

**A Sermon from St. Mark's Episcopal Church  
Berkeley, CA  
*Preached by the Reverend Louis Weil***

**February 6, 2011**

*Epiphany V, Rev. Common Lectionary Year A*

Scripture: Is. 58:1—9A (9B—12); I Cor. 2:1—12 (13—16); Matthew 5:13—20



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Before I moved to Berkeley in the 1980s, I taught at the Episcopal Seminary in Wisconsin. Our principal celebration of the Eucharist was on Thursday evenings: it was a community event, attended not only by the students and faculty, but also families and guests.

One Thursday evening, when I had been the preacher, the Dean commented afterwards that I had preached “my annual anti-liturgy sermon.”

Since I was the Professor of Liturgy, this seemed to be a strange remark – but in fact, he was correct. From time to time in class or in sermons I would speak about a danger which could develop in a community in which the liturgy played such an important role in our daily life, whether it be at a seminary or a parish.

The danger was (and is) that we can get so caught up in the preparation and celebration of the liturgy that it can become an end in itself, that there is a risk of losing a sense of its purpose, a risk of forgetting that the liturgy always points beyond itself, that it embodies priorities which lie outside of the ritual celebration itself.

When I became an Episcopalian during college, I can remember hearing on more than one occasion priests speaking about “our incomparable liturgy.” It is true that as Anglicans we have a rich heritage in our forms of liturgical prayer, in Book of Common Prayer. But what makes me very nervous in that phrase [“our incomparable liturgy”] is that it seems to stop at the liturgy itself, suggesting that we can bask in the beauty of its language and music as a kind of aesthetic experience. But our participation in the liturgy is not the same as listening to great music at a concert.

The aesthetic aspect of the liturgy is always intended to serve its greater purpose, to build up – to nourish – the faith of those who have gathered to celebrate the liturgy. In other words, the liturgy is not intended to be admired; its goal is to send us forth to be the Body of Christ in the world.

In our celebrations of the liturgy, we often experience great beauty, for example in its music, and we see its capacity to awaken in us a sense of the Presence of the Holy. In that way, the liturgy can play a significant role in building up the Church in the life of faith, both in a parish community and also in our individual lives. But the work of the liturgy does not stop there. Its purpose points beyond itself.

At the heart of the liturgical action we see its purpose in reminding us: the entire Eucharistic rite is an act of remembrance, both in the proclamation of Scripture and also in the Eucharistic meal at which we hear each time, “Do this in remembrance of me.” We could say that the liturgy reminds us of what God has done, the whole history of salvation, of God’s mighty works from Creation to the present time. This is done through the reading of Scripture which places us who hear it today within the context of the ongoing work of God, and so also relates our individual lives to God’s Presence and grace.

As Christians, we find that Presence of God revealed with particular intensity in the Incarnation of our Lord, in whom we see the Presence of God revealed in a human life. At the center of every Eucharistic Prayer we hear: “remember.” And it is in the power of that remembrance that we go forth to continue our own journey of faith. That is the purpose of the liturgy which we must claim again and again. If the liturgy does not lead us beyond itself into our daily lives, its purpose has failed.

Today our first reading from the Prophet Isaiah shows that this problem has been around for a long time. The prophet quotes the worshipers of his time: “we are doing all of the outward observances: why does God not notice?” One can hear: “we attend the liturgy regularly, isn’t that enough?” And the prophet says, “No, it is not enough.” Isaiah reminds us that the fulfillment of the liturgy is found in what we **do** in our daily lives: fight against injustice; lift the burdens from those who suffer; help to free those who are oppressed; feed the hungry; give shelter to the homeless; clothe the naked.”

This is what our first reading from Isaiah says: did we hear it merely as an item in our bulletin? -- or as an imperative to us in the living out of our faith.

Do this, the prophet says, and “your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly. ... Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer.” Isaiah is reminding us and warning us of the danger if we stop at the liturgy itself and fail to move through it into the doing of the imperatives it sets before us. This is echoed for us in the Christian community in the words of Jesus in today’s Gospel reading from Matthew: as with Isaiah’s “your light shall break forth like the dawn,” Jesus says to his followers, “You are the light of the world. ... Let your light shine.” That light shines in the lives of those who not only celebrate this act of faith, but seek daily to embody its meaning.