

## AS IT IS IN HEAVEN? REFLECTIONS ON LITURGICAL REFRAMING

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### Abstract

*This article reflects on the phenomenon of a growing dissatisfaction and restlessness with traditional forms of worship as well as on some conceptions of the notion of liturgical renewal. It proposes that a fundamental liturgical reframing is indeed needed, grounded on the theological locus of the Christ-event. A brief description is given of the liturgical importance of this event, followed by some liturgical implications, inter alia, the need for a responsible liturgical reframing of anthropology and our understanding and expectation of the encounter with God.*

**Keywords:** Liturgy, Renewal, Reframing, Anthropology

### The Restlessness with Worship

In the brilliant Swedish film by Kay Pollak, *As it is in Heaven*, there is a scene in which the pastor's wife accuses the church of inventing and sustaining a particular understanding of sin for the sake of 'staying in business.' In a moment of long overdue honesty she confronts and profoundly shocks her husband by openly stating her secret belief that the liturgy of the church has become a tool to manipulate the concept of sin and consequently people's constant feelings of guilt in order to remain in control, and so to exert power over them. In effect she protests against the way in which the liturgy enslaves, rather than frees; the way in which it muzzles life, rather than affirming and gratefully celebrating it. In a sense she cries out for a fundamental reshaping and reframing of the liturgy, so as to become a liturgy that indeed celebrates the gift of life and freedom, incorporating all of humanity – 'as it is in heaven.'

The call for liturgical renewal is of course nothing new. Saliers describes it as a longing emanating from a growing "restlessness with worship 'as we've always done it' in many of our congregations" (1996:13). In the European (specifically German) context, the status quo of the liturgy is experienced by many as not meeting their expectations, and not addressing the growing phenomenon of plurality in an adequate way, as summed up by Ratzmann: *Deutlich ist, dass sich die für den Gottesdienst Verantwortlichen offensichtlich stärker als bisher auf gestiegene ästhetisch-spirituelle Qualitätserwartungen einstellen und mit der ihnen begegnenden Pluralität von Erwartungen konstruktiv umgehen müssen* (2007:522). Many former church-goers find traditional forms of worship to be irrelevant, and consequently become more open to different systems of indicating meaning (*Deutungssysteme*; Schmidt-Lauber 1990:126). Within a South African context the restlessness with worship and indeed dwindling of numbers of those coming to worship services (specifically in the so-called mainline churches) is also well known and statistically documented (cf Hendriks 2003:1-26).

It is clear that the need for liturgical renewal has (once again) become a high priority on the church's agenda. What this 'renewal of the liturgy' in fact entails, however, is often understood in divergent ways. According to Redman, liturgical renewal in the Catholic tradition primarily means 'streamlining and restoration', as 'a kind of liturgical house-cleaning,' while for Protestants it intends 'radical reshaping of existing worship practices' (2002:77). Be that as it may, in my opinion liturgical renewal does *not* mean a mere *restoration* of what have become the ruins of anachronism. It intends more than a *reshuffling* of the liturgical 'items' or order of doing things, or making 'worship wars' about cultural styles and tastes and preferences in music, or which hymnals to use, or whether to focus on youth or the aging, etc. (cf Tisssdale 2001:176). It should also not be mistaken as a *singular event* that can finally formulate and create the ultimate liturgy, but rather be seen as an ongoing process, in which continuous orientation and reorientation is necessary (cf the discussion in 2 below). It definitely is not synonymous with following each and every latest *liturgical trend*. It rather aims at a fundamental reshaping, or rather *reframing*, of the liturgy. For the sake of clarity I would therefore rather speak of the *theological reframing* of the liturgy, than liturgical renewal, the latter being open to misunderstanding in a variety of ways.

Capps, who re-introduced the concept of reframing, speaks about the difference between a first-order and a second-order change, and maintains that the former occurs within a given system (although the system as such remains unchanged), while the latter transforms the system itself (1990:12). Reframing means *to change the conceptual and/or emotional setting or viewpoint in relation to which a situation is experienced and to place it in another frame which fits the 'facts' of the same concrete situation equally well or even better, and thereby changes its entire meaning* (Capps 1990:17). This implies a *theological reconfiguration of the existing*, in such a way that something distinctly new is born, but not without the old. It is the art to do and say the same things in a (sometimes completely) different way, of using the old to say and do the new by means of juxtaposition (cf Lathrop 1993:33).

The frame within which the liturgy is set and takes place is of the utmost importance. We could indeed say that the frame mediates meaning. It reveals the theology (or lack thereof) that lies behind the liturgy. The frame evokes and replicates the structure of the theology that has given birth to it, and in the process also reveals the basic anthropology underlining it (cf the discussion in 3 below).

### **The Quest for a Theological Reframing of Liturgy**

But how should this reframing of the liturgy then be done? What are the key factors that prompt and guide this process of reframing, and of specific importance: what *theological ratio* lies behind it? It would seem that many efforts at liturgical renewal are not necessarily born out of theological principles or considerations; on the contrary, it rather seems as if worship and theology have been growing apart, up to the point of becoming completely alienated from one another.

If this happens, liturgy and theology can no longer enrich one another in a meaningful way. This has dire consequences for both: *And it is then that theology floats free, no longer earthed in the prayer of the people of God. Creeds and codes of behaviour harden and become lifeless, for the story-teller has lost his hearers, and they lose the story. Only together can worship and theology be the place of interpretation, where our world can find and work out the truth as it is appropriately learned and lived today* (De Waal 1982:121).

Dogma and *doxa* should not be allowed to become alienated twins. Theology should not be practised in such a way that it silences the hymn of praise, and prayer must be able to breathe within the chambers of critical, theological reflection. It is fatal to separate worship and theology. Theology without worship is scaffolding surrounding nothing, and worship without theology is a building without foundation. Dogma and *doxa* are *one* musical piece in *cantus firmus* (different voices singing the same basic melody), and the hymns that the church sings are a lyrical expression of what faith *knows*. How we pray remains intrinsically connected to how we confess and how we live, also as a community (*lex orandi, lex credendi, lex vivendi, lex convivendi*; cf Wainwright 1982:94-108).

The church urgently needs *ortho-doxa*. Without this (theology that enriches worship and *vice versa*) theology degenerates into religious mechanics and liturgical manipulation, and worship becomes a panic-stricken experiment. But this type of mechanics and experiment in the long run serves no one. One of the liturgical challenges facing the church could indeed be described as the rediscovery of the theological meaning of the liturgy; and one of the theological challenges the rediscovery and reawakening of the liturgical dimension of theology. It would, however, seem as if these challenges are not being taken up; on the contrary, it seems as if the alienation between worship and theology is growing. What is needed is dogma flying on the wings of *doxa*, and *doxa* being orientated following the compass of dogma.

The effect of the abovementioned divorce is that many efforts at 'liturgical renewal' turn out to be window-dressing, or a mere echo of the prevailing cultural trend, or a frantic search for success and effect. It is of paramount importance that the understanding and practice of worship should always be *theological* in nature, and not succumb to the pressure to 'deliver' at all costs or offer 'quick-fixes' for all requests.

But how should the symbiosis between theology and liturgy then be kept healthy, *inter alia*, also in view of liturgical reframing? Many scholars have of course grappled with this question, offering various (theological) principles for what is commonly called 'liturgical renewal.' Saliers, for instance, pleads for a revitalization of the senses of awe, delight, trustfulness, and hope, because these 'senses name patterns in human experience of God' (1996:14). Tisdale (2001:178-187) in turn refers to four channel markers for worship leaders: firstly, to focus on the praise and glory of God and on the edification of the worshippers; secondly, to keep worship Trinitarian in nature, giving witness to the fullness of God's nature and attributes as attested to in Scripture; thirdly, to acknowledge both the 'already' and the 'not yet' dimensions of God's reign; and fourthly, to enable people to love and praise God with their whole beings: heart, soul, mind and strength.

Long (2002:13) emphasizes the importance of the experience of mystery, showing hospitality to the stranger, making visible the sense of drama inherent in worship, the role of congregational music that is both excellent and eclectic in style and genre, creatively adapting the space and setting of worship, forging a strong link between worship and mission, maintaining a relatively stable order of service, moving towards joyous festival experiences at the closing of the worship service, and having strong charismatic pastors as worship leaders.

Witvliet makes the comment that *many of today's discussions about worship are less about worship than about power, politics, and personal taste. The antidote to this is a loving, community-orientated search for wisdom. The antidote is praying for, cultivating and exercising the gift of discernment* (2003:273). For him, the theological principle that guides liturgical renewal should be discernment, which includes a new regard for the role of the Spirit in worship (2003:273-276). Pecklers (2003:214-216) advocates the rediscovery of

the social dimension of worship, the sense of awe and wonder, the urgency of liturgical formation (participation) as well as liturgical inculturation. And so we can go on.

In this article the *key concept of liturgical reframing is found within the Christ-event, as embodied through the indwelling by the Spirit (inhabitation)*. The Christian worship service is, after all, about the celebration of the life, death, resurrection and glorification of Christ. The first and fundamental confession, on which the early Christian worship centred, was that Christ is Lord (*Kurios*). This was the basic point of orientation (as to our position 'in Christ') and affirmation of all that the latter entails (cf Cornehl 2006:275-287).

By calling Christ *Kurios* the early church confessed their belief that this Christ had the power of God Himself, that He indeed was God's revelation of power over and against all the so-called powers of the world (Versteeg 1971:207). This confession formed the core and essence of the early Christians' worship gatherings, the pivotal point on which their 'liturgies' hinged. This concentration on Christ as *Kurios*, however, did not contradict the belief in, or worshipping of, God as Trinity. On the contrary, not only was the background of the title *Kurios* the Old Testament Name of God (JHVH), but the link between the Christ-event and the role of the Spirit was unmistakable. For Paul, the *Kurios* and the *Pneuma* are linked in an epochal and eschatological way (Versteeg 1971:205-219; cf also Schmidt-Lauber 1990:148-149).

The Christian worship service is about the "celebration of the living, dying, and rising again of Jesus for our salvation and for the salvation of the world" (Webber 1992:22). The resurrection of Christ is of specific importance – it forms the lens through which the whole of the worship service (as well as all of reality!) should be viewed, interpreted and indeed reframed. A theology of the resurrection (*theologia resurrectionis*), however, does not negate a theology of the cross (*theologia crucis*), but rather opens up a space (or frame) within which all the (fulfilled) promises of God can be perceived and celebrated. In this sense it also constitutes the hermeneutical tools for evaluation and indeed reframing of the liturgy.

For exactly this reason the early Christians gathered on a Sunday – to celebrate the resurrection of Christ: *This Lord's day is on Sun's-day, the old principal day of the planetary round. Christians have taken that as occasion to remember that a new sun of righteousness has risen, beyond this sun, brighter in darkness than this sun, saving this sun and its world. By the statement of the new, the old is saved* (Lathrop 1993:42).

It is quite clear that the decisive liturgical principle of orientation, and re-orientation, of the early Christians was the Christ-event, with its culmination in the resurrection (and consequently inhabitation by the Spirit) of Christ. Mouton is of the opinion that *it is particularly in the radical and overwhelming experience of the resurrection power of Jesus as the crucified messiah that the origins of Christianity and the New Testament writings have to be sought* (2007:75). Because of the paradox of the resurrection (a crucified being who is resurrected), the urgent need for interpretation was created, and the worship gatherings of the early Christians became spaces for re-interpretation, re-appropriation and re-configuration of the available symbols and traditions (Mouton 2007:76).

The role of the liturgy on a Sunday for the early Christians was indeed, and still is, to orientate, i.e. to symbolically turn towards the east, where the sun rises, as symbol of turning towards the risen Christ as the Light of the world:

To face east in prayer was to be in the world that God had made, on the earth, under the sun and moon and stars, before God, expecting the open and manifest coming of the day of God in the coming of the risen Jesus Christ. To be in the assembly toward the east was

thus to bear witness in the world while waiting and yet already receiving that Coming One. Worship, by repeatedly inserting the gathering into these directions, thus 'orientated' the community in both time and space and was intended to orientate it, thereby, in a world of meaning and meaningful action (Lathrop 2003:55).

The fundamental question therefore is: do our efforts at liturgical 'renewal' in fact represent such a perpetual orientation towards the Christ-event, or do they flow from other agendas and motives? And furthermore: how do we then go about this orientation? Is there a method for celebrating the Christ-event in such a way that it resonates with our experiences, while at the same time honours the integrity of the event? Webber refers to the 'methodology' of the dramatic re-telling and re-enacting of the Christ-event in such a way that the worshippers' experiences become blended again into the drama of Christ's life, death and resurrection, and so that they are connected to the past, receive meaning in the present and are inspired with hope for the future (1992:34-39). This re-telling and re-enacting of the Christ-event is theologically speaking only possible within the framework of the inhabitation by the Spirit. This has decisive consequences for our liturgical understanding of anthropology (cf the discussion in 3 below).

It would seem that the act of remembrance (*anamnesis*) is indeed of paramount importance for liturgical reframing that is done from the viewpoint of the Christ-event as described above. *What* we remember, but also *how* we remember, determines not only our liturgical experiences in the present, but also our hope for the future. The act of remembrance surpasses and condenses time and space. The past becomes present and simultaneously a component of the future. In this sense, we 'remember' a future for ourselves that exists in hope. In the present (moment of worship) we think, tell and act back (remember) towards the future.

Many worship services, however, suffer from amnesia (cf Keshgegian 2000:27). They have forgotten about Christ, or simply call him into 'remembrance' in a mechanical and traditionalistic way, without understanding the deeper meaning of the Christ-event. They quote Christological formulae to escape from the real impact of the remembered, present Christ, as embodied through the Spirit. In the process they fall prey to ideologies of power, which Keshgegian also describes as *kyriarchy* ("which means the multiple and complex systemic grading of dominations, subordinations, and power arrangements" [2000:27]).

To remember Christ as *Kurios*, however, is totally different from performing *kyriarchy*. It is to participate in a dangerous and subversive act, as this form of remembrance continuously transforms us, takes us out of our comfortable liturgical formulae, monumentalized theological structures and ideologies of power. It confronts us in a radical manner, but in doing so, also inspires us with hope for a new future that fundamentally colours our present. Remembering the Christ of the past in hope of the future re-creates (reframes) the present (cf Schuman 2001:181-186). It also reshapes and reframes our identity, or again in the words of Keshgegian:

The act of remembering is constitutive of identity and the content of the memories shapes the character of the identity. The church not only needs to remember, but what and how it remembers will affect its nature and mission. The church's defining memory is the narrative of who we are in relationship to God in Jesus Christ. Christian identity is shaped in relation to that narrative (Keshgegian 2000:201-202).

What would the liturgical implications of the abovementioned theological paradigm for liturgical reframing then be? We briefly attend to some of them.

## Liturgical Implications

- *Firstly*, as a basic point of departure, it must be quite clear that liturgical transformation is not synonymous with a few adaptations of, or superficial alterations to, the existing state of affairs. As a matter of fact, we *cannot* ‘renew’ liturgies so as to achieve the ‘desired standard.’ Liturgical renewal is not about making clever adjustments or creating breath-taking effects. It is not about making first-order, but rather second-order changes (Capps 1990:12). It is therefore about remembering, interpreting and appropriating the Christ-event in a theologically responsible way. González puts it poignantly:

By its very nature worship, no matter how aesthetically pleasing, is ridiculously incongruous. To think that we can really offer praise so worthy that God would accept it on its own merit is the height of folly. This judgment of ridiculous incongruity must be equally applied to all worship, from the most elemental to the most sophisticated. We cannot overcome it with the well-modulated motifs of a Bach fugue, and we cannot overcome it with the most sincerely felt and most exuberantly expressed joy of contemporary ‘praise’ songs. This is true not only of the style of worship but also of its content. What this means is that theology (for worship ought to be theologically sound) must be very clear that its task is not to make worship acceptable to God... In worship we not only celebrate God’s graceful acceptance of ourselves; we also offer unacceptable gifts, trusting that the same grace that has accepted us will accept them (González 2003:2).

But more fundamentally, the act of reframing liturgy through the lens of the Christ-event impacts on our understanding of people and God and the encounter between them, i.e. on our anthropology and theology (God-images). Therefore:

- *Secondly*, when we view liturgical reframing through the lens of the Christ-event, it has a profound impact on our understanding of *anthropology*, specifically within the context of the worship service. The fact that the resurrection of Christ forms the basis of this lens implies, as stated earlier, that people are viewed within the ontological perspective of being ‘in Christ,’ through the inhabitation by the Spirit. They have received a new ‘status’ and a new identity. Their being-functions take priority above their doing-functions.

This fostering of the being-functions of humans in liturgy could also be described in terms of what has been called a *theology of affirmation*. Louw elucidates as follows:

A theology of affirmation... seeks to deal with ontological issues that affect the status and identity of human beings. Within a Christian spiritual approach to life events, a theology of affirmation describes the status of our being human in terms of eschatology. Eschatology is understood as an ontological category that defines our being human in terms of the events of the cross and the resurrection... Affirmation theology describes signification and ascribes human dignity and subject particularity. It emanates from the ontological ‘Yes’ in Christ to our human being (as demonstrated through Baptism and celebrated in the Eucharist) and is demonstrated in new patterns of pneumatic living (pneumatology and inhabitational theology) (Louw 2008:30).

Within a theology of affirmation the concept of sin can, for instance, no longer be implemented as a tool to reserve control or exert ecclesial power, as the pastor’s wife in *As it is in heaven* maintained. Sin is rather viewed through the lens of a *theologia resurrectionis*. This could imply, on the one hand, that there should be a deepened celebration of the gift of life, taking into account that life as such has been sanctified by the resurrection of Christ, one could say: that life has (once again) been reframed

through an act of God. In the light of this it remains a question whether it is in fact theologically true that *nothing* on earth is pure, as one of the stanzas from the Dutch Reformed *Liedboek van die Kerk* invites us to sing:

*God, enkel lig, voor u gesig  
is niks op aarde rein nie* (238:1a).

(God, only light, in your presence nothing on earth is pure)

To state that *nothing* on earth is pure seems to take a rather pessimistic anthropological view on humanity and life. On the other hand, viewing liturgical reframing through the lens of a *theologia resurrectionis* does not mean that the notion (and terrible reality) of sin is ignored or liturgically avoided – which seems to be the case in many worship services, epitomized in the fact that these services are often devoid of any form of lament whatsoever (Cilliers 2007:160-162). The reality of sin cannot be side-stepped or softened theologically. Could we, for instance, truly confess that we are no longer sinners – as seems to be the case in another hymn from the Dutch Reformed *Liedboek van die Kerk*?

*Heer, U bring vreugde, vrede en vreugde,  
ons is nou geen sondaars meer* (492:2).

(Lord, you bring joy, peace and joy; we are now no longer sinners.)

An anthropology that is formed within the scope of a *theologia resurrectionis* does not need to fall prey to a form of liturgical triumphalism; nor should it succumb to the gravity of a sombre and pessimistic view on life. The challenge is to celebrate the new life that the Christ-event has realized and to lament the realities within ourselves, but also within society, that seem to contradict our ontological identity in Christ as well as the cosmological victory of Christ. When lament takes place, it is always in view of this freedom and the fullness of the gift of life, as embodied through the indwelling by the Spirit. The flipside of the coin of lament is in fact *parrhêsia*, i.e. the confidence to approach the throne of God, where there is grace, knowing that we are (still) sinners, but at the same time (already) pure (Heb 4:16). This could indeed be described as “new patterns of pneumatic living,” as Louw proposes (2008:30).

- *Thirdly*, the Christ-event obviously has a profound impact on our *images of God*, and the character and quality of our *encounter* with Him. The Christ-event underlines the fact that God *reveals* Himself to us, also when we gather to worship Him. Worship is not an abstract or esoteric experience, but rooted in an *actual event*, namely the life, death and resurrection of Christ. This event amplifies the fact that God (continuously) takes the initiative and reveals Himself as the faithful One. He reveals Himself in order to redeem people and in the process He recreates them as his people (cf Webber 1992:28-29). Those who worship are continuously constituted through the Spirit as a *creatura verbi dei* (creation of the Word of God).

The character and quality of the encounter with this God should have priority over any secondary issue that might arise during the act of worship, issues pertaining to liturgical orders, settings, styles and tastes – although these issues are of importance and will undoubtedly be affected when the fundamental questions about theology and anthropology are addressed. Tisdale (2001:176-177) expresses her concern that the so-called ‘worship wars’ might in fact be a way of avoiding the real issues and real questions that need to be brought to the liturgical table: *In the midst of all these wars, which cause tremendous upheaval in local congregations, and in the midst of the arguments made pro and con on both sides of the battles, I am increasingly concerned*

by the question that is all too often ignored in these debates, namely, *How do we keep worship 'deep' theologically?*

The encounter with a God that *reveals* Himself brings with it a *sense of expectancy*. Liturgical reshuffling or restoration might generate some sense of excitement for a time, but it should not be confused with the expectancy that comes with the image of a God who reveals Himself as the Crucified and Resurrected One. Worship is all about an event of revelation, an event of encounter, and not simply an experience of religiosity, *inter alia*, also manipulated through clever or breath-taking liturgical techniques. Worship is all about seeing the bigger picture of God's acts in this world, all about perceiving the reality of these acts in history, in the present and also in the future – and celebrating this with the knowledge that we are part and parcel of the reality of these acts.

The reframing of liturgy to become 'as it is in heaven,' therefore does not imply that we are separated from this world and whisked away to heaven. It is not an abstraction from real life, but rather articulates metaphorically that this life is indeed to be viewed from a radically different perspective. Liturgy after all means to enter, with God, the streets and market-places, and consequently to be repositioned within the rhythms of existential reality (cf Plantinga and Rozeboom 2003:3). In the film *As it is in Heaven* the network of relationships (as represented in the community of the choir), as well as the understanding of the church (ecclesiology) and its practices of liturgy, are fundamentally challenged. Established God-images are transformed. This takes place via the body (singing, breathing, movement), in other words within the context of a *leitourgia* that is fully situated in this life.

Worship on earth is truly reframed. It becomes as it is in heaven.

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