*: we opted for cultural hegemony as our preferred mode of witness, instead of trusting the power of the Gospel. Within living memory, being a Christian was considered the equivalent of being a good citizen, and good citizens were expected to be ‘in church’ on Sunday morning — a reasonable expectation so long as the Church had the power to suppress every other form of social activity on Sunday morning.

But all that is gone. These spaces for worship are no longer seen as public spaces (and it is no accident that many congregations now find it nearly impossible to afford such private accommodation). However, Jesus did not tell his disciples to offer hospitality to visitors; he told them to go and visit the towns and villages of Galilee, counting on the hospitality they would be given (*Luke 9:1-6*). We need to learn to do the same, trusting the Spirit to empower us. Relationships of accountability, trust and mutual respect, not domination, must become the foundation of our witness (*1 Peter 3:13-17*).

And then Sunday worship (at whatever time of day, and within whatever sort of accommodation) can again be important if it is a service of memory and hope. Whether it meets the expectations of visitors is beside the point. Attracting strangers is something Jesus continues to do, and the gathered faithful do it too, when their life together reflects his; but that is not the role of the liturgy *per se*. Sunday worship is effective when it is ritual formation through story and symbol, celebrated on the day of new creation, inviting us to remember the death that trampled death, and empowering us to be the sign of God’s coming kingdom. Mark Searle has described the liturgy as a form of rehearsal in which the actors learn their roles so well they are taken over by those roles.<sup>9</sup> They become the story they tell.<sup>10</sup>

And yet we might still wonder: Did the liturgy of Word and Table ever really function as a public service for the common good? The simplest answer is: If Jesus had not been raised from the dead, he would never have been heard of again; but the risen Jesus was known in the breaking of the bread. So, if his disciples had not gathered at table, they would not have become witnesses to his resurrection, and Jesus still would not have been heard of again. And if he had never been heard of again, (*Romans 10:14-15*), the world

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<sup>9</sup> *Images and Worship*.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, the catechetical strategy modelled at <http://www.anglican.ca/becoming>.

would be a vastly different place today. It is thus of critical importance to the common good that we continue bearing witness that the crucified and risen Jesus is Lord.