

Pentecost 20, Proper 22
Church of the Good Shepherd, Silver City, NM

October 2, 2016
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The Canon of the Mass

Today is the fall UTO Ingathering Sunday. The United Thank Offering began in the late 1800's as several forces came together. One was a growing recognition of the role of women in the life of the Church. The second was an increased need for funding for missions and especially female missionaries, and partly as an offshoot of the reorganization of the church that resulted in what we now have as a central National Church Office. It continues to be a major source of funding for non-budgetary missions efforts. In our own diocese Susan Hutchins drives a Jeep Liberty that was funded by the UTO. Its high clearance and 4-wheel drive allow her to access areas of borderland mission activities that her own car cannot handle.

In its history we see reflected something essential about the nature of the Church. Just like there was a force of women in the church that the Church did not really "see," and the development of the UTO helped bring them to light, so in the church there is that which is invisible. There is that which we see, yes, and then there is that which we do not see. There are church buildings, groupings of people, programs and worship services, and then there is the action of the Spirit in the world through and beyond the Church that slowly brings to bear the Kingdom of God.

Our lessons speak to that which we do not see. In the first lesson the prophet bemoans the visible. He reflects what many people today feel, that the world seems to be going to hell in a handbasket and hurrying to get there, and yet God promises "a vision for the appointed time." Take heart, is the message, for that which is unseen is ultimately the most real.

The Psalm picks up the same theme: Fret not yourself for evil-doers. God is in control.

Paul writes to his protégé, Timothy, in the Epistle lesson today. He reminds him of the history of which he is the product—God has been working behind the scenes. Though he might feel young, or in Paul's enormous shadow, or whatever it is he is feeling, God has not given him a spirit of fear, but of (and I prefer the King James' translation here) of power, of love and of a sound mind. Timothy

need not fear to be a minister of the Gospel. God is doing something unseen that is greater than whatever he might fear, and he is part of it.

In the Gospel lesson Jesus takes a different turn on the same theme. The disciples ask him to increase their faith. He begins with a teaser: If you had faith as a mustard seed (small, but solid) you could do wonders. But then he comes back with the rest of the story. Just as a servant does not deserve praise for merely doing their duty, we do what we are called to do, not for the visible or tangible results, but for the sake of the eternal, invisible Kingdom that we serve.

OK, that was a long introduction to get us into the mindset necessary to approach the Eucharistic Prayer. This is what is often called "The Canon of the Mass." "Canon," if you remember, derives from a Greek word that means "rule." This is the core of the mystery of the Gospel among us. You can measure everything else using this as a yardstick—the sermon, the prayers, and the mission of the Church. In the earliest days this prayer was prayed extemporaneously by the Bishop, who was the principle presider at the gathering of the congregation in a given city. Over the years it became standardized and formalized so that today we have what we have—full and rich, developed over 2 millennia of tradition, prayer and faith.

The Canon names the invisible, making it visible to our spirits. The words work to unmask the Great Mystery, if only a little tiny bit, and for a very short period of time, knowing that the mystery is so powerful and so transforming that even a little glimpse, of which we are just barely capable, is enough to make all the difference needed. How does it do that?

It does that through two things. It does that through the truths it proclaims, and it does that through the progression of thought.

Let's pick up first with the truths proclaimed discussed. There are always five elements to this prayer: the Rehearsal of Sacred History, the Prayer of Remembrance, the Invocation of the Holy Spirit, the Great Amen, and finally, the Lord's Prayer.

The **Sacred History** retells the story of Redemption in Christ. It is very truncated, naming only the central points, but it sets the stage. The stage it sets is not the socio-political one, the historical one or even the strictly religious one. It is the spiritual one: How has the community of God discerned the action of God in our past? In other words, where have we seen the invisible poking through the mantle of the visible?

The **Prayer of Remembrance** is where the Church recalls the words of Jesus. Alternatively called the Prayer of Consecration, Words of Institution in more Protestant circles, or borrowing the Greek word, "Anamnesis," the idea is the same. Let me illustrate how it works:

I dare you not to think of pink elephants. Go ahead, don't think about pink elephants. Think about anything you want but pink elephants. Why are you thinking about pink elephants?

All of a sudden you have been internally connected to the world of pink elephants. Now that's a psychological illustration of a spiritual reality. When we recite the words of Jesus we remember the story of the Last Supper, but in our sacramental tradition it is more than merely recalling what we have heard. It is a re-membering, a making a member once more, of ourselves with that sacred event. We are made present to it, and it to us in ways that comfort and transform us. The visible action of the telling of the story reveals the invisible action of God in Christ making us into the Body of Christ.

The **Invocation of the Holy Spirit** names the transcendence. All that is the work of God in the world is the action of the Holy Spirit. The growth of the Church, the permanence of the Church (against rather impossible odds,) the efficacy of what we do in the name of Christ, even the very existence of the ground we stand on, the church we sit in, and the world we live in is the work of the Holy Spirit. At the center of our experience of the Spirit is the mystery of which we get a glimpse in this ritual. The action asked of the Holy Spirit is to make us the Body of Christ by and through participation in the sacrament of the Body of Christ.

Then we all get on board with what has been said. It comes in the form of a doxology. Trinitarian in theology, Christocentric in its focus, it locates us, the visible church, in the midst of the action of God in the Church invisible, that great mystery of redemption that God is doing in the world. It all reaches a great crescendo in The **Great Amen**, which means, "Yeah, what the priest said, that is what I say, too!"

Finally, we end with the **Lord's Prayer**. We acknowledge a couple of things here. First, we surrender our best-crafted prayer to the words of Jesus. Surrender has been the theme through the whole of the celebration, and we return to it here. In the Canon we have created the best we could, but in the end our confidence is not in ourselves but in following Christ. Then, we join with those who have been learning to pray from Jesus through the centuries. Last year I sat with Ida

Campbell when she was so confused she could not put a lucid sentence together. However, when I began the Lord's Prayer she would chime in. This kind of thing is really quite common. This most iconic of Christian prayers is probably the most memorized and prayed of all the prayers of the Church, and rightly so, for in doing so we make Jesus our common teacher for the life of prayer.

Then there is the structure of the prayer itself. Remember what we said last week. It is not just bread, wine and our money that we lay on the Altar, it is ourselves, that we might be constituted the Body of Christ in the world today. As we move through the elements discussed already, though the order of some parts may shift from Eucharistic Prayer to Eucharistic Prayer, they take us from our past into our future. They show us to be riding on a great spiritual tradition, that began in the hoary beginning of all things, and will end in the final resolution of all things. It lays out the action of the Plan of Salvation: God created us and the whole world good, but we were and are corrupted by sin. Jesus Christ came to redeem us from that corruption and to restore us to fellowship with God, with one another and with our world. Now we have been caught up in that great invisible work of God, as active participants, people who are part of something unseen, whose work in the world shares in revealing to the world, just what the unseen more-real than reality Kingdom is all about.

Now, vibrating in this invisible reality that has been revealed by words and actions, we approach the Altar. But I'm getting ahead of myself. This is for next time!