

Advent Cheer: the Carol Service as liturgy

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If its December, then, unless you live on a deserted island, you will hear Christmas *songs* on the radio. You may also hear some carols (a Christmas song, for example 'White Christmas' does not mention religion) which mix religion and the tradition of popular singing, and you might even hear the odd Christmas hymn (e.g. 'On Jordan's bank') which is distinguished from the carol by the fact that you can spot the fact that it was written by an expert and needs an organ to keep the tune going! If you are very lucky you may even hear a group of actual carol singers! But what about hearing carols in the liturgy? Or even having a liturgy of carols?

A carol service can be an opportunity to let people reflect on parts of the Christian tradition that are least appreciated today, or it can be a liturgical traffic jam: everyone wants to move but each in a different direction. There are two pit-falls to be negotiated: first, that it becomes a carol concert; and second, that it becomes a school event. If it is simply a concert – an opportunity for the choir or choirs to show off their stuff – then it is not really liturgy and an act of recollection of the mystery of the coming of the Christ. If it is just elaborate carols, Christmas motets, and a couple of popular pieces 'for everyone to join in', with a blessing tagged on, then it is most unlikely that it has created a space for prayer and reflection by the community. Yet, this is the most common form of carol service: the choir director creates a 'liturgy' determined by the musical abilities and tastes of the specialist singers. There may be a place for this, but it should not be confused with liturgically preparing for Christmas. The other pit-fall is that it is an assembly that is prepared by the school for the school and the only others directly involved are the parents participating as an admiring audience. This is an important part of the school's preparation for Christmas, but it will not involve the whole community as a liturgy in which they as adults can take part. When it is organised around the school the primary intention is to celebrate and communicate the memory of Christmas; when it is celebrated as an liturgy of the whole community this service can be a celebration of the Old

Covenant as leading to the coming of the Christ. Carol services in the form of 'Nine Lessons and Carols' were an invention of the early twentieth century, but in that form they give liturgical expression to a Christological theme as ancient as Mt 1:1-18: the history of Israel becomes fully comprehensible with the birth of Jesus. If the carols are located within this frame of the 'book of the generations' of Jesus the Christ (cf. Mt 1:1), then it can be a true liturgical event.

In an age when 'Christmas' is a time when many people scatter to every corner of the globe, the carol service also serves another purpose. A generation ago the idea of being 'at home for Christmas' seemed as 'natural' as apples falling from trees in autumn; today, Christmas is the mid-winter break when some of the most regular participants in the Eucharist throughout the year may be in the tropics or on the ski slopes: the carol service is often the last chance for the regular worshipping community to be together and specifically celebrate the Advent / Christmas season. In effect, the carol service becomes the community's actual Christmas celebration, because it is only part of the regular community that is there for Christmas Day along with visitors whose demeanour shows that they do not regularly join this community around the Eucharistic table.

Because this event is not an 'official' liturgy, it is one that can adopt many forms without difficulty becoming a vehicle for expressing the particular gifts and creativity of the community. For example, in communities where there is a permanent deacon, this is one of the Christmas events over which he can preside.

One other aspect of this liturgy should not be forgotten. Many people who find the Eucharist threatening or off-putting can find this acceptable because it is a 'cultural' part of Christmas. Such visitors can become fully part of this assembly in a way they might never feel comfortable or participant at the Eucharist, and if the liturgy has a narrative structure they hear the story of Christmas in a convenient form. Moreover, because the Eucharist can often be the marker of divisions among Christians, indeed can often deepen a lack of sympathy with Catholic Christians among those who feel excluded by Catholic

regulations on inter-communion, such liturgies as this can have an ecumenical value: here is one of those few liturgies that all can share fully.

A Theology for a Carol Liturgy

‘But when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!”’ (Gal 4: 4-6). This line from Paul captures a way of looking at the mystery of the Christ with which we are only vaguely familiar: the Christ came at the end of a long providential preparation that reached back into the earliest history of humanity. This is the theme of the genealogies in Mt and Lk, and the theology behind the line in the creed: ‘God ... the Holy Spirit ... who has spoken through the prophets.’ Our belief is that the Christ brings us to a perfect relationship with the Father and that that coming has been prepared by the Spirit. In a myriad of ways the world was silently prepared by the Spirit so as to be ready to welcome the Lord when at last he came. Likewise, it is our faith that the Spirit is silently preparing minds and hearts today to welcome the Christ who is the fullness of all human desires for the good. The Christ is not presented in this theology as standing as the alternative to our human existence, but rather the perfect expression of all that is honourable, just, pure, lovely, gracious, excellent, and worthy of praise (cf. Phil 4:8). In him all desires for the good and the holy are fulfilled, we see our God made visible and are caught up in the love of the God we cannot see.

Finding Carols

Every hymnbook has a selection of carols, but this is often quite limited as the aim of most hymnbooks is to supply that slightly distinct item: the Advent or Christmas *hymn*. One of the best collections of *carols* available is *The New Oxford Book of Carols*, edited by Hugh Keyte and Andrew Parrott (Oxford 1992, paperback 1998) – by the way, there is also a ‘shorter’ version available, but this is of much less value as a quarry!

Selecting Readings

There is no end to the various ways that readings can be selected for this: your favourites, the liturgy group's favourites, any of the sequences of readings that can be found in the lectionary. And, of course, there are well-tried formulae like that, widely used by Anglicans, which is based on selection made for King's College, Cambridge. It has a lot to recommend it, here are its selection: (1) Gen 3:8-15; (2) Gen 22:15-18; (3) Isa 9:2-7; (4) Isa 11:1-9; or Micah 5:2-5; (5) Lk 1:26-35 and 38; or Isa 60:1-6 and 19; (6) Mt 1:18-23; or Lk 2:1-7; (7) Lk 2:8-16; (8) Mt 2:1-11; (9) Jn 1:1-14. This selection could be called 'the history of salvation' approach to Christology with a very definite classic theological dynamic beginning with the promise made in the moment of judgement after the sin of Adam and Eve – what Catholic theologians referred to as the *protoevangelium* – and ending with the Joannine prologue. It has two less obvious dynamics as well: to use all the core bits of the narrative that an audience (e.g. on the radio) who might have only a sketchy knowledge of the Christian narrative could associate with; and secondly, to make sure that their narrative seemed consistent: there is a quite harmonisation of Mt and Lk so that 'curiosity' questions are not raised.

Whatever readings are chosen there are three factors to bear in mind. First, once you have made a selection, then you have committed yourself to a particular theology of the Christ-event in exactly the same way that Mt and Lk have different theologies of the event due to the way that they use particular quotations and themes from the Old Testament. Every selection carries an inherent theology. Hence you have to think of the overall picture you are creating rather than just picking 'all our favourite bits.' When I have done this with liturgy groups – helping them to pick the nine readings – it has either been a learning experience *par excellence* on how the Church related to its memory or has shown that the group had not the slightest clue as to why we read 'all that stuff'! So selecting the readings can be a valuable part of Advent preparation. A useful trick is to start with the final reading and then select the others in so far as they help to bring a deeper understanding to it. Second, one has to arrive at the Christmas narrative as laid out in the gospels, and this entails some use of the familiar Bethlehem scenes. Not to have such

pieces read would not accord with the tone of the season. This implies that no matter what large christological picture one might want to present, it will never be clear-cut or neat: this is just as well as the mystery of the Christ is always greater than the frameworks in which we try to present it. Third, stick with the canonical scriptures. Someone will always suggest some ‘meaningful’ reading that could be included – but this questing after ‘relevance’ is to be resisted for four reasons. (1) This is the time in the Church’s year where we especially reflect on the Old Testament: there is such a wealth of material there for reflection, that there can hardly be said to be a shortage of suitable passages. (2) The whole Advent liturgy is heavily dependent on the Old Testament for its lectionary and re-use of that lectionary here adds to a more general appreciation of the whole season. (3) In a carol service there is already an heavy emotional and nostalgic input in the carols, part of the purpose of reading from a canon is to avoid a concentration on ‘what is meaningful to me’: a use of what is less ‘attractive’ but appropriate can extend the imagination of the faithful and challenge them in a way that ‘the meaningful’ rarely achieves. (4) Lastly, and most important of all, it was in reflecting on ‘the scriptures’ (which we now call the ‘Old Testament’) that the Christian community from the very beginning made sense of the mystery of the Christ-event as we can witness in the use made of quotations from the prophets in the infancy narratives in Mt and Lk. We, each Advent, are engaged in this very process: we seek to make sense of what we know of Jesus through the reflection on the Old Testament. Only when we reflect on the appropriate passages of the Old Testament can we make sense of what is written in the earliest Christian accounts (what we refer to as the New Testament) and thus reflect on the great Prophet, the Anointed One of the Lord.

No matter what choice of readings is put forth, someone will object that their favourite is omitted (usually a reading with verses also found in Handel’s *Messiah*): such protestors can be invited to be part of the liturgy group for next year. Lastly, this is a very wordy service, but is it also one that can have a very celebratory tone due to holly and lanterns and jolly carols: it is not an event that needs a homiletic or catechetical input ‘explaining’ the readings or suggesting why they were chosen to fit a theme. The readings are best left to be their own communication. Likewise, complex histories of the carols or singing

instructions by the conductor are out of place as they fragment the flow of the liturgy and smack of the master-class. All such instructions can be put on a service sheet. Exegetical 'explanations' can just add words without extra enlightenment and cloud a very simple sense of celebration with the deadly spectre of the classroom. If you want to do catechesis on this, then do it in a proper class environment (perhaps making such a group the group that prepare the carol service) not here. It is also best to avoid this as a 'good advertising moment' for even the best causes such as announcing when the penitential service is going to take place or the times of Christmas Masses: such info can be appended to the service sheet. Information of that sort makes this seem less than a simple celebration of Advent/Christmas joy and more like a sprat to catch a salmon: 'to get people to hear that they should be going to church more often.' People may need to hear this message, but in a media-savvy environment, to suggest it at this service is counter-productive. If people are to be enticed back to celebrating with the community, then this is more likely to be achieved by making them feel welcomed, not being under pressure, and somehow more aware of the mystery that draws humanity to itself.