



St Luke's in the City

150 years - 2009

# Celebrating at the Crossroads

## 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

### 15 June 2008

#### Liturgy as Transformation

#### **GATHERING: Words, Actions, Symbols**

A liturgy which can be read (like a book) is a bad liturgy.

Robert Hovda

Our liturgy is from a book: A New Zealand Prayer Book / He Karakia Mihinare o Aotearoa. Being Anglicans means that our identity is formed not primarily by a confessional statement but by prayer books. There is a great freedom here. *Lex credendi, lex orandi* – the rule of belief is the rule of prayer. It is prayer, liturgy, which both defines our belief and forms us as disciples of Christ. Anglican liturgical tradition has been formed in a succession of prayer books in the English vernacular, beginning with the 1549 Book of Common Prayer, continued in 1552, bedded down for almost four centuries by the 1662 book. Revisions proposed in 1928 were widely adopted but never approved. By the final two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century nation-based (or region-based) provinces of the Anglican Church had produced a plethora of prayer books. Revisions have endeavoured to strike a balance between faithfulness to the spirit of the Book of Common Prayer, whilst taking seriously the experience of 20<sup>th</sup> century ecumenical liturgical movements and the needs of the contemporary context. Many fine prayer books have been thus produced.

But none of these books constitutes the liturgy. One of the gravest mistakes (presumably unintended) of the 1662 BCP was its tendency to reduce liturgy to the words between the pages of the book. As a consequence, we Anglicans have tended to clasp onto our precious books, as though Jesus wrote them, as though they were the most important thing in the world. But the Prayer Book is not the liturgy. Liturgy is first and foremost something people do. The word itself makes that clear: from the Greek words for 'the people' (laos) and 'work' (ergon) – the work of the people. The liturgy is something we do, requiring not just disembodied minds floating up high in a doctrinal sky, but earthly bodies, down on the ground. The liturgy does not consist in reading our way through a book, but doing a common action together.

Thus, liturgy works most effectively when we gain a certain freedom from the words on the page, when we are no longer worried about the words of the prayers, not preoccupied with getting the words right. Freedom from books and words means that we actually notice each other, and we may even actually notice ourselves and whatever it is that presses us from within. Look, here are the people of God, the living Body of Christ! Freedom from books means that we can enter the liturgy much as we might a dance, a dance which works by gestures, symbols, movement, attending to each other. This is also why sacramental worship endeavours to engage all the senses – seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, smelling – for the liturgy is about bodies, Christ's body on the altar, our bodies offered and celebrated.

Fr David Moore