

# The Liturgy: A Liberating Connection

## Making Connections

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**Justo:** Our subject yesterday was the interpretation of Scripture. Looking at the history of biblical interpretation, we noted that there are three distinct ways in which the church has interpreted Scripture. The first, which is also the most common in Western tradition, is to look at Scripture as law and prophecy. Scripture speaks of what we ought to do and of what will come to pass. The second is allegorical interpretation, which has been used in our Western tradition as a means to avoid the narrowness of the first. These two methods, radically different as they may be, still have one point in common: They focus their attention on the text itself and not on the *events* of which the text speaks.

We then argued that the predominant method of biblical interpretation in the early church is neither of these but a third, which is usually called "typological" interpretation. This is a method of biblical interpretation that places the notion of history at its very heart. Clearly, history does not repeat itself. History moves. Therefore, when the Bible is read typologically one is not simply looking for eternal truths, unchangeable principles that have nothing to do with their historical setting. On the other hand, although it is true that history does not repeat itself in an eternal cycle, it is also true that history is not a series of unrelated events, each of them completely unprecedented, a sort of atomistic, meaningless collage of happenings. History, as Scripture sees it, *both* moves forward and follows certain patterns. The early church, in its

reading of Scripture, was convinced that these patterns or *types* all pointed to the *archetype* of history, Jesus Christ, whom we have seen in history and whose return in glory is the goal of history. On this basis, an understanding of history and a vision of the future of history are significant for our present obedience. Therefore, typology, more than a method of interpretation, is an entire perspective on reality, most specifically on historical reality, that governs not only the manner one reads Scripture but also the manner one reads life. It is at this point that, as we shall try to show today, typology and liturgy intersect.

However, before we go into such matters, it is important to point out that we are not pursuing them out of a purely antiquarian interest. If typology, which was so dominant in the early church, lost ground at a certain point in Christian history, this was not a matter of historical accident. And if today there is renewed interest in it, that too is not a matter of historical accident.

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The earliest Christian theology developed in the midst of a community that was not of great account in the eyes of the world. The social status of early Christians may be open to debate, but what is certain is that, by the very fact that they were Christians if not also by reason of their social origins, Christians were a despised lot.

This is a situation that I know quite well, for I grew up as a Protestant in a pre-Vatican II Catholic society in which Protestants were seen not only as heretics but also as ignorant fanatics.

In such a situation, the early church drew great strength and comfort from a view of history that both promised a different future and made sense of the sufferings and humiliations of the present. Joseph sold by his brothers, yet was made a ruler in Egypt; Moses rejected by his own people, yet rose to be their deliverer; the stone that the builders rejected, was then made the cornerstone of the building; all these were pre-enactments of the great drama of history in which Jesus, the new Moses, the stone rejected by the builders of Israel, was crucified yet rose again to rule in glory. And the same was true of Christians themselves, who like Joseph, like Moses, but above all like Christ, were the rejected stones of society.

But that is not the entire picture. Growing up as I did, I remember how we Protestants rejoiced when anyone with the least status in society joined us or even made a statement that appeared to be favorable to us. Our church was quite ambivalent about its status in society. While it rejoiced in being part of the long history of stones that the builders rejected, it also longed to have a place among the builders. And this was not just a matter of seeking social respectability for ourselves. It was also a desire to see the Gospel, as we understood it, make way among the powerful in our society.

Likewise, in the early church, attempts were made to make both the church and the Gospel more respectable. It was precisely out of such attempts that allegorical interpretation grew, for by interpreting the Bible allegorically one could show that after all what it says agrees with what the best pagan philosophers had also said.

However, it was after the time of Constantine, early in the fourth century, that typology really lost ground. It lost ground precisely because the view of history that it espoused, and that looked forward to an end different from the glories of the Roman Empire, was not compatible with the growing alliance between Church and Empire. For over a millennium and a half, Christianity enjoyed respectability and the support of the state and of society at large. There was nothing strange or uncouth about being a Christian. On the contrary, all respectable people were Christians. Christians were no longer stones rejected by the master builders, but the builders who decided which stones to accept and which to reject. This may be seen in the efforts on the part of Eusebius of Caesarea to show that the conversion of Constantine was the goal towards which history had always been moving, and therefore to have the book of Revelation, which spoke of a different view, kept out of the canon of the New Testament.

It was in such a situation that typology lost ground, both in the East and in the West. In the East, it was not abandoned but was rendered powerless in one of two ways. The first, of which Eusebius himself is a good example, was to limit history and its typology to past events. Eusebius himself interpreted the rise and reign of Constantine in terms of the typology of King David, who had risen to power as God's anointed. But then he refused to apply the same typology to current events, to those who in his own time were despised and persecuted, as David had been persecuted in his youth. If the new King David had arrived in Constantine, it was not necessary to look beyond this kingdom to a greater one.

A second way in which typology lost power was by limiting it to purely ecclesiastical matters, and to those having to do with our eternal salvation. Like allegory, this new form of typology had little or nothing to do with history but referred to eternal matters.

As long as the Constantinian arrangement lasted in the East, and even under hostile Muslim and Marxist regimes, such biblical interpretation was normative and helped the church avoid many a conflict with the state.

In the West, the other two strains of biblical interpretation became normative. Indeed, to interpret Scripture as referring to a history in which the builders of society reject the stones chosen by God was a very questionable and even subversive thing. In contrast, allegorical interpretation, usually connected with heavenly realities of which we shall partake after death, reinforced a "pie-in-the-sky" theology that led to quiet acceptance of present injustices, while the interpretation of Scripture as a book of law led to a sacralization of the present law and order that had similar social consequences.

Things have changed in recent decades. They began changing centuries ago, with the French Revolution and the rise of the secular state. But in recent decades, there have also been very significant changes. In 1900, roughly 50% of all Christians lived in Europe; by 1985, that number was reduced to 25%. In 1900, 80% of all Christians were white; by 1985, that figure was reduced to 40%. Most of these changes are due to the growing churches in the Third World, in areas that

in 1940 were under colonial rule but which are now independent. And most of the growth has taken place, not under colonial regimes that might have favored Christianity in a Constantinian style, but after the end of colonial rule. In other words, in the midst of a post-Constantinian, increasing secularism, these churches are growing and showing enormous vitality.

**Catherine:** In the North Atlantic, things have followed a different path. There has been growing secularism, joined with a decline in church membership and participation. In the United States, whatever the fluctuations in church membership in recent years, it is quite clear that in terms of our culture, we are becoming more and more secularized. A variety of activities are scheduled for Sunday mornings, not only church services. Church participation appears rarely in television dramas, except for funerals and weddings. Even in these brief appearances, the clergy often are quaint characters, out of touch with contemporary life. As a general rule, clergy do not have the social status they did a few generations ago. There are many other professions that have far greater prestige.

In western Europe, the secularization process has proceeded at a more rapid pace. Participation is infrequent, even for people who would identify themselves as Christians, and many would claim no affiliation at all. In fact, it is not simply the growth of the church in areas outside of the old North Atlantic stronghold that has changed the statistics for the church worldwide—it is also the clear decline in percentages of population that would claim church membership within that traditional heart of medieval Christendom and the North American colonies it produced. The

development of communism in Russia and after World War II in Eastern Europe can be seen as a more rapid and pressured rise of secularism. Both Russia and Eastern Europe were taken abruptly from a strong Constantinian situation to a radically secular and clearly hostile social setting. Where typology had been used to sacralize the present order, it obviously would have to change—and to change in the direction of the ancient understandings.

**Justo:** In the last few years, we have witnessed momentous events in what used to be called the communist bloc. After decades of pressure, persecution and apparent non-existence, the church in China has shown itself to be still a vital force. The recent events in Russia and in Eastern Europe are well known. How have these churches survived? What has been the source of their strength? In one word, it has been their understanding of history, kept alive by a liturgical life deeply grounded in that understanding.

In recent decades there has been a liturgical revival throughout the Christian world. This renewal finds support in the early liturgies of the church and owes much of its impetus to scholarly research and discoveries regarding those early liturgies. Indeed, we have learned that early Christian worship was very different than we—especially we Protestants—had assumed. But the impetus behind this liturgical renewal is far from the purely scholarly or antiquarian. In Africa, Asia and Latin America, among minorities in the North Atlantic, and in a myriad other places, Christian communities are developing liturgies which in many ways approach what we know of the liturgies of the early church. Thus, while scholars in the North Atlantic have been

researching the worship of the early church, Christians in various parts of the world have been developing patterns of worship which bear some of the characteristics of that early worship. Part of the reason is that like the early church, many of these Christians cannot count on society to support their faith. And one of the ways in which the two are similar is precisely in their typological understanding of Scripture and of history.

**Catherine:** In fact, without understanding typology, the early liturgies seem very strange indeed. Think of the Apostolic Tradition (the Rite of Hippolytus) stemming from the early third century, though purporting to represent an earlier, second century form. There, baptism is paralleled with the Exodus. The whole baptismal service—because it is held on Easter Eve—links the baptism of the new candidate with the death and resurrection of Jesus, which is in turn linked to Israel's crossing of the Red Sea and the Jordan. In other words, the release from bondage which God had caused for Israel, followed by the entrance into the Promised Land across the Jordan, was re-enacted, re-lived, re-done in an even greater fashion by Jesus, who freed humanity from the greater bondage to sin and death, and all the powers of evil, and delivered us to a greater land, the Kingdom, the Reign of God.

When baptism was performed on Easter Eve, the candidate was not simply reminded of those past events, but the parallel was relived at that moment. If the Cross and Resurrection are a type of the Exodus—in fact, if they are the *archetype*—then baptism is also a type of the Cross

and Resurrection of Jesus and of the Exodus. All that was said about typology in terms of Biblical history therefore also relates to this liturgical event.

It can be stated more clearly: Baptism *is* a type. The liturgical event is the latest in the series of such types. It depends for its power on the archetype—on the Cross and the Resurrection of Jesus. It has no independent source or power. But in the same way that the Exodus and the death and resurrection of Jesus were actual events in history, so too this baptism is a specific moment in history—in the chain of events that are linked by their typology.

The Rite of Hippolytus sheds more light on the parallels. After the candidates are baptized and anointed with oil—that is, made Christs, anointed ones, with royal and priestly powers—, they are joined to the whole congregation as the Easter eucharist is celebrated. For these candidates, their first communion includes not only the traditional chalice of wine but also a chalice of milk and honey to indicate that through baptism, they have been brought into the Promised Land—the water in which they were baptized was a type not only of the Red Sea but also of the Jordan.

Other types abound in the ancient liturgies: the manna in the Wilderness and the Bread of communion, which the Gospel of John links together with the words of Jesus: “I am the Bread of Heaven.” Those who are baptized may truly have entered the Promised Land, but there is also a sense in which they still are pilgrims through the Wilderness, preparing to enter that land. The

image of new birth is also clearly present, along with death and resurrection. Again, the words of the Gospel of John are helpful: Even as Jesus was born, not of the will of the flesh but of God, so too in baptism those who once were born of the flesh are now born of God. And these words from the Prologue of John's Gospel come just before the account of the Baptism of Jesus: "To all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God; who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God."

Types are not simple representations of past history, but complex, evocative, symbolic, poetic forms that can be combined in myriad ways within liturgy. Yet they retain the character of a new historical moment in which these types come to life, with the power they possess because of those earlier moments. If in the Scripture itself we find frequent use of typology, much of it pointing to the liturgy, then it would appear that the liturgy of the church may be the best setting in which to understand fully the significance of much of Scripture. It is in the liturgy—most specifically in baptism and the eucharist as well as in aspects of the liturgical year—that the types with which Scripture has to do reach us and become events in our time. Baptisms were situated on Easter Eve because in our baptism we died with Christ and rose with him. The Eucharist was on Sunday because it was the day of the Resurrection. The calendar and the sacraments became events, typologically, not simply rituals that were performed for reasons of tradition.

In the sixteenth century—and beyond—one of the debates among the churches was whether something "happened" in baptism and the Lord's Supper. Were these purely symbolic acts or did something really change? To view the sacraments typologically is to see that question differently. Yes, something happens: at a specific moment in history—in a liturgical setting—a type recurs. What Scripture records as happening in the past now occurs in our presence. It is an event. How we respond to that event may be as ambiguous as is our response to all of history. The possibilities may only be known to faith. But an event is an event; it is not the symbol of an event. An event is a moment in which something happens. It is a specific moment in history.

**Justo:** It is important to underscore the centrality of *history* in this vision. Indeed, it is at this point that Christianity differs radically from the mystery religions that were so popular in the Mediterranean basin during the first centuries of the Christian era and whose modern counterparts are so popular in our day. During the first two or three decades of the twentieth century, there was much research into these mystery religions, and many scholars concluded that Christianity was simply one more among many such religions. The parallels were many. Baptism, with its imagery of being washed in the blood of the Lamb, seemed very similar to the taurobolia, in which initiates of Mithra were washed in the blood of a bull, and the resurrection of Jesus was paralleled to the resurrection of Osiris after Seth dismembered him and scattered his body all over Egypt.

What all of this missed, however, and what more recent scholarship has realized, was the one radical difference between the mysteries and Christianity. The mysteries had evolved from the various fertility cults of the area. The flooding of the Nile in Egypt and the cycle of the seasons further north had given rise to a number of myths explaining them. In all of these myths, just as nature dies every year only to be renewed again, the God dies either on a yearly basis or in a transhistorical, mythological world.

Christianity, on the other hand, had sprung out of the faith of Israel, a faith which was essentially historical in character, for although the Hebrews did have myths of creation, and explanations of a number of natural phenomena, their faith was based, not on such phenomena, but on the historical deeds of God for the redemption of Israel.

Likewise, Christianity did not speak of a God who dies and is raised every year, nor of one who dies and is raised in the mythological world of the gods, but of a God incarnate in history, who died and rose only once, at a given date. (I remember when I first learned the Apostles' Creed, how puzzled I was that Pontius Pilate seemed to be blamed for the crucifixion when there were so many actors in the drama. It was only much later that I realized that the inclusion of Pilate in the Creed is not an attempt to blame him but an affirmation that the Creed is speaking about historical, datable facts.)

The grounding of baptism and eucharist is not some eternal principle nor some recurring cycle. The grounding of baptism and eucharist is the historical event, Jesus Christ. And, because they are so grounded—baptism and eucharist—, every time they are celebrated, they are also historical events, or, using the terminology which we introduced yesterday, they are *types* linking our history with the *archetype* of all history, Jesus Christ, who suffered, was crucified, dead, buried and raised again, "under Pontius Pilate."

**Catherine:** If the use of typology lessened greatly after the rise of Constantine, it is no wonder that it is making a return at this point when the Constantinian age is ending in the West—and really never existed in the areas of the world where the church is a post-medieval institution. In the present liturgical renewal, the Roman Catholic Church and many of the traditional Protestant churches have drastically changed their liturgies for baptism and the eucharist. What is fascinating is that one can compare these new liturgies and see that they are far more parallel to each other than most are to their own church's liturgies of fifty years ago. They also have more in common with the early church than they have with the sixteenth century. The recent Lima document of the World Council of Churches—"Baptism Eucharist and Ministry"—shows the commonalities very well. I doubt that, even if such a document could have been produced fifty years ago, it would have shown anywhere near the areas of agreement. The change is not antiquarian, it is quite practical. The second- and third-century churches understood the power of *done*—to create and nurture Christian identity. It was a major means of helping people to

know what it meant to be a Christian and to live their lives out of that understanding. The surrounding culture could hardly be expected to help in that process.

In the Constantinian period, one could assume that the whole society was Christian, and that Christian identity had little “overagainstness” to the culture in which it found itself. But in an increasingly secular society, we find ourselves in great need of these means of Christian identity-formation. When the rediscovery of ancient manuscripts and the academic study of liturgy came forth with these early forms, churches adapted them readily to their own contemporary situations. The renunciations in baptism—also part of early liturgies—now make sense, when it is clear that Christians not only must affirm what they believe but they also must reject and turn from many of the values and beliefs of the societies in which they live their lives.

The liturgical renewal includes more than the sacraments. Even in Protestant churches that celebrated little more than the Lord 's Day, the church calendar has taken new root. The seasons of the year provide dramatic ways in which the teachings of the church can be reinforced in the home. Granted, we have problems with such things as the secularized versions of Christmas, the celebrations still provide great opportunities for Christian nurture beyond the walls of the church. Along with the church year has come a new interest in the lectionary within churches that had little sympathy for such matters a few years ago.

It may be that the increased secularism that surrounds the churches has caused us to seek for what can create in us a common Christian identity. Even if we do not worship together most of the time, perhaps we can read the same texts and celebrate the same seasons in an *ad hoc* ecumenism that may in the long run prove crucial to our growing together.

In this context, let us look again at David, in the narrative that we mentioned yesterday, surrounding the story of his battle with Goliath. The account of the anointing of the young David, while Saul is still king, occurs in the present lectionary late in the Lenten season. Typologically, this makes great sense. Even as David was anointed to be king while another was still ruling, so those who are to be baptized at Easter—and we who are to be dramatically reminded and renewed in our baptisms—are to be or have been anointed as the royal and priestly people of God. (Even the anointing with oil as a part of the baptismal service is being restored by many churches that would not have considered it until recently.) Just as young David took on the struggle with Goliath and was victorious, so too we who are baptized will be called upon to struggle against the powers that are raised against us. We too can be confident of some surprising victories. Even as the victory brought David the jealousy and enmity of Saul who was still king, we too can anticipate the animosity and antagonism of the powers of this world that do still rule. In all of this, David pre-figures, and we who are now baptized experience in our own lives, the archetype—Jesus who is anointed one, who in this Lenten season is approaching the climax of the enmity he has aroused because of his victories. To be baptized is to be added to this line, this history. It is an event. It teaches us not only something about David,

not only something about Jesus, it also teaches us about ourselves—who we are because we are baptized.

The astonishing events of the past few weeks in Eastern Europe point to new possibilities.

Churches in radically secularized societies have gained a new stature. Their clear Christian identity has not caused them to remove themselves from the public arena. Will their renewed vigor lead modern equivalents of Constantine to seek alliances with them? Will the churches themselves seek for a power that once was theirs in the medieval model? Or will some new forms emerge that let the strengths of the early church remain in the midst of a modern Secular society?

**Justo:** Only history—future history—will provide answers to such questions. Yet the events of the past few months in Eastern Europe are not disconnected with the subject we are discussing.

A friend of ours, a seminary professor who has specialized in Eastern Orthodox theology, told us the story of something that happened to him several years ago. He had taken a group from this country on a study tour of The Soviet Union. As was customary in such cases, a guide had been assigned to his group—a guide whose function was to be polite and helpful, but who was also clearly there as a representative of the Party and its interests. Since the group was composed mostly of seminary students and pastors, and since the purpose of the visit was to come to a greater understanding of the Russian Orthodox Church, they attended a number of liturgical

celebrations. The guide made it quite clear that he was uncomfortable in such places, which, according to him, were no more than the remnants of a by-gone age. Yet as the days passed, he grew more pensive. Finally, on the last day of the visit, he called our professor friend aside, to a place where he knew he couldn't be overheard and said: "I have something to confess to you. Many years ago, when I was a young boy, my grandmother took me to church and had me baptized. She never told my parents, who were members of the Party, and she made me promise that I would keep the secret. I've never thought much about it. But tell me, did something happen? Am I really baptized?"

This man's story leads to two reflections: First: yes, something did happen; something was happening. In the midst of a society officially committed to one view of history, another very different view was being upheld, not by scholarly debate nor by philosophical disquisition, but by a liturgy that understood its purpose as grafting participants into that other history. In his baptism, that young boy had "renounced the Devil and all his works," and even though he had officially renounced Christ and all his works, he was not quite sure what it all meant. Baptism, seen not as a symbolic event, nor even as a washing away of sin, but as a grafting into a different history, kept tugging at the man. And one wonders to what degree such tuggings have had anything to do with the surprising events of the last few months in Eastern Europe.

Secondly, and looking now at our own situation, one wonders if our liturgical practices would lead to any such reaction.

**Catherine:** We have seen typology as helpful in biblical interpretation and in the early liturgies. But the connection between Scripture and liturgy is not automatic. Preaching is the necessary link. That will be the subject of tomorrow's lecture.

