LANGUAGE AND LITURGY

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If we were asked to give a snap definition of language, I suppose we would say 'the use of words to communicate our thoughts and feelings to others.' Not that language is the only medium of communication. We can and do communicate by the use of our bodily organs and senses, e.g. sight, sound other than words, smell, touch, gesture and other physical movements.

Our concern today, however, is with language as a means of communication, and of communication not only with other people, but also with God. In examining this subject our starting point must be to realise that we are psycho-physical entities; we need to express, therefore, not only our thoughts, but also our emotions – 'I feel' as well as 'I think.' We do this by means of the spoken word and, since the beginning of history, by the written word. Both aspects are relevant to the present study.

When using language to express thought, our object is to instruct or convey information, and so convince our hearer or reader. In doing this we should seek to be accurate in content and to be clear, concise and complete in expression. But when using language to express feelings, our object is to evoke an appropriate emotional response in our hearer or reader, and to persuade him to accept what we are telling him. In this case we may use emotionally charged expressions, so-called tone words, designed to appeal to feelings and prejudices, in order to win agreement; and here our words may well follow not the logical but the psychological order. In practice, we often use both modes of expression in the same statement, particularly in the spoken word, but it is well to be aware of this and to do what we do advisedly. To confuse rational and emotive expressions by purporting to advance a rational argument through the use of emotional appeals can be dangerous, and is the stock-in-trade of demagogues. But the abuse does not invalidate the use, and there is of course a right place for imaginative, rhetorical, exhortatory and poetic language, which can have a powerful evocative appeal to the whole man, body, mind and spirit. Shakespeare could have written, 'The many seas redden.' But he did not. He wrote, 'The multitudinous seas incarnadine.'

This spectrum in our use of language can be seen in the span of academic studies, ranging from mathematics, the natural sciences and logic on the one hand to literature and poetry on the other. Similarly there are variations in the use of language by different social groups, dependent on education, status and relationship. To talk of common speech is something of an abstraction: it is true only within a limited area. We vary speech and, to a lesser extent, what is written according to time, place, occasion and person – think of a professor lecturing to his students; an MP speaking a) in the House of Commons, b) at his party conference and c) at the hustings; of a company chairman speaking to his shareholders; of a shop steward addressing his work mates; of a *Times* leader or a *Sun* editorial. Norms and styles differ as well as

choice of words.

We have also to remember that a living language is, by definition, a developing thing. Some colloquialisms of the present become part of the standard or received English of the future, though many are ephemeral. The written word is and must be more formal and conservative than the spoken. Unless it had a generally accepted and secure base a widely-used language like English would not have served as a means of communication for peoples of different cultures across a number of generations.

So much for language in general. What is the bearing of what has been said thus far on liturgy, and the language of public worship? All the points made are relevant, but they have to be applied in the context of the nature and purpose of Christian worship. We do not, in the liturgy, tell God anything that he does not already know. Communication to God therefore differs from communication to our fellows, and communication from God is different in nature from our human responses in words. The purpose of public worship is to adore God, to praise him and thank him, to confess our sins, to pray for others and ourselves, and to listen to the word of God read and expounded as we do those things that he has commanded us to do. The key point is that we are addressing God not privately but with others in the public worship of the Church.

How did all this start? The gospel was first preached in Greek, that is, *koine* or common Greek, by the apostles and their successors within the classical *oikumene* or civilised world. At the beginning of the Christian era popular Greek was spoken generally in the main centres of trade and commerce within the Roman Empire, and would be known to and used where appropriate by the dispersed Jewish community. So Greek was the natural language of the infant Church. In it were written the Scriptures and the earliest pastoral texts. It was the language of prayer – mostly extempore, though not arbitrary, at this stage – of singing and of preaching. The object was to preach the gospel to the pagans and to nourish the faithful.

The situation changed in the fourth century, when Christianity became first the favoured (AD 313) and then the state religion (AD 319) of the Roman Empire. The Church ceased to be an underground movement, and a new factor emerged with which the Church has had to live ever since. This is the fact that the Church is a dual entity: on the one hand, a spiritual concept, the body of Christ, on the other, a human institution and as such subject to the same pressures, tendencies and requirements as any secular organisation having the same structural characteristics. This dualism and potential tension is accentuated when there is a close Church/State relationship. The Church's mission is to deepen man's relationship with God, and to point to his ultimate destiny, and its duty is to organise itself most effectively to this end. But the means towards this end must entail a system of management, of laws, rules and regulations, administered by fallible human beings and necessitating some accommodation with the powers-that-be of this world. What has happened in the Church's history is that a kind of dialectic process has occurred. When there has been undue emphasis on the institutional features of the Church, e.g. too much legalism and formalism, to the detriment of its spiritual mission, then reform movements have arisen. Sometimes the reforms ceased to be constitutional and therefore contained within the Church, but became revolutionary and therefore schismatic. There is always a risk that a healthy corrective may become an over-corrective which emphasises a neglected truth, but does violence to others of equal importance. The need is always to hold a balance between these two aspects: undue concentration on

the first aspect leads to subjective pietism and on the second to a formal and ossified structure far removed from the heart of the gospel. In this story of action and reaction between these two poles, language forms one of a number of elements.

After this necessary digression, let us return to the fourth-century liturgy of the Western Church (and it is with the Western Church that I shall be dealing from now on).

First, a word about sacred or sacral language. Sacral languages are found in all periods and among all peoples. They result from a sense of the special and solemn character of the relationship between the human and the divine, which sanctifies, as it were, the language used to address the divine. There is a basic urge to express devotion in a fitting language, one which is emotionally as well as rationally satisfying, and to avoid that which is banal, trite or has incongruous associations. Underlying this is the consciousness that in prayer one seeks to enter another world. .

In the early days of the Church, Latin, in contrast with Greek, had been regarded as unsuitable for use in the liturgy because of its pagan associations and lack of a specifically Christian vocabulary. But by the fourth century Christian Latin, combining classical and colloquial elements, and incorporating some theological and philosophical terms from Greek, had developed to a point where it was ready for adoption for the most sacred parts of the liturgy of the Western Church. This development was clinched at the end of the fourth century by Saint Jerome's Latin translation of the Scriptures, the Vulgate, which superseded the much rougher 'old Latin' version. Shortly after this, the change to Latin was made in the Roman rite. The new rite in Latin was destined to endure and indeed remains to this day, behind the permitted vernacular uses, as the normative western rite of the Roman Church. It satisfied the traditional requirements of a language of worship – memorability, order and rhythm, balance, studied repetition, cumulative and sonorous phrases combined with a certain severity and restraint, all suffused with Roman gravity.

Time, however, marched on: the vernacular languages emerged and grew, and Latin ceased to be the language of the majority. By the end of the Middle Ages there was a growing body of opinion in Europe, particularly in Germany, the Low Countries and Britain, that Latin, having ceased to be understood by the many, had become an impediment to the Church's primary task. So one of the corrective protests, to which I have referred, gathered strength and in England, in 1549, the first Prayer Book in English was published for use throughout England and Wales. This book, with its successors, set the standard of liturgical English until our own times. It was compiled by Thomas Cranmer, a master of liturgical writing with an extraordinary sensitivity to words and style, and was cast in a conservative mould, like the Authorised Version of the Bible, archaic in parts when it was written, and making use of earlier translations and models going back for a hundred years. This liturgy of Cranmer's demonstrated that English could be made a fitting language of public worship, achieving many of the effects of the Latin liturgy without doing violence to its own idiom.

Now I must make a brief reference to the pronoun used in addressing God. In Latin the second person singular 'tu' is used when addressing God or one person, and the second person plural 'vos' in addressing more than one. Similarly in English – and in other European languages – there were different pronouns for singular and plural application, i.e. 'thou' and 'ye' (later 'you'). But in England in the later Middle Ages the practice arose of using an honorific plural, 'ye' or 'you' when addressing the king or other exalted personage. (We are all familiar with the use of the royal plural in the

first person, 'we.') This usage spread first among the magnates when addressing their peers, and then down to those of middle rank. By the mid-seventeenth century 'thou' as a singular was in general use only by the ordinary people, except when addressing God. The use of 'thou' and 'thee' by the Quakers in the later seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was a protest against what they regarded as the social discrimination implied by the dual usage. Since then 'you' as a singular has become the normal form, though the 'thou' form has survived in dialect. In other European languages, so far as I am aware, this process has not progressed so far as in English, and the second person singular has survived as the form for family and friends (and for God). In modern English 'thou' and 'thee' have a solemn flavour, as the traditional way of addressing God and also occasionally of individuals, especially in a legal context. There is food for reflection in this curious bifurcation of meaning in the use of the singular pronoun to address God. Perhaps it connotes both kinship, closeness and also worship; perhaps there is a fusion of attitudes, one of intimate reverence.

Now let us return to the Prayer Book and the 1662 version in particular. The language of this book, with that of the Authorised Version of the Bible, has largely conditioned religious language in the English-speaking world (and I include extempore as well as set prayers) and this not least for Methodists. The Wesleyan Order of Holy Communion, based on the 1662 Prayer Book, and to a lesser extent the Order of Morning Prayer, provided a pattern of Cranmerian English for prayer and worship which has lasted until our own day.

But within the last two decades there has been increasing dissatisfaction with these old forms as providing standards for present-day worship. The reasons are numerous: here we are concerned only with the aspects which affect language. We have to take account of several phenomena which have affected the use of English. First there has been an increasing emphasis on ready communication to the greatest number, coupled with one on informality and easy manners, which therefore stresses simplicity. Secondly, those who hold strongly egalitarian views on political and social matters, have emphasised all those things people have in common, and tend to be suspicious of hierarchical structures, centres of excellence and the tastes and contributions of smaller groups. We have observed in recent years how the word 'elite' has come to be used more often than not in a pejorative sense as applied to the social, educational and cultural scenes, though not to the fields of sport and entertainment. Thirdly, within the Church there has been a strong reaction against the kind of devotional language beloved of our Victorian forefathers. There is distaste for what is now seen as sentimental and pietistic phraseology, and a dislike of the constant use of superlatives such as 'most blessed' which, it is argued, like a superfluity of ceremonial acts, tends to weaken the significance of those words and actions, which would have all the greater impact from a more sparing use.

In assessing these corrective movements, we have to remember that any healthy society or organisation needs to comprise both conservative elements and elements seeking change, or, in other words, a stable centre to provide continuity and growing points at the periphery. It is a question of balance, of striking a mean, so that sometimes the emphasis should be on the conservative side, and at other times on the radical. In the field of language it is right that we are in favour of clarity and simplicity if this is a reaction against woolliness, verbosity and pretentiousness or, if you like, gobbledegook. (But I must enter a caveat as regards clarity. There is regrettably a need at times for a measure of ambiguity as affecting expressions of doctrine in what are meant to be documents of reconciliation.) But it is wrong if we

take as our only determinant of clarity the lowest common denominator, so that our vocabulary becomes limited and hackneyed, by failing to make use of the rich resources of the English language, with its dual Anglo-Saxon and Romance strains. Again the egalitarian corrective is right if it seeks to meet the linguistic needs of the majority, but wrong if it seeks to deny the linguistic needs of minority social, cultural and indeed religious groups.

In response to these and other pressures, new liturgies in modern English have appeared in recent years throughout the Western Church. In the Methodist Church in 1975, after an experimental period, the Sunday Service was published with other offices (including the 1936 Communion Service) in the *Methodist Service Book*. Certain parts of the new book follow the International Consultation on English Texts, but much is original. This exercise presented a great challenge to the draftsmen – how to make their contribution to the creation of a good liturgical style based on modern English. At one level it is true to say that such a language must be a product of our present way of thinking and doing things, as it was for the Latin of the Roman rite from the fourth century, and the English of the Anglican rites of 1549 to 1662. It is not enough, however, for this language to be modern and relevant. It has to have also, as we have seen, a certain elevation of style, if it is to evoke a full response from the whole man, heart and head, and help him to lay hold of the things not of this world. At a deeper level, therefore, it should try to reflect that sense of the numinous, of ongoing continuity, timelessness and permanence that man ever seeks in his quest for God. It cannot be expected that a new liturgy can achieve all this immediately. A lapse of time is necessary for liturgy to mature, to be progressively loved by the faithful and made their own. If we subject our new liturgy to the criteria mentioned, I think it emerges with some credit. There are blemishes of omission as well as commission, and in comparison with the old it is bound to appear bare and matter-of-fact. The advantages of the new form cannot of course be gained without some loss. Moreover, central to our thinking must be the even more important question of content, where there is no doubt that we now have an order which in structure and doctrine is a great advance on the old. Much can be done in any case to enrich the service by the use of the traditional Eucharistic hymns, by appropriate symbolic acts and by the use of ‘eye-gate’ generally. The old order will of course always have a place with us; were it not so we should be denying our Methodist heritage. But for the future our primary norm of worship must be the Sunday Service. It is for us to build on that foundation. Some progress has been made in the creation of a worthy contemporary liturgical English, and it is for all of us to play our part, in association with other Christians, in advancing towards the most fitting possible liturgical framework of a service which embodies the mystery of salvation.