

Liturgy: The Context of Patristic Exegesis

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Taking the title of this paper fairly literally, I propose to speak rather about liturgy than about patristic exegesis, examining historically and in more general terms the relationship between the liturgy and Scripture. I hope that this will throw some light, direct and indirect, on the context that the liturgy provided for the patristic understanding of the Scriptures and so on the influence it exercised on this understanding.

THE RELATIONSHIP OF SCRIPTURE AND LITURGY: BEGINNINGS

The relationship between Scripture and liturgy is a rich and complex one, because both are rich and complex realities. We can find a good point from which to start in three episodes from the Gospels, three occasions on which Jesus brought word and ritual action closely together.

If the Last Supper was a paschal meal, there would have been a place for the *haggadah*, presumably spoken by Jesus. Moreover, two of the Gospel accounts attribute a discourse to Jesus: John at considerable length, and Luke more economically. The celebration of the Last Supper seemed to call for a word from Jesus that was additional to the normal prayers and to Jesus' own special ritual words.

In John 6 the discourse on the Bread of Life seems to speak both of the bread that was Jesus' word and of the bread that was his flesh. Word and sacrament, it may be hinted, belong harmoniously together.

In Luke 24 Jesus made himself known to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus in the word by which he opened the Scripture and in the breaking of bread. Would the Christian hearer not be reminded of the Eucharist?

These three texts then, involving Jesus himself, suggest an affinity between word and sacrament such that liturgical action invites the accompaniment of the word and the word somehow tends towards sacrament.

'In the beginning was the Word,' John said, not 'in the beginning was Scripture.' There is no doubt that the liturgy had an important role to play in the emergence of the Christian Scriptures. While historically this

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Dublin: Four Courts Press,
1995; pp. 27-37

must have been a complex matter, and many fine distinctions should be made, it is enough for the purpose of this paper to refer in a broad and general way to some early connections between liturgy and Scripture.

- a) From the New Testament we know that passages from the Old Testament were read in a Christian sense.¹
- b) The memory of Jesus, his actions, words, etc. and the experience of his disciples were handed on in Christian assemblies, many of them no doubt liturgical. This transmission of his memory was connected with the early Christians' own situations and own lives, and so the tradition grew. Apostolic preaching and tradition of this sort must have been important for the formation of the Scriptures.
- c) The letters of Paul were read at and exchanged between Christian assemblies.²

Thus the emergence of the Christian liturgy and the emergence of the corpus of Scripture are closely related, so that the early Church includes the word in this form as part of its service of worship. The ritual has its word, its accompanying narrative. From the beginning the word, Scripture, is at home in the liturgical assembly and is not something extraneous or alien or additional.

A couple of sentences from a mid-second-century text of St Justin Martyr can sum up the development. He is describing the Sunday Eucharist of the assembled believers: 'The memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read for as long as time allows. When the reader has stopped, the one presiding speaks, admonishing and inviting all to imitate such fine examples.' Prayer follows and then the eucharistic liturgy.³

READING OF SCRIPTURE IN THE LITURGICAL ASSEMBLY

So the Church has acquired its Scriptures, written texts, New Testament and Old Testament. How will it use these in the liturgy?

A first answer is: by reading them publicly in the assembly. It will arrange them in many different ways; different numbers of readings, different systems will eventually emerge; different rituals too. And yet there will be notable agreement about the importance of the reading, about the appropriateness of certain books and pericopes for certain seasons

1 See, for example, Luke 4:16-21; Acts 4:24-30; 8:26-40; 13:14-40.

2 In addition to these connections, it is sufficient to note here that the synagogue service had an important influence on the developing Christian liturgy of the word; to note also that some acclamations, hymns, prayers, greetings or other formulas from early Christian liturgy were quoted or echoed in the Scriptures; and to note finally that the regularity of the liturgical assembly, the celebration of the Eucharist, and the practice of Baptism were bound to have had some impact on the contents of the Scriptures.

3 Apol. I 67.

or occasions; about the use of the Psalms; about Gospel acclamations; about signs of reverence for the word. There will be universal acknowledgment of the place of the reading of the Scriptures in the liturgy.

This raises a further question: how have the scriptural texts functioned in the liturgy? Different roles can be distinguished. I borrow the enumeration that follows from Paul Bradshaw.⁴ The functions are not mutually exclusive; the dominance of one in a particular case does not exclude others.

- a) A *didactic* or catechetical function can be recognized, one that starts from the Scriptures themselves. The Scriptures are read to make people familiar with them, to deepen the understanding. This practice may have roots in the liturgy of the synagogue and there are some indications that Christian assemblies adopted early a practice of regular, sustained—you might say, systematic—reading week by week and, perhaps in some places later, day by day. The Christian people must know the most important portions of the Scriptures and so they are formed in the Christian spirit and grow in the knowledge and love of God. Indeed, how else will the great assembly become familiar with the Scripture before the age of printing or even before the mass production of bibles and the spread of literacy? Systems of readings will develop; the lectionary will emerge. A homily or address or commentary or explanation will frequently accompany the reading, required by the primarily didactic function of the reading. In this first case envisaged, the liturgy largely provides the occasion or the context of the reading; the relationship of the reading to the sacramental act that follows will be an indirect one, primarily through the internal effect that it achieves in the participants as it forms them in the Christian spirit.

- b) The second function is *anamnetic* and takes its start from the liturgical rite. As an example of this Bradshaw cites the practice in the early Jerusalem cathedral office of reading the same text every Sunday morning throughout the year: the account of the passion and resurrection of Christ. Obviously the primary purpose here is not didactic but rather to recall the resurrection at just the spot where and the time when it was believed to have happened. The rite then was an anamnesis, the reading serving to recall God's great deed and to interpret the meaning of the rite and provide warrant for it. This is just one example of what went on very widely from the fourth century. Before then what we know as the liturgical year had scarcely begun to emerge, and its

4 P. F. Bradshaw, 'The Use of the Bible in Liturgy: Some Historical Perspectives,' in *Studia Liturgica* 22 (1992) 36-43. In another article in the same number of this journal, 'Lectionaries—Principles and Problems: A Comparative Analysis,' H. I. Allen Jr in a somewhat similar way identifies six functions of lectionaries (71-77). The greater part of this volume is given over to the papers of the Congress of Societas Liturgica held in Toronto in 1991 on Bible and Liturgy. Much of this material is of interest to our topic.

evolution will obviously be the principal influence on the expansion and the development of this way of using Scripture in the liturgy. No doubt this use will have had some Jewish roots—in connection with the Passover especially—and Christians will have had something similar in their early celebration of the paschal vigil.⁵

Where this is the primary purpose of the scriptural reading, the texts will be specially selected, that is, they will not simply follow the order of regular readings,⁶ and they will be more directly related to the sacramental rite that follows them or, better, they will be more obviously part of an integral rite.

Bradshaw warns that didactic and anamnestic functions may both be present together and indeed that over time or for groups at the same time one may yield in priority to the other.

c) The third function, identified by Bradshaw as *parabolic*, starts from the worshippers. What are their needs that are to be met by appropriate Scripture reading? This is primarily a pastoral function. Readings are chosen accordingly for such occasions as funerals, votive Masses, Masses for particular needs, and so on.

d) The final function is *doxological*, to glorify God, a purpose that underlies all public reading of Scripture. The liturgical reading of the Scriptures is always the acknowledgment of the word of God, and hence a confession of God's glory. But this can be the dominant intention—readings have continued to be proclaimed in ancient languages even when these are no longer commonly understood.

In proposing this useful distinction of functions Bradshaw did not intend to confine himself to any particular time but ranged over the whole history of the Christian liturgy. However, all four functions can be recognized within the patristic period. Local and cultural influences will also have come into play, of course, in the way and the circumstances in which these functions were fulfilled and in further determination of them.

What is happening when the Scriptures are read in the liturgy? The word, frequently in origin a spoken word (the prophetic word of the Old Testament, the Gospel word preached by the apostles)—this word, written down and preserved as Scripture, is now restored to its original function and its true status as the living word of God spoken to God's people. As has been suggested earlier, the Scripture is nowhere more at home than in the liturgical assembly. It is for the reader and for the preacher to enable the word to speak today, to be a living and active

5 Compare the inclusion of the institution narrative in the celebration of the Eucharist.

6 In his notable work *The Origins of the Liturgical Year*, New York 1986, T. J. Talley proposes that on occasion the influence may have worked in the opposite direction, that it may have been the course reading of one of the Gospels that occasioned the introduction of elements of the liturgical year.

word, a sword that will apply its sharp edge, cutting into the heart of the community gathered to hear it. The Scripture then is to become word once again through the ministries of the reader and the preacher. On reading from the prophet Isaiah, Jesus said: 'Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.'⁷ Something of that remains the aim of the proclamation in the 'today' of the liturgy.

According to Paul De Clerck,⁸ there is an act of tradition in the liturgical assembly. Through the proclamation of Scripture the word of God is *received* in faith by the participants as the living word of God; it is *assimilated* in a variety of ways by them, made their own, translated into action, done; and it is actualized by preaching. And so it is *transmitted*. It is not enough, after all, simply to have the Bible. Celebrated in faith, this is the story that gives identity to the Christian people and, in being appropriated and passed on in the liturgy, that takes within itself new assemblies and succeeding generations. Thus the history of salvation continues, the divine plan is worked out, the mystery of Christ is accomplished, God's great deeds are somehow prolonged, when the Scriptures are proclaimed in the liturgical assembly.

From all of this there emerges something of the context of patristic exegesis, something of the dynamics at work when the Fathers addressed themselves to the Scriptures and then to their hearers (or, to put the matter differently, when the Fathers were addressed by the Scriptures and then enabled the participants to be addressed by that same living word).

OTHER USES OF SCRIPTURE IN THE LITURGY

Earlier the question was asked: how does the Church use the Scriptures in the liturgy? A first answer given was: by reading them publicly in the assembly. A second answer may be given in two parts:

a) By taking over psalms and biblical canticles for use as Christian prayers and hymns in its liturgical celebrations.

This happened first with individual psalms, then with the Psalter as a whole and with some Old Testament canticles, and, more gradually, with some of the New Testament canticles. There may have been several related reasons for this and some variety in the interpretation of the fact. In the first place, before these psalms and canticles are the prayer of the Church addressed to God, they are part of the word of God spoken to the Church. Thus in the Mass, for example, the psalm was included in the liturgy of the word not simply to afford an opportunity for response to the readings; it was itself a proclamation of the word of God, as the reading from St Paul or from one of the Gospels

7 Lk 4:21.

8 P. De Clerck, 'In the beginning was the Word', *Presidential Address*, *Studia Liturgica* 22 (1992) 10f.

was, and it could be the subject of the homily. A second reason close to this was the fact that these psalms and canticles were viewed differently from non-scriptural compositions, having a quality all their own as part of the word of God. This gave them an authority lacking in popular hymns. It is well known that during the fourth century the Church abandoned almost completely its corpus of early non-biblical hymns because of the use of such compositions in support of heresy, notably Gnosticism and Arianism. As a result the standing of the psalms and other canticles was bound to be enhanced and their use to be increased: they were canonical and therefore trustworthy. A third important and all-pervasive factor at work was the interpretation of the psalms in the light of the mystery of Christ. This is perhaps the most decisive influence in making the Jewish psalter the prayerbook of the Christian Church, and it is too well known to need elaboration here.⁹

b) By using biblical events, phrases, images, references, language in its prayers.

This second way was made relatively easy by the fact that a common text was in use in Greek, and later in Latin, and also because by and large the Fathers shared a rich common biblical culture. The use of the Scriptures in this way varied from a shallow and fairly banal employment of a biblical word or expression, an allusion that set off no deep resonances or suggested no fresh insight, all the way to a profoundly developed and sophisticatedly exploited typology.

TYPOLOGY

Typology requires no explanation in this context. For the purpose of this paper I use the word very broadly here, much as in earlier times. The late Jean Daniélou dealt with this forty years ago in *Bible et liturgie*,¹⁰ a book that still retains its value. Typology has its roots in the Scriptures themselves, which already read some of the events of the Old Testament in the light of Christ and find in them foreshadowings of the good things to come.

The liturgy is shot through with typology. This approach will influence the choice of Old Testament readings to accompany New Testament pericopes and the choice of texts for special occasions. But of more concern here is the way in which many of the prayers of the liturgy reflect this typological approach and develop it skilfully.

9 See B. Fischer, *Die Psalmenfrömmigkeit der Martererkirche*, Freiburg 1949, a work updated and translated several times since; L. G. Walsh, 'The Christian Prayer of the Psalms' in P. Murray O.S.B. (ed.), *Studies in Pastoral Liturgy*, vol. 3, Dublin 1967, 29-73.

10 Paris 1951; English translation, *The Bible and the Liturgy*, Darton, Longman & Todd, London 1960. For a recent (positive) retrospective appraisal see G. Wainwright, 'Bible et Liturgie': Daniélou's Work Revisited, *Studia Liturgica* 22 (1992) 154-162.

A good example can be seen in the Ordination Prayers of the *Apostolic Tradition* of Hippolytus, probably written in Rome about 215.¹¹ The prayer for the ordination of a bishop looks back to God's appointment of leaders and priests among the Jewish people, to his provision of ministry for his sanctuary, to the choice He exercised from the beginning. Now God is asked to send upon the candidate the power of the governing Spirit given by God to Jesus Christ and given by Jesus to the Apostles, who established the Church in every place as God's sanctuary. The work of the bishop is characterized as an exercise of the high priesthood and is further described with scriptural phrases and allusions.

Likewise the prayer for the ordination of a presbyter sets the context of God's favour towards his people and appeals to the choice of elders made by Moses at God's command and filled by God with the Spirit He had given to Moses.

For the ordination of a deacon the prayer bases itself on God's sending of Jesus Christ as servant of the divine will and revealer of the divine plan. The deacon in turn is referred to as servant and as chosen for the service of the Church, and the prayer goes on to speak of his service in the sanctuary and to the offering of the appointed high priest (that is, the bishop).

The point is clear. A line is established that runs from the beginning of time through events, figures and institutions (the sanctuary, the offering, the priesthood) of the Old Testament, the event and the person of Jesus Christ, and the present life of the Church. These figures, events and institutions find their focus in Jesus Christ and they are given actuality in the liturgical rite today. What unites all of them and allows the prayer to see them in a single perspective is belief in the continuing action of God carried out in fulfilment of an unfolding salvific design that was revealed and pre-eminently realized in Jesus Christ.

A similar example is found in the ancient Roman blessing of baptismal water, the consecration of the font.¹² Here the symbol of water carries the divine gift of salvation, of life. The prayer cites the primeval waters over which the Spirit was moving (so that water conceives the power of sanctification); the flood, in which by water sin was brought to an end and virtue began; the four rivers that flow [from paradise] to water the whole world; the water that gives joy to God's city; the water given in the desert; the water of Cana changed into wine; the water in which Jesus was baptized; the water that poured from his side. The Holy Spirit is invoked to give fecundity to the water of this font in order that it

11 B. Botte, *La Tradition apostolique de saint Hippolyte. Essai de reconstitution*, Münster Westfalen 1989, nn. 3, 7, 8, pp. 6-11, 20-23, 26-27.

12 *Liber Sacramentorum Romanae Aeclesiae Ordinis Anni Circuli*, herausgegeben von Leo Cumibert Mohlberg OSB, Rome 1960, nn. 445-8, pp. 72-4. This text remained in use virtually unchanged until it was revised after the Second Vatican Council.

may bring about all the salvific effects of Baptism (which are also developed).

Water has been God's instrument and sign of salvation from the beginning, so that events and texts of the past can be read in the light of the mystery of Christ and in turn can enable us to understand what God does now in the sacrament of Baptism. Scripture and liturgy are brought into a most harmonious relationship, since ultimately it is the same mystery that both celebrate.

A further example is provided by the ancient Roman prayer, which we still use today, for the consecration of chrism.¹³ This prayer begins, as it says, 'in the beginning,' when at God's command the earth brought forth the olive tree and so the oil that provides chrism. With prophetic insight David anticipated the sacraments of God's grace in singing of the joy that the oil would bring us; at the time of the flood the olive branch carried by the dove was the sign of a future gift, announcing the restoration of peace. All of this, the prayer continues, is clearly fulfilled now in Baptism with its water and its oil. God commanded the washing and then the anointing by Moses of Aaron as priest; and chrism attained even greater honour in the baptism of Jesus and the descent of the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove upon Him. So God manifestly fulfilled David's prophecy that Christ would be anointed with the oil of gladness beyond his fellows. The prayer then asks the Father to sanctify the oil, to infuse it with the power of the Holy Spirit through Christ, from whose name chrism takes its name. By chrism God anointed priests, kings, prophets and martyrs. For those to be baptized may it be the chrism of salvation for eternal life.

The line and the continuity of this prayer are even clearer. Past events look towards the future; future fulfilment is seen and anticipated in the past. And all of this is brought to a point in this present rite and in the use of the oil in the Baptism (and in the other sacraments) for which this rite prepares.

A final and somewhat different example can be seen in some of the great eastern anaphoras (on which our Roman Eucharistic Prayer IV was modelled). There the theme of our thanksgiving is the whole sweep of history seen in the light of the economy of salvation.

Is the Eucharist merely the occasion for the use of richly-textured biblical prayers of such magnificent scope? More than that, I should think. Rather, these are prayers that proclaim a history, a design that is celebrated in the Eucharist and finds fulfilment and actuality there, in anticipation of the consummation of all things in Christ in God's kingdom.

I should like to select one point as a particular illustration. In the epiclesis of very many prayers, especially Syrian texts and those influenced

by the Anaphora of James, the eucharistic action of the Spirit is set in the context of, and in relation to, some of the Spirit's actions recounted in Scripture, in particular his coming on Mary and being active in the Incarnation, the descent on Jesus at the Jordan, the coming on the Apostles at Pentecost. This is done in either of two ways: a) by referring explicitly to the scriptural episodes in a brief development on the Spirit at this point; b) by using of the Spirit's coming in the Eucharist such words as 'illapse,' 'descend upon,' 'rest on,' 'hover over,' 'overshadow,' 'dwell in,' 'breath on' (singly or in some combination), which are understood as allusions to the operation of the Spirit in the Scriptures.

So, for example, the Spirit who came upon Mary and formed a body for the Word is to come upon us and upon the mysteries, and by his descent is to make the bread the holy Body of Christ and what is in the cup the Blood of Christ, for the fruit of the Eucharist among the participants. Similarly, as the Spirit rested on the only-begotten Son in the form of a dove in the river Jordan and as He appeared in tongues of fire on the Apostles, so He is to dwell and to rest on us and on the offerings, and by his coming is to make the bread and the wine the Body and Blood of Christ, for the benefit of those who share in the Eucharist. The connection being established between the two sets of actions is closer than simply their common origin in the same agent, the Holy Spirit. The Eucharist can be seen as the actualization of a divine economy revealed and realized in and by Jesus Christ. In the context of the whole Eucharist the epiclesis seeks the realization by the Spirit in the Church of what was accomplished once for all in the paschal mystery of Jesus Christ. The role that the Holy Spirit played in the mysteries of Christ's earthly life, in the resurrection, and on Pentecost, He continues to play in the Eucharist and in making the Eucharist effective in the Church's life.¹⁴

These are some notable examples from the liturgy of both East and West, the liturgy the Fathers would have celebrated. Its vision was one they would have shared, its sacramental world one they were at ease in, and, of course, many of them composed and adapted the classic prayers of the liturgy. They preached the great mysteries that were part of the liturgy and explained the liturgy. This typological approach then is one they will develop expertly and energetically. They will recognize a continuity and a progression that stretches from creation, from Adam and Eve and the dominant figures of Genesis through God's mighty deeds in favour of the Chosen People, through the figures of the Old Testament that in their own way pointed to and anticipated Christ, to Christ the fulfilment of the promises, and from Christ through the times of the Church to the consummation of all in the fulness of God's kingdom, in

¹³ *Ibid.*, nn. 386-8, p. 62.

¹⁴ This paragraph and the preceding one are taken largely from my article 'The Holy Spirit and the Eucharist,' *ITQ* 50 (1983/84) 48-66.

which the Church shares even now by anticipation. It is a magnificent vision of faith and it gives the Fathers a perspective in which to read history.¹⁵ The overall continuity which they recognize confirms their sense of the unity in Christ of the two Testaments and of the completion of the Old in the New, a sense elegantly summed up in St Augustine's phrase, *et in vetere novum latet et in novo vetus patet*.¹⁶ Within this they can embrace some of the great, enduring anthropological and religious realities (e.g., sacrifice, guilt, expiation, law). Such an understanding is obviously of enormous hermeneutical importance for their exegesis of the Scriptures. I am aware that some or much of this would be challenged today, but it is not the concern of this paper to deal with such contemporary questioning.¹⁷

CONCLUSION

The liturgy will not allow us to treat the Scriptures simply as written texts. The reading must be proclaimed by a minister so as to be heard by all present ('heard' in the biblical sense). The setting of the proclamation must be such as to heighten expectation and engage the hearers actively. Because in the final analysis it is Christ who is present and who addresses them. So too, from the beginning the liturgy has had the tradition of preaching and continues to insist on it. The word must be interpreted for and applied to *this* people, *now*.

This word contained in the Scriptures and proclaimed in the Christian assembly is made alive, given its cutting edge in the celebration of the liturgy. The sacrament actualizes it, makes it effective again and again.

Thus the liturgy will not allow us to hear the Scripture as a message from the past or as a record of events and persons long ago. The liturgy insists on bringing that history, that story, down into the present, today, the liturgical *hodie*. Neither will it permit the hearers to remain within the confines of their immediate present. As the liturgy sees it, the

15 The liturgy gives expression to this not only in its readings and prayers but also in icons, ritual actions, etc.

16 Quaest. in Hept. II, 73 (CSEL 28/2, 141); in this original context the verbs are in the present subjunctive.

17 A third answer, of less concern to this paper, can be given to the question, how does the Church use the Scriptures in the liturgy?—by developing rites from events and actions described in its Scriptures. This can range from the establishment of liturgical feasts (e.g., Christmas, Ascension, the Martyrdom of St. Stephen) to such imitations and adaptations as the fast of forty days, the washing of the feet, the procession with palms, the epiphetha, some anointings. The development of the liturgy and the popular devotions of Holy Week is interesting and instructive in this regard, as is the tendency through many centuries towards an allegorical or a dramatic interpretation of the Mass with reference to Christ's passion and death. For some expansion of this see Bradshaw, art. cit. 49–52.

Scriptures proclaim a mystery, a mystery that is continuing and is ever actual, a mystery that transcends the limitations of past and present and future, of here and there. This is the mystery that the liturgy engages; every time we celebrate the Sacrament that mystery is actualized for us and we are carried into reaches that lie beyond space and time. This is the understanding that liturgy has of itself, an understanding that the Fathers shared. It must influence their exegesis.