

Homily for the Solemnity of the Assumption 2010

The First Reading for today's mass begins with the words:

"The sanctuary of God in heaven opened, and the ark of the covenant could be seen inside it."

As we continue to look at the particular insights of Pope Benedict in preparation for his visit next month, this sentence just has to be the starting point for a look at what he has revealed to us about liturgy and worship, and especially about the celebration of mass, because it expresses pretty clearly his vision of what is going on in the sacred liturgy.

We might begin by asking, why does the liturgy matter, why is it so important to celebrate mass in a particular way? Why make so much fuss about getting it right? Isn't it a bit self-indulgent to worry about the details of what goes on at mass when we could be out there feeding the hungry and clothing the naked? This is a very fair question, and it is important that we are able to answer it clearly. The Pope is uncompromising on this point:

"I am convinced that the crisis in the Church that we are experiencing today is to a large extent due to the disintegration of the liturgy."¹

That sounds quite a big claim, so what does he mean? He is building on an idea which can be found in the documents of the Second Vatican Council, which say the Eucharist is 'the source and summit of the Christian life'²; this was also picked up by Pope John Paul II who said 'The Church draws her life from the Eucharist'³. So, the Mass makes the Church; therefore our experience of mass, how we celebrate the Eucharist, affects the sort of Church we become. Where the liturgy loses its focus on God, where worship becomes centred on man rather than centred on God, then the community effectively celebrates itself; it becomes inward-looking and self-obsessed, and its worship becomes fruitless and pointless. At the World Youth Day in Cologne Pope Benedict offered a different vision. He refers to the fact that in the Eucharist Jesus changes bread and wine into his body and blood: 'violence is transformed into love, and death into life'⁴. The universal longing for change, for transformation, the hope that everybody has that things can be better, reaches its climax. He goes on:

"To use an image well known to us today, this is like inducing nuclear fission in the very heart of being - the victory of love over hatred, the victory of love over death. Only this intimate explosion of good conquering evil can then trigger off the series of transformations that little by little will change the world."

¹ *Milestones: Memoirs 1927-1977* (SF, CA: Ignatius), p. 149.

² Lumen Gentium n.11

³ Ecclesia de Eucharistia n.1

⁴ Mass at Marienfeld 21/08/05

This first fundamental transformation of violence into love, of death into life, brings other changes in its wake. Bread and wine become his Body and Blood. But it must not stop there; on the contrary, the process of transformation must now gather momentum. The Body and Blood of Christ are given to us so that we ourselves will be transformed in our turn. We are to become the Body of Christ, his own Flesh and Blood.”⁵

The Mass matters because in the Mass we experience God’s power to change and transform: death can be turned into life, hatred can be turned into love; bread can be turned into body, wine into blood; finally, as a result of experiencing all this, we can be changed, too, and thus we can ourselves transform the world. The liturgy matters because it must make real for us this experience of transformation. If all it does is confirm us in a self-satisfied complacency that all is well, leaving us undisturbed, without a sense of drive to be God’s instruments in redeeming the world, it has failed us. ‘Sunday is...the day when Christians rediscover the Eucharistic form which their lives are meant to have’⁶.

How we celebrate Mass is important, because it makes a difference to the sort of community we become, the sort of people we become. It lifts our eyes, raises our expectations of what might be possible. Living in the world greed, lust, the will to power seem normal and unavoidable; but when we celebrate Mass well it points us beyond this, to a different Kingdom with different standards, to a place where self-giving (this is my body, this is my blood) are not extraordinary, they are just real human life.

‘Worship gives us a share in heaven’s mode of existence, in the world of God, and allows light to fall from that divine world into ours.’⁷

Having established that liturgy really matters, we can see here what the ‘big idea’ really is. Liturgy is not something that I do, because that would somehow edge God out of worship, it would make him irrelevant. Liturgy is something that God does, something that is going on all the time regardless of me, something which I can allow myself to become a part of. The liturgy of the Church is not something in my control, it is something in God’s control. When I celebrate Mass as the Church celebrates it, using the words and gestures that are set out to be used, I become a part of something much bigger than me, something that extends throughout the world and throughout eternity. I become caught up in God’s action. But if I decide to make it up, to adjust and adapt, to do things my own way, I am no longer part of something bigger than me, I edge God out and put myself at centre stage. Sometimes it can be very tempting to do this as a priest, to come up with clever ideas, or gimmicks, or entertaining little tricks; people laugh and tell me how clever I am. But these shift the focus of the liturgy away, and I find myself standing between the people and God. Once they worshipped God, now they worship me, and it is a very poor exchange. As Pope Benedict says, when a priest places his own personality, his own ideas, in front of the people in

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Sacramentum Caritatis n.72

⁷ The Spirit of The Liturgy, written as Cardinal Ratzinger, p. 21.

celebrating the liturgy he becomes ‘a wall instead of a window’⁸, obscuring God rather than revealing him.

Pope Benedict refers to a saying of Gandhi that each of the three habitats of the cosmos has its own mode of being. Fish live in the sea, and they are silent; the animals of the earth scream and shout; the birds, whose habitat is the heavens, sing. Human have a share of all three; they carry the depths of the sea, the burden of the earth, and the heights of the heavens within them. So all three properties belong to them – silence, shouting and singing. But Pope Benedict says people who want to live without transcendence, without a sense of the sacred, only want to be earth, trying to make the depths and the heights into earth too, so they only shout.

‘The right liturgy, the liturgy of the communion of saints, restores totality to these people. It teaches them silence and singing again by opening to them the depths of the sea and teaching them to fly, the angels’ mode of being. It brings the song buried in them to sound once more by lifting up their hearts. Indeed, we can now even turn this around and say: One recognizes right liturgy by the fact that it liberates us from ordinary, everyday activity and returns to us once more the depths and the heights, silence and song.’⁹

Right liturgy liberates us from the everyday. That is the key for Pope Benedict. If our worship is mundane and banal, not much different from our ordinary secular activities, it is poor liturgy. There is little silence in everyday life, but there must be silence in liturgy, because that is the opportunity for God to act, to speak. Many of us see little beauty in our daily lives, but above all the liturgy must be beautiful. The liturgy celebrates God’s ability to transform, through love, the darkest hour of death into the bright triumph of resurrection. At the heart of our liturgy is the beauty of Christ who loves us so much, loves us this much. ‘Beauty is not mere decoration, but an essential element of the liturgical action’¹⁰. Liturgy is focused on God, and God is beautiful – indeed he is the yardstick by which all beauty is measured. So everything to do with our worship must be beautiful: the Church, the vestments, the sacred vessels, the music, the staging of the action. If it isn’t beautiful, it isn’t Catholic.

The Pope’s vision of the liturgy takes a bit of effort to grasp, but once we do grasp it, it is awesome and exciting. It invites us to meet the living God. In the consecration at Mass ‘For a moment the world is silent, everything is silent, and in that silence we touch the eternal – for one beat of the heart we step out of time into God’s being-with-us’¹¹.

⁸ ‘A New Song for the Lord’ p.67

⁹ Ibid. p.160

¹⁰ Sacramentum Caritatis n. 35

¹¹ The Spirit of the Liturgy p. 212