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## THE TYRANNY OF TEXTS: CHRISTIAN WORSHIP AS PRE-LITERATE

A Here's another Golden Oldie. I came across it while scrolling through my library of previous Essays.

B This one was number 76 from February of 2004 – more than twenty years ago!

C I offer it here nearly unedited. It seems to me to extend and amplify my previous Essay.

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1 I write these words at 4:00 a.m. on a Wednesday morning. I've awakened at this unholy hour and can't get back to sleep, tossing and turning in body and in my fevered mind, recalling and reliving a spirited conversation of several hours ago at the monthly meeting of our parish Worship Committee, on which I sit as one among several other laypeople.

2 There wasn't a hint of anger or rancor in our debate as I remember it; In fact, our difference of opinion was remarkably good-humoured and even playful.

3 But I can remember my own passion as we addressed the issue of providing printed texts of the lectionary pericopes with the Sunday guide-to-worship.

4 As I remember the situation, I was pontificating (Me? Pontificating? "Far be it from my heart, the thought thereof." Shakespeare, Richard the Third, Act 1, Scene iii) about the problem and reminding the committee that Christian worship is essentially pre-literate.

5 I was arguing, against my well-loved pastor, that providing printed texts of the lessons each Sunday was not necessary. In fact, I was saying, it's counter-productive to provide printed texts of the lessons each Sunday. More than that, I was saying, it betrays our mandate as worship leaders to provide printed texts of the lessons each Sunday. You get the picture.

6 (Aren't you glad I'm not on your parish Worship Committee?)

7 I felt, in the moment, that my words were somewhat scattered and not very persuasive. In any event, I lost my argument: we'll continue to provide printed texts of all the lessons every Sunday for every worshipper, in my parish.

8 So I've resolved to set out my case in better shape at this ungodly hour, if only to assure I'm better armed when the issue rises again.

9 So. Here it is. The Tyranny of Texts. Why Christian Worship is Essentially, Inherently and Necessarily Pre-Literate. ( Some alternative sub-titles: Throw Away Those Printed Lections! Remove Those Bibles From the Pew Racks! Unplug That Electronic Overhead Projector!)

10 I hear you asking: What's wrong with providing worshipers with printed lections every week? With putting Bibles in the pew racks? With printing out the peoples' participation in prayers and litanies each Sunday? With beaming prayers and scripture texts from electronic projectors onto overhead screens? I'll tell you. Here's what's wrong. Three reasons.

11 The first argument is ECCLESIAL. When we provide printed texts in any form for worshipers to use, we're freezing out four populations of people who might regularly be worshiping among us: The blind. The aged with poor eyesight. The fully illiterate and the functionally illiterate. And little kids who haven't yet learned to read. It's as if we're sending the signal that we expect our worshiping assemblies to consist exclusively of literate, adult, able-bodied middle class elites. No others need apply.

12 Am I being too harsh? Too melodramatic? (Me? Melodramatic? Far be it from my heart, the thought thereof!) Discounting my passion and my melodrama, I nevertheless see it as a real risk. It's as if we're saying, "If you want to participate in worship here, you'll have to be able to read in English." I could never say that.

13 But, I hear you saying, Some people are more visually than aurally oriented. They learn and comprehend better through the eye than through the ear. What of them?

14 Yes, yes, yes. I've heard that argument. And I respect it. Perhaps for these folks we'd be compelled to provide a kind of black-market print-piece: Not simply the Day's scripture lessons, but also, while we're at it, the text of the Collect for the Day, an outline of the preacher's sermon, and the texts of the Prayers of the People, the Offertory prayer, the Eucharistic Prayer, and the Post-Communion Prayer. In large print. To be requested by a surreptitious whisper in an usher's ear. I'd actually allow that, as a compromise accommodation for the aurally challenged.

15 See, I'm not all that hard-nosed.

16 The second argument is SOCIOLOGICAL. When we insist on providing printed resources for every worshiper every Sunday – hymns perhaps excepted – we're sending a second unfortunate signal. We're saying, "This is going to be difficult, folks."

17 In the best of circumstances, Christian worship can be intimidating. Liturgical worship – and there isn't any other kind; all worship is liturgical. The only question is, "Is it good worship?" Or bad worship? Liturgical worship, I say, always needs education, interpretation, mystagogia.

18 And to place into a worshiper's hand a hymn book, and a psalm selection, and a set of scripture lessons, and a litany, and an itemization of parish announcements – all that is surely print over-kill. It's enough to terrorize the stoutest pieties.

19 It's worship leaders, after all – the pastor and assisting ministers and lectors – whom we can rightly expect to be the literate ones on a Sunday morning. They're the ones to handle the printed texts.

20 No one else in the worshipping assembly should need to read in order to participate fully. (Again, with hymns, and the compromise accommodation cited above, as possible exceptions.) All the rest of us outside the chancel should be asked simply to be engaged in what's going on in our midst.

21 Your public ministry as worshiper, during any public reading, is to help the Reader to read, by listening. To commit your fullest attention to what's happening. Not in private meditation with your personal Deity. Not attending to your subjective needs and desires. Not alone in your own world of worries. But instead to be fully engaged in a corporate, common, egalitarian, mutual ministry. Committed to the communal. To submit eyes and ears and all the senses to this moment's sacrifice of praise, to this moment's gift of grace. Without having to press your nose into a printed text to read.

22 Not reading yourself, that is, but helping the Reader to read by actually listening. It's the difference between a private experience and a corporate one.

23 And to beam texts onto overhead screens by electronic projectors is no better. It's worse. Not only are you expected to read those texts, disengaged from the Reader and from the moment, you're also by that expected to become a conspirator in your own electronic seduction.

24 Most of us have no awareness of how captive we've become to our technology, in so many areas of everyday life: Television, computers, cell phones, e-mail, Internet. I envision Christian worship as providing a refuge from all that: a respite, a retreat, a sanctuary from technology's excesses.

25 (Why do you suppose you get all misty-eyed at a Christmas Eve Candlelight Service? For some very good reasons. For once in your busy year, you're brought into the presence of "primary experience." Bread at last and not a stone.)

26 Which brings me to my final point: a LITURGICAL argument. When we insist on providing print resources – scripture lections, prayers, litanies – to every worshiper every Sunday, in the expectation that they'll be reading from those texts, we run the risk of appearing to support that liturgical sectarianism I have called word-reductionism.

27 Faithful readers of these Essays will recall that word-reductionism has been a major focus of my own almost-paranoid Great Crusade in these my declining years.

28 Word-reductionism, I contend, is that liturgical pathology – especially pernicious among Lutherans – that equates worship with words. Worship equals words. It implies that our work is done, in worship preparation and practice, when we have the words down right. Words printed. Words spoken. Words sung. Words prayed. Heaven knows these days, words projected onto looming overhead screens!

29 Don't get me wrong. I have a great respect for words. Even words in print. I wouldn't be communicating with you in this medium if I didn't love words. As I have argued before, nobody should be allowed to preach in a Christian church who does not love words. Who does not love even grammar!

30 But words aren't the whole story when it comes to worship. Christian worship is not just words; it's also action. Event. Occasion. Incident. Things happen in Christian worship. You stand. You sit. Kneel. Sing. Pray. Participate. Walk forward. To a Meal. At a Table. Eat. Drink. Digest. Metabolize.

31 Jesus did not say at the Supper: "Read this." or even "Say this." He said "Do this." That's an active verb.

32 To insist on printed resources for every worshiper every Sunday is to risk supporting a pernicious pathology that is ultimately anti-sacramental and anti-incarnational.

33 So. I've run out of gas. I'll leave my arguments there, and lay my hand upon my mouth. And my head upon my pillow.

34 And when, next Sunday, the usher at the church door smiles sweetly and presses those print pieces into my palm, I'll smile sweetly too. And not complain.

35 Me? Complain? Far be it from my heart, the thought thereof!

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