

Proper 17, Year C

- Our liturgy is more than just the words we say
- Our worship of God isn't merely spoken
- Because everything that we do when we gather here, everything, is meant to cultivate reverence – to orient us to God, to shape us into the kind of people in whom others can see Christ at work clearly
- That, first and foremost, is what we're doing here every Sunday morning or Wednesday afternoon when we gather together and share in Christ's Body and Blood
- Some of the things that we do are more obvious about achieving these aims than others
- So, for example, when some of us bow at the name of Jesus in our liturgy, it is because at some point the tradition decided to enact or embody that portion of Philippians chapter 2 which says, "Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."
- Our bowing at the name that is above every name is meant to get that idea into the core of us, at a level deeper than spoken words ever can, to help us know deep in our bones that Jesus Christ is Lord
- The same is true when some of us bow at the cross in procession – not out of reverence for this particular object, but out of recognition that it is through the cross that Jesus Christ accomplished the world's salvation – and in hopes that if we bow at the cross we might receive and recite this truth, not only with our lips, but in our lives
- Some of the things we do, though, are less obvious, especially to us today – it's less clear what ways they are intended to shape us
- One of these is in the procession itself
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- The order of liturgical processions, believe it or not, is grounded in passages from Scripture like the parable that Jesus tells this morning, where he says, "all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."
- In the early days of Christianity, when a lot of our liturgical traditions began, the most important person in a parade or procession didn't come at the end
- That may be hard to believe now, where it seems that the most important person is always reserved for last – but it really wasn't always the case

- In the Byzantine Empire, for court processions or military parades, the first person, at the head of the column, was the Emperor
- And that was for a very simple reason: If the Emperor was first, then the Emperor could make his way in and sit down first, and actually be able to see the entirety of the parade or procession which was, more often than not, in his honor
- And so, the more important you were, you earlier you came in the parade, in hopes of being seen and noticed before the Emperor's attention waned
- It's in this context that the liturgical orders of procession arose
- And, I should add, processions were often not small affairs, even in the church
- There was a time where it was likely that every attendee of the service was involved in the procession
- And in liturgical processions, eventually the clergy would come, at the end
- But before all that would come the really important people – the laity, the Body of Christ and the body of the faithful, without whom there would be no Church, and certainly no need for those who came later in the procession
- Clergy being last in the procession, once upon a time, were trying to humble themselves, to make themselves last
- Of course this isn't as clear these days, where it seems every parade tries to save the best and most important for last
- But our procession was, and still is, intended to convey that it is the congregation that is important, and the clergy are more or less incidental
- Our liturgy is more than just the words we say
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- But it's the words we say, too
- Words we have borrowed from Scripture and fashioned into worship that shapes us, shapes our worldview, shapes the way that we think about and interact with the world
- Words like we hear in the Book of Hebrews: "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. Through him, then, let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God."
- Those are words we've been hearing a lot, as they make one of my favorite offertory sentences – because they remind us that our offering is first and foremost our sacrifice of praise, the fruit of lips that acknowledge Jesus's name

- But they are words that remind us, too, that our sacrifice can never be merely words, that part of our offering to God is to do good, and to share what we have
- Or, as the prophet Micah puts it, “to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with [our] God.”
- And the hope is, that if we hear certain words and phrases enough, they become our vocabulary of the faith, the lens through which we understand and make sense of the world
- Which is why so many Episcopalians can talk so readily about God “in whom we live and move and have our being” [or can talk about being “unfeignedly thankful” or might even say that something is “meet and right”] or might suggest that we “read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest” something or might even be able to say, “All of us go down to the dust; yet even at the grave we make our song: Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia.”
- These aren’t simply words that we remember, they’re words that shape us and shape our reality
- They’re working upon us at levels beyond the merely conscious level
- I’ve seen this made movingly clear – when worshiping in a retirement and skilled nursing community with people who suffered from dementia to the point where there were largely non-vocal... until we began reciting the Lord’s Prayer in worship, and heard them speak more words than they did the entire rest of the week
- Words of prayer and praise to God, so deep that even as their memory might have been failing, it was clear that God was still present there, in their hearts, and that God still remembered them
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- Our liturgy works on us, always
- In word and symbol and sacrament
- In ways we notice and ways we’re unaware of
- It shapes us in ways we want to be shaped and ways we don’t even realize
- Bit by bit, giving us language to describe the presence of God in our lives
- Forming us more and more into God’s people, to bear the light of Christ to the world