

# Trumpets, Ashes, and Tears

Nicholas Wolterstorff

Every Sunday morning for almost 2000 years now we Christians have left our beds, our tables, our fireplaces, and gone out onto the paths and roads and streets of our world, by foot, by horse, by bicycle, by car, from the dispersion of our daily existence to our liturgical assemblies. Then after our divine service is finished, we go back again over the paths and roads and streets to our homes and places of work and recreation. Christian existence has from its beginnings followed this pattern of gathering and dispersing, this systolic-diastolic beat of contracting and expanding, assembling and scattering. The pattern is familiar to all. But what does it mean?

Also from the very beginnings of Christian existence this heartbeat of gathering and dispersing has followed the temporal one-plus-six rhythm of Sunday plus Monday-through-Saturday. Into the otherwise uniform flow of time has been introduced a septuple cadence, rather as the train traveller finds herself introducing into the uniform meter of the click of the wheels rolling over the joints in the track a rhythm of strong and weak. A systolic-diastolic heartbeat in a septuple cadence of one plus six—this from age to age has characterized the Christian way of being in the world. In my book *Until Justice and Peace Embrace* I have inquired into the meaning of the septuple rhythm. Here I want to look into the meaning of the heartbeat. Specifically, what do the parts of the beat—the gathering and the dispersing—have to do with each other?

One can readily discern standard patterns of Christian thought on the matter. Some regard these two phases as not having anything at all to do with each other. They see them as jointly essential to the full Christian life but functioning side by side, not serving or conditioning or fulfilling or interpenetrating each other. The point has been made in various ways. Some say that the active life is jointly indispensable with the contemplative life for the full Christian existence. Others prefer to say that worship and work, liturgy and labor, must complement each other.

It is clear, though, that most people who have reflected seriously on the matter have not been content with this side-by-side picture. They have tried to discern some inner connection between our life as gathered and our life as dispersed. Traditional Catholicism, for

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example, has thought along the following lines: Most of us throughout our daily lives are immersed in the sphere of the secular. But on Sundays by our participation in the Eucharistic liturgy we enter the sphere of the holy. In the liturgy we adore and bless God, while God's grace is sacramentally infused into us and Christ is made bodily present before us. The contemplative adoration of God is the highest action we can perform in this our earthly existence; nonetheless, it is incomplete. We look forward to the beatific vision of God vouchsafed to the saints in heaven. To this end, the sacramental infusion of grace is indispensable. Our participation in the liturgy represents, then, both the beginning of our life of contemplation and the means of its completion. The fundamental significance of our life in the *secular* is that it preserves this present material and social existence of ours, which in turn enables us to participate in the liturgy. The active life *enables* the contemplative life; our lives as dispersed *make possible* our lives as assembled.

Traditional Reformed thought has often turned this model from traditional Catholicism on its head. Where the traditional Catholic saw Monday through Saturday as being for the sake of Sunday, the Reformed have seen Sunday as being for the sake of Monday through Saturday. Where the Catholic saw the significance of work as lying in its enabling of worship, the Reformed have seen the significance of worship as lying in its enabling of authentic work. Liturgy is for the sake of labor. Authentic earthly life does not consist in ordering our existence so as to catch as much as we now can of the Vision of God and to receive the sacraments so that in heaven we shall experience the whole; it consists of struggling to serve God in the establishment of his Kingdom here on earth. It consists, if you will, of the struggle to make our lives and our world holy. The assemblies are the place where the King's directives for the week are heard and where nourishment for the task is received. Our lives as assembled are instrumental to our lives as dispersed.

Tacit in both these one-directional "instrumentalisms" is of course a priority as between the church gathered and the church dispersed, as between liturgy and labor, worship and work. In traditional Catholicism, the reception of grace and the adoration of the bodily-present Christ which together constitute the core of the liturgy are what is of supreme importance in life: our work in the world is in service of that. In the traditional Reformed view, our work in the world whereby we serve God in the obedience of faith is the supremely important thing: the liturgy is in service of that. But it

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*The calling of the church is fulfilled just as much in its adoration of the Holy One as in its struggle to make the world holy.*

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is also possible to think in these hierarchical terms—that is, to think of worship as superior to work or of work as superior to worship—without viewing the relationship in an instrumental way. It is possible to think in terms of lower and higher without thinking of the significance of the lower as simply that of serving or enabling the higher.

Certainly Vatican II and the thought inspired by it does not limit the significance of our work in the world to its enabling of the liturgy. It grants to such work its own intrinsic significance. Yet quite clearly a priority remains. The formula toward which Vatican II gravitates is that the liturgy is *source and summit* of the Christian life. The liturgy nourishes our daily lives; but at the same time, participation in the liturgy is the summit of the Christian life. That is clear, for example, in these passages from the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* of Vatican II:

. . . Every liturgical celebration, because it is an action of Christ the Priest and of his Body, which is the Church, is a sacred action surpassing all others. No other action of the Church can equal its efficacy by the same title and to the same degree. . . .

The sacred liturgy does not exhaust the entire activity of the Church. Before men can come to the liturgy they must be called to faith and to conversion. . . . To believers also the Church must ever preach faith and penance; she must prepare them for the sacraments, teach them to observe all that Christ has commanded, and encourage them to engage in all the works of charity, piety and the apostolate, thus making it clear that Christ's faithful, though not of this world, are to be the lights of the world and are to glorify the Father before men.

Nevertheless the liturgy is the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; it is also the fount from which all her power flows. For the goal of apostolic endeavor is that all who are made sons of God by faith and baptism should come together to praise God in the midst of his Church, to take part in the Sacrifice and to eat the Lord's Supper.

Though I know of no corresponding passage on the Protestant side that is quite so crisp as this from Vatican II, a great many Protestants in our century have indeed reversed this Catholic model of priorities. They would not reduce the significance of the liturgy to its service of our life in the world any more than contem-

porary Catholics would reduce the significance of our life in the world to its service of the liturgy. Yet they would say that the Church is most fully realized as the body of Christ in the world, or performs the actions of supreme importance at those points where a cup of cold water is given in the name of Christ—at those points where the poor hear good news, where the captives are sprung free, where the blind recover their sight, where the oppressed are liberated, and where all the dwellers on earth experience something of the shalom of the Year of Jubilee.

**U**p to this point I have been sketching out models—ways of thinking, patterns of thought. Let me now begin to engage the issues by suggesting that we must resist choosing between these two positions. The body of Christ on earth is realized just as much in its struggle for justice and peace in the world as in its worship of the God of justice and peace. Its calling is fulfilled just as much in its adoration of the Holy One as in its struggle to make the world holy.

Jesus performed the works of healing and preaching, but also the works of praying and worshipping. And his Sonship was manifested no more in the one than in the other. It is true that when asked whether he was the long-expected one of Israel, Jesus pointed to his deeds of healing and preaching. But one of the decisive occasions on which he pointed to these messianic signs was during his attendance at the synagogue. Every faithful Jew was faithful in prayer and blessing, and every faithful Jew expected the Messiah to be faithful in these as well. These, though characteristic of the Messiah, would not be a distinguishing mark of him. Doing the works of shalom would be that. But if our Lord's Sonship is brought to realization both in his healing and in his praying, in the one no more than in the other, can we as his body be realized in any other way?

Yet surely we must go beyond this recognition of equal ultimacy. The relation of assembly to dispersal, worship to work, liturgy to labor, is not that of merely being side by side. The traditional Catholic who argued that the dispersion is in the service of the assembly and the traditional Reformed who argued that the assembly is in service of the dispersion both discerned something important. Both discerned that in some way these two phases of the heartbeat of the church, the systolic and the diastolic, are closely interrelated.

One way in which they are interrelated—and here I plant my feet firmly in the Reformed tradition—is that the liturgy does indeed serve our life in the world. It both directs and nourishes it. The liturgy is not just an instrument of that grace which gets us to heaven; it is also an instrument of that grace which guides and empowers us for our work as covenant partners with God in the coming of His Kingdom. In Scripture and sermon

we are confronted with God speaking; only someone who has heard almost nothing of the speech of God can doubt that that speech guides and directs our lives as dispersed. In the Lord's Supper we are, as the Reformed confessions put it, nourished and refreshed; only someone who has never experienced such nourishment and refreshment can doubt that this empowers us for our lives in dispersion.

But though this direction of the relationship of assembly and dispersal is profoundly important, I do not wish here to develop it further. The reality of liturgy pointing to life needs to be enriched, and our thought about it deepened; yet few today, at least in the Reformed camp, doubt that liturgy must point to life. A good many people, however—so it seems to me—are oblivious of the fact that life must also point to liturgy. Without denying the importance of liturgy pointing to life I wish here then to reflect on life's pointing to liturgy.

**W**e leave our homes, our offices, and our playgrounds and assemble for the liturgy. But we do not leave behind our *experience* in our lives of dispersion. We carry that experience along with us. A fundamental dimension of the liturgy is that in it we give expression, in concentrated and condensed ritualized form, precisely to our experience in the world and our response to that experience. Let me point out three fundamental ways in which that is true.

We can begin with a fundamental theme in the thought of John Calvin. As Brian Gerrish, church historian at the University of Chicago, remarks in one of his essays on the thought of Calvin, to be human is for Calvin to be one of those points in the cosmos where God's goodness finds its response in gratitude. Thousands of passages could be cited as illustrations of this pervasive Calvinian theme. Here is just one, from near the opening of the *Institutes*: "Although our mind cannot apprehend God without rendering some honor to him, it will not suffice simply to hold that there is One whom all ought to honor and adore, unless we are also persuaded that he is the fountain of every good . . ." (I,ii,1). The thought is clear. Considering God's mighty attributes may fill us with the conviction that this being *ought* to be honored and adored, and this in turn may induce us to render some honor to this mighty being. But this will not suffice for full-hearted honoring and adoring. We also need to be persuaded that this mighty being is *good* to us. In other passages Calvin makes clear that being persuaded of God's goodness is as much a matter of perception and experience as of intellectual conviction. If our devotion is to be full and authentic, we must not only be intellectually convicted of God's goodness and might, but we must *apprehend* the goods of the world *as gifts of God*. Whereas the secularist sees in the food that comes our way nothing other than

something good, the Christian apprehends those goods as gift—rather in the way in which, when we are guests at a dinner, we experience the dinner not only as delicious but as a gift.

Though this theme of experiencing the goods of the world as a gift of God is indeed fundamental in Calvin, we should not allow our focus on it to make us lose sight of the other, neighboring, theme at which he hinted in the passage quoted and which he develops at length in other places. We honor God also because we experience the world as *his glorious work*. The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament shows his handiwork. Just as we, in looking at the work of an artist, do not apprehend it merely as a beautiful object but as the admirable work of an artist, so too the believer in walking through the world apprehends its wondrousness as the *glorious work of God*.

In short, for Calvin, to be a believer is to experience this world as a manifestation, a revelation, an epiphany of God. It is to experience it as a "sacrament" of God—and not in some indefinite way but in the quite specific way of experiencing it as a gift to us and as his glorious

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work. To such experiences, says Calvin, the only appropriate response is gratitude and adoration.

This same theme was eloquently developed in his own way by the late Russian Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemmann. At creation, says Schmemmann, "God blessed the world, blessed man, blessed the seventh day (that is, time), and this means that He filled all that exists with His love and goodness, made all this 'very good.'" To this act of God, Schmemmann continues, "the only *natural* (and not 'supernatural') reaction of man, to whom God gave this blessed and sanctified world, is to bless God in return, to thank Him, to *see* the world as God sees it and—in this act of gratitude and adoration—to know, name and possess the world." Schmemmann goes on to say that

all rational, spiritual and other qualities of man, distinguishing him from other creatures, have their focus and ultimate fulfillment in this capacity to bless God. . . . "Homo sapiens," "homo faber" . . . yes, but, first of all, "homo adorans." The first, the basic definition of man is that he is *the priest*. He stands in the center of the world and unifies it in his act of blessing God, of both receiving the world from God and offering it to God—

and by filling the world with this eucharist, he transforms his life, the one that he receives from the world, into life in God, into communion with Him. The world was created as the "matter," the material of one all-embracing eucharist, and man was created as the priest of this cosmic sacrament.

Now if we do indeed gratefully and adoringly experience our world as an epiphany of God, in the specific mode of gift and glorious work, then of course we do not leave these experiences behind but carry them with us as we leave our places of dispersion and come together into our assemblies. We come into our assemblies carrying trumpets of joy. We express our gratitude and adoration in word and song and gesture and color. We worship and adore God, we bless and praise him. And we do so not for something other than we have experienced in the world but precisely for what we have experienced. The celebration of the liturgy does not represent our turning away from a so-called profane or secular world to a so-called sacred world. It is our response to our apprehension of *this* world as gift and glorious work of God. As Schmemmann puts it, "It is *this world* (and not any 'other world'), it is *this life* (and not some 'other life') that were given to man to be a sacrament of the divine presence, given as communion with God, and it is only through this world, this life,

by 'transforming' them into communion with God that man *was to be*."

**B**ut there is more of our experience in the world which we come bearing to our assemblies than what I have discussed so far. To grasp this, we must leave Schmemmann behind, for he scarcely takes note of this part of our experience, at least not when speaking of the liturgy. But Calvin can still be our guide; for of this added dimension he was vividly aware.

What every human being experiences as she makes her way through life is the presence of evil—of evil in bewildering abundance, evil in personal forms and evil in social forms. It makes no difference whether we are believers or unbelievers, we find ourselves in the presence of moral evil. We are a fallen humanity. The experience of the believer, however, has an additional quality. The believer experiences the moral evil of humanity as waywardness, as sin, as alienation from God, as falling short of God, as rebellion against the holy law of God. Where the secularist sees only evil when beholding Auschwitz, of a depth that recedes beyond every attempt to grasp it, the believer sees sin against God of a depth that defies all grasping. Where the secularist sees only evil in looking at the arms race, the believer

## The Nicene Creed

(May be sung to a hymn tune in common meter, such as "Azmon")

In one God the Father I believe; Almighty Maker He  
Of Heaven and earth—of everything we see and cannot see.  
And in one Lord, Jesus Christ His Son, begotten when' worlds were none—  
Very God of God and Light of Light—one substance, Father and Son.  
Who came from Heaven for our sake, our sins to face and carry,  
Incarnate by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary,  
Suffered as man on Pilate's cross, to free us all from sin,  
Was dead and buried and three days lay in the tomb they placed Him in.  
The third day He rose from the dead as Holy Scriptures tell,  
Ascending to His Father's House, at God's right hand to dwell.  
In glory He shall come again to judge the quick and dead:  
His Kingdom then shall have no end, and over earth be spread.  
And I believe in the Holy Ghost, of life the source and Lord,  
Who from the Father and Son proceeds, who spoke in prophets' word,  
And whom we worship and glorify with Father and with Son.  
And I believe a catholic Church, apostolic and one;  
One baptism I acknowledge for remission of our sins,  
And look for resurrection, when the life to come begins.

*Francis Fike*

sees defiant idolatry. Just as one sees a child's resistance to its parent's just command not only as wrong but as disobedience, so too the believer experiences humanity's moral evil as something more than evil. She experiences it as disobedience to God. And sometimes, at least, she also sees God's judgment on this defiance. To these apprehensions she responds with sorrow and repentance, and with a plea for deliverance and mercy.

As we leave our places of dispersion and travel to our assemblies, this experience of our world and our response to it we also carry with us. This, too, we cannot leave behind. We come bearing the ashes of repentance. And this experience also finds condensed ritualized expression in our liturgy. In word and song and gesture and color we confess our sins and the sins of our world, pleading for deliverance and forgiveness. It was the Swiss Reformers who first introduced an explicit act of confession into the public liturgy of the Western church. For that innovation they had several reasons. But one, I think, was their vivid experience of the evil of the world as disobedience.

**I** suggest that there is yet one more thing which the believer experiences in his life of dispersion and which he brings with him to the liturgy. For this third, we must leave both Schmemmann and Calvin behind, and, indeed, almost every other theologian. Only a few contemporary theologians, Jürgen Moltmann foremost among them, have had the courage and insight to single out this third experience.

As we human beings travel through life we experience pain and suffering—in part our own, in part that of others. Some of this pain and suffering is non-innocent suffering; it is punishment for, or the consequence of, moral evil. But not all of it is that. The suffering of the Israelites in the brickyards of Egypt was not the consequence of their sin, nor was the suffering of the Jews in the camps of Auschwitz. Some of the suffering of our world even resists our seeing it as the counterpart of *anyone's* sin—the accidental death of a child, for example.

My question now is this: How does the believer experience such suffering? We saw that the believer apprehends the goods of the world as a gift, the wondrousness of the world as a glorious work, the moral evil of the world as disobedience. Is there any counterpart in the believer's experience of the suffering of the world? Is the suffering of the world also some sort of epiphany of God? Or is our experience of suffering just separate from our experience of God?

Some believers experience some of humanity's suffering, perhaps some experience all of it, as the anger of God. The Old Testament *Book of Laments* closes with this cry of total desolation before the Almighty:

*Restore us to thyself, O Lord, that we may be restored!  
Renew our days as of old!  
Or hast thou utterly rejected us?  
Art thou exceedingly angry with us?*

Other believers—I think mainly those who have not themselves suffered much—say that suffering is to be apprehended as one of the gifts of God. And yet others testify that what they experience in suffering is the absence of God, the abandonment of God. What the secularist sees just as unmerited suffering, they experience as God's mysterious and painful abandonment.

There is yet another possibility, a possibility rarely grasped in the Christian tradition and seldom grasped in the tradition of rabbinic Judaism, but present in the Bible. Nowhere has it been better expressed than in Isaiah 63, verse 9. Speaking of Israel and of God the writer says: "In all their affliction, he was afflicted." In our afflictions, God is afflicted. Over our suffering, God suffers. Over our mourning, God mourns. Over our weeping, God weeps. I suggest that what the believer sees in beholding the suffering of the world—the thought makes us tremble, I admit—is no less than the suffering of God. What the believer sees when beholding the rabbi from Nazareth on the cross is not only human blood from sword and thorn and nail, but the tears of God over the wounds of the world.

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So the suffering of the world is also an epiphany of God—sometimes of the anger of God and sometimes of the gift of God, but always, I suggest, of the suffering of God. The God who has covenanted himself to humanity suffers over our suffering. The suffering of the world is not to be experienced as just other than God but as the suffering of God. To this epiphany, how else can we respond than with lament and intercession, crying out "How long, O Lord, how long? Deliver yourself, and us your children."

As you and I leave our places of dispersion and travel to our assemblies, we carry with us our experiences of the suffering of ourselves and of the world. But most of us do not experience God in this suffering. Most of us do not see it as an epiphany of God. And so, though we bring our experience of suffering to our assemblies, we do not know what to do with it there. Though praise and confession play large roles in our lit-

urgies, lament plays only a minor role. We skip over those desperate psalms and songs of lament from ancient Israel. And our intercessions, which ought to be grounded in sorrow over the sorrow of the world, give voice at best to muffled cries of pain. The lament, "How long, O Lord?" is scarcely heard. Though we bring our tears of pain with us to our worship, we don't know how to cry them there. Tears in the assembly are regarded as liturgical failure. I suggest instead that a liturgy without tears is a failure. We must find a place for lament.

Of course, if the liturgy is to be authentic we must also genuinely experience the world as gift and glorious work of God and feel the joy of gratitude, otherwise the songs of praise are mere sounds. We must genuinely experience the world as disobedient to God and feel the regret of repentance, otherwise the gestures of repentance are mere gestures. And we must genuinely experience the world as the suffering of God and feel the agony of lament, otherwise the words of intercession are mere words. Authentic experience and life in the world is a condition of authentic liturgy. If the condition is not

satisfied, God finds our words and songs and gestures deficient, sometimes even nauseous.

The liturgy of the Christian church, then, is for blowing the trumpets of joy over our experience of the world as gift and glorious work of God. It is for rubbing on the ashes of repentance over our experience of the world as disobedient to God. And, yes, the liturgy is for crying the tears of lament and intercession over our experience of the world as the suffering of God over the suffering of the world. We do each of these in its own place in the liturgy. In Holy Communion, mysteriously, we do them all together.

Praise, confession, lament, adoration, repentance, intercession. In entering the assembly we do not obliterate the world from our mind but carry along with us our experience of the world as a three-fold epiphany of God and our response to that experience. In the liturgy, while "holding in remembrance" what we have experienced of God, we give voice to our response. For that we need trumpets and ashes and tears. ■

## JOURNAL REVIEW

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### The wonder before our eyes

by Roy M. Anker

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*The Color Purple* Produced and directed by Steven Spielberg. Screenplay by Menno Meyjes, based on the novel by Alice Walker. Starring Whoopi Goldberg, Danny Glover, and Margaret Avery. MPPA rating PG-13.

*Out of Africa* Produced and directed by Sydney Pollack. Screenplay by Kurt Luedtke, cinematography by David Watkin, based on the life and writings of Isak Dinesen. Starring Meryl Streep, Robert Redford, and Klaus Maria Brandauer. MPPA rating PG.

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The two super-hype adult movies of this last Christmas season, *Out of Africa* and *The Color Purple*, are both altogether worth watching, but one is much better than the other. Both Sydney Pollack and Steven Spielberg seem intent upon reviving a disappearing film tradition—the picture that summons all the medium's capacities to tell a grand epic story and therewith move the daylights out of audiences. Both *Africa* and *Purple* are history pieces set

roughly fifty to sixty years ago, one among European adventurers in imperial Africa and the other amidst black life in the American South. For a brief while we plunge into largely vanished worlds, and in both cases we leave starkly aware of the vagaries of class, power, geography, and time. And both filmmakers etch their stories with abundant local detail, which in itself compels a good deal of viewer interest.

Technically, the design and cinematography give each a splendid rich look that at times borders on excess. A more

lavish treatment for either story would be hard to imagine. So adept is each filmmaker that occasionally their pyrotechnic display distracts from the narrative. We have long known of Steven Spielberg's cinematic wizardry, Sydney Pollack's huge success with *Out of Africa* comes as a surprise. Both films are more or less one-man shows, passions of personal vision, and they constitute a sharp departure from past work (*Tootsie* and *E.T.*) toward much greater thematic complexity and depth. So we all could think of many more similarities in intention, style, geo-political insight, and so on.

The most interesting question, though, comes with final effects on the screen. Spielberg does well enough with what he does. But his *Purple* falters because it largely neglects a persistent theme in Alice Walker's prize-winning novel. And because of that neglect, most of the characters come off flat, and what change and growth they do undergo seems unconvincing. Indeed, what Spielberg excludes is so central and decisive for Walker

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