

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

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**Liturgy
Office**
ENGLAND
& WALES

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

CELEBRATING SUNDAY EVENING PRAYER

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." 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.