

## CHAPTER 3

# *Ceremonial Action*

### **Posture**

Humans are not pure spirits. Nor are we disembodied minds. Our worship of God involves our whole selves including our bodies. Many Anglicans clap during certain songs, and at other times raise their hands in the biblical posture of prayer. Liturgical dance is becoming more common. There is a growing insight into the interrelationship between body, mind, and spirit. Standing embodies the risen life that we, the baptised, share with Christ. At the council of Nicaea (325 AD) astonishment was expressed that some were kneeling on Sundays, and during the fifty days of the Easter season. It was then ruled that prayers be made to God standing. This practice continued until the middle ages.

Kneeling on Sundays became common only when priests were seen to be doing something *for* the passive congregation. With the renewed insight that all, clergy and lay, celebrate the Eucharist together, it seems more appropriate if all have the same posture as the presider. As a community discusses such changes there needs to be an acceptance of diversity as some, for example, may find long periods of standing difficult.

Although *A New Zealand Prayer Book* occasionally provides suggestions for appropriate posture (page 517) "it is left open to each congregation to decide whether to sit, stand or kneel at the various parts of the service" (page xv). Kneeling stresses the individual and penitential. A community may decide to kneel for the confession only in the season of Lent. If a confession is used during the fifty days of Easter, standing may be more appropriate. At other times, standing together stresses the communal "*we* have sinned" (page 407), "*we* have failed to support one another and to be what we claim to be" (page 479).

In a simple celebration of the Eucharist which moves directly from the greeting to the confession, it may also flow better for all to remain standing

throughout greeting, confession, and collect.

"Let us pray" is not an invitation to kneel. To change posture for the Collect of the Day seems unnecessary.

No posture is suggested for the Prayers of the People. Anglicans have usually knelt, but standing is an alternative practice which may again highlight that we intercede together as the baptised, exercising a priestly role with and through the risen Christ's perpetual intercession. When the presider stands to break the silence after the Sermon this can be a natural signal for the leader of the Prayers to move to the designated place for leading them, and for the community to stand to pray.

Anglicans, used to standing to sing, may wish to experiment with being seated during the Preparation of the Gifts. A hymn or anthem may be sung while seated. The presider is also seated while the deacon or (in the absence of a deacon) others can prepare the holy table. When the table has been prepared all stand.

"The Great Thanksgiving is a unity" (page 517). Changing posture within it destroys this unity. Announcements within the prayer to effect a change of posture such as "please kneel" or worse "let us pray" (as if we have not been praying) conflict with the prayer's unity. After the Invitation to communion, people can wait to join the communion procession by being seated.

The silence after communion may be broken by the presider standing to say "Let us (stand to) pray." All may then stand for the Prayer After Communion (e.g. pages 525-545, or pages 428-429, 472-473, 490), a hymn, and the Dismissal of the Community.

## **Gesture**

If someone describes a certain baptism as "water torture," it is not difficult to imagine the ritual: "I baptise you in the name of the Father (drip), and of the Son (drip), and of the Holy Spirit (drip)." Such a ceremonial hardly conjures up images of washing, drowning, or waters of rebirth, just as many fonts cannot

bear the weight of imaging a bath, tomb, and womb.

Gesture, like posture, recognises that we have bodies. We are not disembodied spirits who communicate by telepathy, we use our bodies to communicate. Signs, symbols, and gestures are as essential to communication as words. In the past passive congregations, heads buried in hands or books, may not have noticed if a priest, standing with his back to the congregation, held his hands behind his back during the Lord's Prayer. However personally devout a presider may be, such a gesture in today's liturgy will reduce the worshipful atmosphere for many.

Whatever our practice, it is not possible to "do nothing" in terms of actions. Holding a book, holding hands together, or by one's side, are actions. Just as studies of early Christian prayer texts have lain at the heart of modern textual revision, so the scholarly study of early ceremonial has rediscovered ritual of noble simplicity which is both functional and expressive. This is not an argument for a new *via-media* between those who "do nothing" and those who follow a ritual of great complexity. This is an invitation to think again about the visual component of worship. In this the KISS principle (*Keep It Simple Service-leader*) is helpful.

Gestures can be confusing. Dom Gregory Dix's grandmother attended the Tridentine mass once and was convinced the priest released a crab onto the altar. His gestures, she thought, were to prevent the crab from crawling into view! If actions are not self-explanatory, it is worth reflecting on their value. Do they need to be abandoned or does their rationale need to be included in education programmes?

Getting the words right is only a part of the renewal of worship. Having a new Prayer Book does not excuse us from paying attention to actions. In fact a new Prayer Book may damage good liturgy if, through unfamiliarity, people are glued to the book. "Grace and peace to you from God" is a strange statement to address to a book! Liturgy flows best when presider and people learn by heart greetings they address to one another. Hence, it is the leader's responsibility to use ones that have simple and consistent responses.

In *A New Zealand Prayer Book*, gestures are usually not indicated and there is freedom to choose gestures appropriate to the community, architecture

and size of the building, size of the congregation, and relative importance of the celebration (whether, for example, it is a festival or weekday, Lent or Easter). Care needs to be taken that ceremony does not highlight the secondary at the expense of the basic structure of the Eucharist (e.g. does the ceremonious putting out of the candles give the impression that it is more important than the Dismissal of the Community?) Ceremony ought to help to make the text intelligible rather than being imposed upon it from a way of celebrating, say, the Roman rite or *The Book of Common Prayer*.

Ceremonial gestures, like all ceremony, can be divided into four categories: practical, interpretive, signficatory, and allegorical.

Practical actions are functional. They are required for the smooth running of the service. We stand, for example, for the Peace. Interpretive actions are those which bring out the meaning of the text. For example, the presider may raise the hands at "Lift up your hearts." The presider's hands are open wide in welcome at the greeting which establishes a relationship between presider and community. The presider can appropriately trace a sign of the cross over the people in the Absolution at the word "cross" on page 408. Many in the community will cross themselves at this point as well. Presiders need to take time to decide whether using a sign of the cross at this point in the other Eucharistic Liturgies (when the cross is not mentioned) would be suitable or not.

Signficatory actions relate directly to the service. Like signs generally, however, (and road signs make a good example) they may require some explanation. They may have a teaching element, such as wearing red for a martyr's feast. Or they may express an attitude. Some bow in prayer before the holy table before proclaiming the Gospel (if there is a deacon reading, this may be replaced by the presider blessing the deacon.) At the announcement of the Gospel some in the community make the sign of the cross on forehead, lips, and breast in openness to the Gospel in mind, heart and voice. In some communities the reader kisses the Gospel book after concluding "This is the Gospel of Christ." The presider may kiss the holy table at first arriving there and on finally leaving it. This expresses that Gospel book and holy table are signs of Christ's presence in the community.

Allegorical actions are those which have no relationship to the text or

service, but are imposed upon it (e.g. thirty-three signs of the cross over the eucharistic elements). Practical, interpretive, and signficatory actions, suitably explained in a community's education, can be meaningful. Allegorical actions are highly questionable and are being removed from liturgy in most denominations even where they were previously prescribed.

Some gestures may not be appropriate with *A New Zealand Prayer Book*. Likewise, some actions which may have been suitable in the past may no longer have a rationale within our revised liturgies. This is an invitation to give some thought to whether to continue them. Such actions may include signing oneself with the cross at points that do not relate to the text or rite (e.g. in the "Glory to God in the highest," the Creed, and "Blessed is he ..."), breaking the bread during the account of the last supper, elevating the bread and cup after the "words of institution," using multiple signs of the cross during the Great Thanksgiving, making the sign of the cross with the bread before placing it in the communicant's hands, and breaking the bread in the communicant's hands.

### *Some Questions*

*Which of the suggestions in this chapter do you consider would enhance the worship in your community?*

*Which do you find less helpful and why?*

*Can you think of other suggestions appropriate for your context?*

*Can you design a process for your community for implementing change?*