

# INTRODUCTION

*You are a people set apart to sing the praises of God,  
who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.*

1 PETER 2:9

Christians have always marked the morning and evening hours of the day with prayer. The earliest sources outside the New Testament tell us that they prayed the 'Our Father' at morning and evening. Other early documents tell us that they blessed the lighting of lamps at the hour of sunset by calling on Christ, the 'joyful light' of God the Father.

We know that by the time Christians were able to practise their religion freely – the fourth century – the traditions of public morning and evening liturgy were well established.

Morning Prayer was a service of thanksgiving and praise to God, offered in and through Christ. With each new dawn it recalled Christ's resurrection and our sharing in this new life. Psalms and hymns were sung and the prayers of intercession looked forward to the day ahead, asking God's blessing on its concerns.

Evening Prayer on the other hand looked back and thanked God for the blessings of the day that was passing. It remembered Christ's death and our Christian call to die with him to sin and to live in holiness. Thus the whole of the day was encompassed within the death and resurrection of Christ – the paschal mystery through which we are redeemed. Evening Prayer celebrated the arrival of dusk by the lighting of lamps and candles. Incense was often burnt as a penitential rite, something that linked with the 'evening sacrifice' of Christ on the cross. Intercessions and prayers brought in the world and all humankind into the mystery of Christ, our light.

Liturgy is public worship – the very word comes from *leitourgia* meaning *work of the people*. It is the communal celebration of God's work of salvation in Jesus Christ. It is ritual celebration which of its nature demands more than words. These liturgies were for the whole Church; they were colourful and action centred. As well as lighting lamps and burning incense, people moved around the church, pausing at the

font, the cross, special relics and so on. Something of this still lives on when, for instance, we celebrate the Way of the Cross as a procession around the church, or the Taizé custom of Friday evening 'Prayer around the Cross'.

These liturgies were acts of worship for everyone, not just clergy, but celebrated regularly in the big city churches built at the time by the whole community of the Church: bishop, priests and people.

With the growing importance of monastic life, the style of prayer changed. It became more word-centred, more a meditation on the psalms and scripture, less of a ritual action: (psalms recited one after the other, the whole 150 in one week; the whole bible once each year and so on). This was the style of 'office' (literally 'duty') that later became the 'breviary' of the priest. Its character as liturgical celebration was diminished.

Even so, some 'people's' liturgy remained: Sunday Vespers, once common at least in Europe; the very popular 'Compline' last thing at night, and so on. Other 'Devotions' came in too, with the growing cult of the Blessed Sacrament. These things provided the colour and popular sentiment once associated with Lauds and Vespers.

The Second Vatican Council wanted to restore to the people something of the daily, popular liturgy, morning and evening. The great 'Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy' which set in motion the reform of the Roman Rite, wrote of this form of prayer:

*Pastors should see to it that the chief hours, vespers particularly, are celebrated in common in church on Sundays and the more solemn feasts.*

SC 100

'The chief hours': this type of liturgy is bound up with the passage of time. The 'hour' is a great biblical theme: the hour of salvation, Jesus' 'hour' of glorification in St John's Gospel, etc. These hours are the pivots of the day: darkness into light, light into darkness. They may be also the 'hour' of God's redeeming grace, when at morning he is named as Life, the Sun of Justice rising from death or at evening, as Light of the world, the true evening sacrifice.

This brief survey has been given not to recapture a golden age and resuscitate it, but rather to enable us to know and respect the tradition we have inherited and refashion it in a way which is valid for our own time. As the General Instruction on the Liturgy of the Hours says:

*The liturgy of the hours is not seen as a beautiful memorial of the past demanding intact preservation as an object of admiration; rather it is seen as open to constantly new forms of life and growth and to being the unmistakable sign of a community's vibrant vitality.*

GILH 273.

If this is to be realised, parish communities will need to be open to the principles outlined in paragraphs 33 and 279 of the same Instruction, where it says respectively:

*In a celebration in common and in private recitation the essential structure of this liturgy remains the same, that is, it is a conversation between God and his people. Celebration in common, however, expresses more clearly the ecclesial nature of the liturgy of the hours; it makes for active participation by all, in a way suited to each one's condition, through the acclamations, dialogue, alternating psalmody and similar elements.*

GILH 33

*The main consideration is to ensure that the celebration is not too inflexible or elaborate nor concerned merely with the formal observance of rules, but that it matches the reality of what is being celebrated. The primary aim must be to inspire hearts with a desire for genuine prayer and to show that the celebration of God's praise is a thing of joy.*

GILH 279

Respecting the principles in both these quotations, parishes can develop a form of morning and evening prayer which is authentic and meaningful to those who celebrate.

Here are some aims for a parish celebration – that it be:

- **a liturgy of time:** we celebrate the passover moments symbolised in the transfer from dark to light and light to dark.
- **simple in outline:** the structure should be clear and the patterns of prayer respected.
- **ritual prayer rather than read text:** create a worthy and inviting environment; sing the psalms and hymns; use symbol, gesture and movement.
- **shared by all:** distribute the ministries as widely as possible and involve people in the preparation.
- **constant:** this prayer speaks of God’s fidelity and of the Church’s effort to be faithful in responding to God in Christ. Better a little each Sunday than an occasional flourish. The rhythm of morning and evening prayer will grow in us and enrich our parishes as it punctuates our lives.
- **open:** Morning and Evening Prayer has been celebrated in some form by all the churches throughout the centuries. It is a liturgical celebration which can bridge the denominational divide and be a worthy and authentic expression of our common baptism into Christ.

*Let the word of Christ dwell in you in all its fullness,  
as you teach and counsel each other in all wisdom by  
psalms, hymns, and spiritual canticles, singing thankfully  
to God in your hearts.*

COLOSSIANS 3:16

## The Assembly and its environment

All Christian worship begins with the gathered community of the Church which we call the assembly. It is the primary symbol of Christ present in and with us, so that we all may be one.

In our buildings for worship the needs of the community are reflected in the spatial arrangements. The focal points of altar, ambo and chair show us the action of the eucharistic celebration: the font points out the importance of initiation. When we consider the prayer of the church we find that this does not fit easily into the space arranged for sacramental celebration, it needs its own shape to bring out its significance.

### Gathering

Depending on circumstances practical suggestions might include:

- the use of a separate chapel or space within the building;
- the rearrangement of a small area of the worship space: seats facing inwards, a horseshoe arrangement, or perhaps grouped together in a less formal manner;
- using the main worship space or a large sanctuary but trying to focus on the community, not on elements associated with sacramental worship.

The shape of the arrangement needs careful thought. Whilst there is no *ideal* solution, the symbol of gathering suggests some form of circular or *choral* setting, e.g., facing one another.

Whatever space you prepare consider the following:

- enough seating and ease of access;
- provision for the different ministries: reader, musician;
- the physical objects of worship: candle, incense bowl;
- lighting;
- amplification (if necessary).

It is important that the congregation is comfortable with the arrangement and feels part of the liturgy. The celebration of the liturgy of the hours requires a model of worship that allows for a greater flexibility in ministry and roles.

## Symbol

Various symbols are associated with Evening Prayer. The ones listed have a long and ancient history in Christian worship.

### Light

The associations of light with the liturgy are many and varied: Christ our light, the resurrection, the baptismal candle, the celebration of Candlemas and so forth. The kindling of lamps as evening fell became a reminder of Christ our light which in turn provided the lucernarium rite. The group may choose to have one centrally placed candle (in the Easter season the Paschal Candle) or a variety of smaller ones according to the festivity providing we remain true to the tradition of a living flame, thus excluding false and artificial candles.

### Incense

Following scripture and the tradition of the Church incense has been used as a sign of oblation for the protection and blessing of God. At the evening office it was used as a sacrificial offering – prayer rising to heaven. Fathers of the Church such as St John Chrysostom saw the evening incense as a penitential rite of self-offering to God. Traditionally it has been used to incense altar and people – two of the presences of Christ.

Incense is burned during the gospel canticle. People may be invited to put incense on the charcoal if it is used in the Introduction and during the intercessions. There are various ways of burning incense: the simplest method is to place the burning charcoal in a specially prepared heat-proof bowl, and place the incense in a container beside it; or a thurible could be used.

### Other Symbols

Other visual elements might include:

- an **icon** representing Christ or the particular feast,
- **water** during the season of Easter as a reminder of our baptism.

Attention should also be given to **plants** or other **decor** which could enhance the environment and provide a seasonal accompaniment for the rite.

The traditional way of celebrating feasts and seasons has been through the use of different colours. This, together with other aids and the sensitive use of space, should help express the different mood and message of each season: the bareness of Lent contrasted with the richness of Easter.

It is important to have a sense of balance not to overcrowd the celebration with too much nor to use inappropriate objects. A rule to follow is the advice of the Church to remain authentic and simple.

## Ministry

All ministries are ministries of service, enabling the prayer of the community. In all liturgy, it is better that ministries be shared among several people rather than one person act as both reader and cantor, for example.

## Presider

A priest or deacon exercises the ministerial role of presider. Where there is a need this form of liturgy may also be led by an appropriately-skilled lay minister. The ministry of presider requires:

- a sense of prayer,
- a presence through word, gesture and silence,
- a grasp of the liturgy itself, an idea of how the various parts fit together,
- an ability to enable others in their ministries,
- a perceptible competence in leading liturgical celebration.

A good presider is the leader of the assembly, able to open and conclude prayer, proclaim in word and song, lead when needed, follow when necessary. In Evening Prayer there is no obligation to give presiders a special chair or to set them apart. As first among equals they need to be part of the assembly yet also seen and heard by all. In some communities the various roles may be shared.

## Musicians

Music is integral to liturgy. The human voice has always been the primary instrument of worship and the principal minister of music is the assembly. A **cantor** can lead the assembly, sing alone as required and also teach new settings. A second cantor or musician may seem a luxury

but they can provide a lead for the assembly and a contrast and help to the cantor. An **organist** or **instrumentalist** helps sustain the singing and through music can create atmosphere and allow reflection.

### Reader

He or she will be sensitive to the style and content of the scripture, aware of the importance of good diction and have a simple manner of delivery. The Intercessions could be announced by a second reader. Depending on circumstances the reader proclaims from a lectern, the ambo or reads from their place.

### Other Ministries

- Preparing and clearing the worship space: moving furniture, lighting the candle(s), preparing the incense bowl;
- welcoming people and handing out what is necessary (leaflet, hymn-book, candle etc.);
- assisting the presider, carrying the candle in procession.

*There is a special and very close bond between Christ and those whom he makes members of his Body, the Church, through the sacrament of rebirth. Thus, from the Head all the riches belonging to the Son flow throughout the whole Body: the communication of the Spirit, the truth, the life, and the participation in the divine sonship that Christ manifested in all his prayer when dwelt among us...*

*The excellence of Christian prayer lies in its sharing in the reverent love of the only-begotten Son for the Father and in the prayers that the Son put into words in his earthly life and that still continues without ceasing in the name of the whole human race and for its salvation, throughout the universal Church and all its members.*

GILH 7

# Elements of Evening Prayer

## Structure

Evening prayer consists of four sections: **Introduction**, **Psalmody**, **Word**, **Prayer**. Each section has a number of parts. Evening Prayer begins with the **Introduction**: a hymn, opening responses, a liturgical action involving either light or incense. The section is concluded by the Opening Prayer.

**Psalms** are integral to the liturgy of the hours; in this version there is a seasonal psalm and a New Testament Canticle.

The scripture reading, the response and the Magnificat, the **Word** section, emphasise the reflective character of this liturgy.

**Prayer** has always been an essential part of the worship of the Christian community; prayer for the church, the community and the world.

There follows a more detailed description of the components of liturgical prayer.

## Repetition

The material in this book is intended to be repeated over a series of weeks so that not only the structure of the prayer will become familiar to people but also the texts themselves. There are suggestions that some texts are changed with the liturgical seasons; other settings, such as the Magnificat, might not be changed for a longer period to allow people to get to know and pray the texts. Though this form of prayer may initially be new to many people in the beginning it is desired that through repetition of common elements it will provide a welcome opportunity for prayer and praise to God. Planners and musicians need to respect this aspect of the prayer rather than be continually seeking after novelty.

## Prayer

In the liturgy prayer is greater than the spoken texts prayed by the presider and the assembly. Prayer is the shared silent response to a passage of scripture, the graceful lighting of a candle or placing of some incense on an incense burner.

## Silence

Every liturgy needs moments of silence so that people can reflect on what they have heard and listen to the voice of God speaking to them. Silence helps to give a celebration pace and flow leading from one element to another. Different groups will have different capacities for silence and those leading the prayer need to be sensitive to those who have gathered to pray together.

## Posture

It is customary at Evening Prayer to stand for the Introduction, sit for the Psalmody and the Scripture readings, to stand for the Gospel Canticle – the Magnificat – and remain standing until the conclusion of the prayer.

## Music

Many of the texts of Evening Prayer are intended to be sung: the hymn, the psalm and canticle and the Magnificat. Music brings another dimension to the celebration. It allows all to sing with one voice and it can help give expression to the text. Communities should choose carefully what it is sung according to what is available and to their resources. Through repetition it is hoped that people will become familiar with settings.

## Word

Scripture is integral to the prayer of the Church. It is the source of the psalms and canticles; it is the inspiration for hymns and prayers. The scripture reading is a time for reflection within Evening Prayer and all should be done to aid people's reflection. It should normally be read from the ambo by someone who is commissioned as a reader. The reading should be read from a worthy book: a lectionary or bible or a folder that has been prepared for the readings.

## Dismissal

At the end of the celebration all are dismissed to live out the prayer in their daily lives. Some gatherings may wish to end with an informal sign of peace as a way of concluding the liturgy. In the material in Appendix 3 it notes that there may be occasions in the year when it may be appropriate to end the celebration with refreshments.

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