

# A Meditation on the Initial Greeting of Eucharistic Prayer

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Blessed be God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And blessed be his kingdom, now and forever. Amen

I don't know whether this will work or not work, be of interest or not be of interest. I'm starting a series of sermons which will talk about the content of our worship. Episcopalians habitually talk about the Bible and how much they don't know about it. They talk less frequently about how much they don't know about what they tend to do more often than read the Bible, which is use the Book of Common Prayer. I sometimes wonder if familiarity breeds the assumption of understanding. Every Sunday, week after week, year after year, Episcopalians engage in this largely undiscussed and unanalyzed process we call public worship according to the Book of Common Prayer. It might pay to pay some attention to why the elements of these experiences of public worship are what they are and are in the order they are in.

The first point I want to make about Episcopalian worship: the structure is rational. Every element in the service was included in order to move us toward God by means of Christ, and to move us in an orderly, rational, universally applicable way suitable for many different kinds of people in highly varied circumstances. Each element of the service builds on the preceding one and points toward the subsequent one. One may not agree with the postulates behind the ordering of elements, but it's a rational structure. You'll have to take my word for it now, but by the time I'm done I hope the argument will be sustained. In the meantime, keep the idea in mind and look for the evidence.

The service we use on Sunday morning is divided into a prologue followed by two parts of the service proper. The dividing line between the two parts

comes at what's called The Offertory, which is when people bring the bread and wine from the back of the church to the front. The first part of the service is built around a series of readings from the Bible and our varied responses to them. The second part of the service is built around an offering of bread and wine, its acceptance by God, and his return of it to us. The prologue gets us ready for the whole process of worship.

I want to talk about the first element of the prologue today, first things first. We start out – and I'm going to ignore the musical part of the service, not because it's gingerbread, it's not, but because what it really does is heighten and deepen the content of the rest of the service. So the service has its structural integrity whether or not the music is there. To understand the structure we don't have to talk about hymns.

So, music aside, the service begins with what's called "The Greeting." One of the reasons for this discussion of worship is, by the way, to give you some technical language. Episcopalians cannot, I'm a bit sorry to say, get along without technical language. It's just that our worship process is, in the true sense of the word, esoteric. It's not the kind of thing you do every day in the ordinary course of fixing breakfast, making the beds, or writing grants. You don't make the beds saying, "Blessed be God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit." You don't research your grants saying, "And blessed be his kingdom, now and forever." Although it might not be a bad idea on occasion. Public communal worship is a special realm of experience dealing with some unique concepts and uncommon actions.

So our worship is esoteric. That means it requires a technical language to talk about it just as any other technical field does: mathematics, chemistry, English literature, music, what have you. Even forestry, or sewing or carpet cleaning would, I imagine, each have its technical language. Worship is the same way. So to understand worship it's helpful to understand at least something of its technical language. What's deceptive about the technical language of worship is the same thing which is deceptive about the language of ordinary Christian theology: you take ordinary words and make them mean something they don't ordinarily mean. At least we make them mean something more than they ordinarily mean. And that gets very confusing. When, for instance, we use the word "son," in our worship does it mean some metaphoric, trans-historical reality, "son of God," or does it mean the everyday biological and social understandings of the word? This problem bedevils the use of religious language. Anyone who thinks about the structures of Christian belief must deal with this question of strained language. And our liturgy is full of it.

So the first part of the service is called "The Greeting." You see, a

perfectly ordinary term except that it has that definite article in front of it which tips us off that this ordinary term is not meant in an ordinary way. This is not a greeting, not just any old greeting, this is “The Greeting.” So I begin, “Blessed be God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.” And then all of you respond, “And blessed be his kingdom, now and forever, Amen.” There are other forms of the greeting, this just happens to be the one we use during this season of the church year. But what is common to all forms of The Greeting? Structurally common?

*Answer #1:* You begin and we respond.

Yeah, it’s a dialogue. Can anyone think of a greeting which isn’t inherently dialogic?

*Answer #2:* “Hello?”

Yes, except you hardly ever say it to an empty room. To use “hello” requires another presence besides oneself. So the key thing in The Greeting is the recognition of presence, the recognition of the presence of the other. Now the other is present here, in this worship, in at least two forms. It’s present in a human form, and also in a – I don’t want to say unhuman – I want to say supra-human form. What’s important is that the nature of presence is the same in both cases, whether it’s human or more than human. The presences we experience at the beginning of the Eucharist, both of God and of each other, share this one characteristic: they are something other than ourselves. Therefore, to recognize the nature of the experience we are about to enter into we need to recognize the presence of something other than ourselves, be it human or not. That’s essentially the function of the greeting, to establish the nature of the community which is gathered here. It is a community made of separate selves, of separate centers of consciousness, awareness, action, life. Therefore it requires a dialogue if its reality is to be recognized and expressed.

So the purpose of the greeting is to remind us, gently and subtly, of whom we are and what’s present here, that is a community of separate selves, called out of separateness into unity, but in that unity not surrendering their uniqueness, their individuality. That’s why The Greeting has that dialogic structure. God works with communities of selves, not with a mass of undifferentiated humanity. Therefore, before we worship God, that with which God works has to acknowledge the presence of diversity, seeking unity in its relation with God.

Now we move from structure to content. In this case, we say, “Blessed be God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.” Now when you bless something what are you doing to it?

*Answer:* You’re setting it aside.

Yeah, you're separating it for some special purpose or use. Fundamentally, blessing is a form of identification, but it is an identification of purpose rather than substance. For instance, when you bless a candlestick or cross they are being set aside for a special purpose. Forever after, this object and its assigned purpose are to be associated with each other. Now the word "blessing" goes one step farther than that because it's not just set aside for any old purpose one can imagine, but for a specialized purpose which has something to do with God or, in some cases, with the depths of human existence, with that which really counts and is really important. To bless something in that technical sense is usually thought of as establishing a means of communication. I bless a cross, that cross is to be part of our means of communication with God. It will speak to us of who God is and we will look to it with an expectation that it will so speak to us.

So, blessing points to communication, to setting aside for a special purpose, to setting aside for a special purpose which has to do, somehow, with the roots of things, with the presence of the invisible in the visible, of God's love in the material world.

Now, for Christians, of course, the root of things is God. So when we say, "Blessed be God," it's recognizing God's special purpose in relation to us and that special purpose is, and I realize I'm using another technical term here, our salvation. "Blessed be God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit." A recognition of God's presence, a recognition of that presence as intending our salvation and by the way, the recognition that God isn't simple – Father, Son and Holy Spirit form an inner complexity of divine being. Whatever or whoever that God is who we are recognize in worship, She is a complex reality.

Now, a footnote. I don't particularly like the doctrine of the Trinity. I just haven't found anything better to take it's place. But it is a mistake to think that this sort of Trinitarian language, Father, Son and Spirit, used in the greeting is of the essence of the definition of God. Trinitarian ideas are doctrines, created by human beings to express as profoundly as they can, their understanding of the nature of God. The doctrine of the Trinity is not God, it is a statement about God, and there is a world of difference. In this case, its use reminds us is that the process upon which we are embarking is one of relation to a complex reality and, therefore, what comes out of the process of worship may not be simple. In fact, it probably won't be.

That lack of simplicity, that complexity, is necessary for two reasons. The first one is the complex inner nature of God himself, herself, itself, however you want to put it. God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The complexity is also necessary because otherwise the concept of God is not adequate for

its purpose of relation to a complex creation. Given the location of this ministry, acknowledging of the complexity of creation shouldn't be much of a problem. It is for some, but not here.

*Response:* Can we go back to the sentence construct for a minute? My English teacher mother would say, "Turn the sentence around, and put the subject and verb in the right order, and it then becomes, 'Father, Son and Holy Spirit be blessed'". So that implies not an acknowledgment of the fact that they are blessed, but it implies an action on the part of us in blessing The Father, Son or Holy Spirit. So then by what authority or power do we have the ability to bless the Father, Son and Holy Spirit?

*Question:* Isn't that where we're setting apart a divine mystery?

Yes, but I think it goes one step farther than that. That is, the relation between God and ourselves is like the greeting, it's dialogic. God can't fulfil his function in relation to us unless we seek that fulfillment. Consequently, the setting aside of God, our movement toward God, our blessing of God is an essential beginning to the whole process of worship, which is the symbolic presentation of our, and I might say the rest of the world's, relation to God in the first place. So that in a quite literal sense, (And you must realize that not all my brothers and sisters who stand in front of congregations and wear funny cloths would agree with me on this point. This is strictly Jon Goman.) we do bless God in the sense of setting him aside for the performance of a specific purpose.

I believe that we actually do bless God in the sense of bestowing a gift on God, and the gift we human beings give to God is allowing God to fulfil his purpose in us. I would illustrate this by asking how many of you have ever had to deal with a person who obviously needed help but wasn't about to accept it? They are very irritating to deal with. The same thing is true here. In order for God to fulfil his saving purposes, the human recognition of those purposes is, if not essential, at least helpful. God may love us no matter what we do. But just as ordinary human love can be more or less effective depending on whether it is reciprocated or not, I'd argue that divine love, God's love that moves us toward the second half of this dialogic statement, that about the Kingdom of Heaven, becomes more effective among us if it is recognized, sought, and shared. Such recognition, seeking and sharing is our blessing of God. It is entirely appropriate that we acknowledge this aspect of our relation to the divine at the beginning of our worship.

Now, there is another reason that "Blessed be God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit" is in the order it's in. It may not be good English, but it's darn good theology. The unity of God comes first. There is only one God. That's recognized first. Any analysis of the interior nature of that one

God – everything behind the colon – is second. It is a common mistake in Christianity to act as if we have the one God, God, and then, in addition to that, you have the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. My children used to have a particularly annoying toy, a sort of silly putty you could throw into the ceiling and it would stick there.

*Response:* It's still being sold.

Oh, dear. Well, the theological error one needs to guard against is thinking that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are like the silly putty, just thrown against the outside of God where they stick like superficial additions. But that's not the point. Father, Son and Spirit are not entities in and of themselves. They are a descriptive analysis of the nature of the one God. That's another reason why the one God as a unity is named first and the descriptive analysis of the elements of that unity comes second. In other words, in a normal conversation that follows a greeting, I first say hello, and then I build on the recognition of the other with a more complex conversation. In a very simple way, that's what's going on here. First, we recognize the presence of that which we are addressing, "Blessed be God." Then we have an analytical description of which God we are addressing. It's not the god money; it's not the god power; it's not success; it's the God who is described in the Christian theological tradition as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the one whose purpose is to bring us to the kingdom.

So, this Trinitarian language is language of identity, it defines to whom we are speaking. The first sentence tells us to whom we are speaking and tells us something about our relationship, one of blessing, with that entity to whom we speak.

Now, I'd better move on to the second sentence or you will all accuse me of being a German theologian in disguise. The second part of the dialogue names at the beginning of the service that which we seek to glimpse more fully by its end. In other words, where we are going. The Greeting not only identifies to whom we are speaking, he who is present, but also something about where the conversation is aimed. By the way, you can analyze any Christian worship service in terms of who is speaking to whom, and when; it's all conversational. But the objective of the Eucharistic conversation is to glimpse of the Kingdom of God, to the renewal of our hope, the strengthening of our resolve, the informing of our minds, and the affirming of the bonds of love. In other words, whatever the goal is of this whole long drawn-out complex process of Christian life as mirrored in our worship, that which we hope for is the eventual result of the recognition of God's presence which takes place in the first sentence of the dialog. That's the Kingdom and that's where we are going. If our worship does what it is supposed to

do, you will, by the time the service is finished, have been reminded of different and varied aspects of the kingdom, and your relation to that kingdom will have been strengthened, confirmed, deepened. At the beginning of our journey we recognize, we acknowledge, the end of it.

That's important in ordinary conversation also. I've had conversations with people that wandered all over without any particular order or structure. I've even been accused of it myself, although I can't understand why. I keep on telling people that if you listen to me long enough I always get some place. Well, that's what abstract randoms do, we always go around in big circles.<sup>1</sup>

*Response:* Circles?

Yes, circles, or ellipses, or even spheroids, my conversation is the linguistic equivalent of the formula describing the surface of a spheroid.

*Response:* Just say a closed polygon.

We can discuss afterwards whether the personality involved is polygonal or not.

Now the point to all this is that at the beginning we remind ourselves of our goal – with the intent that our awareness of that goal shapes our relationship to the different parts of the service as we move through them. “Blessed be God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And blessed be his kingdom, now and forever.” Everything else that we experience in the service we need to seek to understand as a step toward some kind of increased vision of, understanding of, participation in the kingdom.

OK. I think that's enough about the Greeting. Probably more than enough. At least I hope it will never be a simple throw-away part of the service again.

*Response:* Before you go on, I think you made a good argument for why “be” is in the initial statement, “blessed be.” But I'm waiting to hear the argument why it isn't “is” in the second part: “Blessed is his kingdom . . .” The use of the word “be” implies action on our part, the word “is” is declarative, a statement. I think I understand the first one, why it's “be” but not the second.

Try that again from another angle?

*Answer #1:* Blessed be God. Turn it around and it makes sense. “God be blessed.” It's a declarative statement. Who's doing the blessing? We are. So you take the second one, do the same thing and it comes out “His kingdom be blessed.” Blessed by us. So I have a bit more problem with us blessing the kingdom.

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<sup>1</sup>If you have no taste for the ridiculous, please ignore the next exchange.

You mean with us setting the kingdom aside for a special purpose since it has already been set aside by God?

*Response:* Exactly, I appreciate the relationship with God. I'm not sure we can use the same piece with the kingdom. But you might be able to make it work by saying "Blessed is his kingdom, now and forever," which is a declarative statement and not one in which we are bestowing our blessing on the kingdom.

Interesting. I don't have an immediate response to that. I don't have an answer.

*Response:* I think it's reverential. Blessed be God. It speaks of our reverence and that we should reverence the Kingdom as well.

*Response:* I guess I go back to your comment about setting aside, Jon, in making it special. I'm translating now. This sets aside this kingdom, from that of Monaco, from England, from Canada. This sets aside, it's special.

Yes, that's right. Again, it's a matter of identity. The Greeting is concerned with identity. We want to say who the other is who is present to us at the beginning of this conversation. And what's special about Him and this situation.

Now, one of the odd things about the Kingdom of God is that it, well, in the first place we use impossible language to talk about it. Kingdom is not a very lively term for most of us. We don't for the most part, live in kingdoms. It's an archaic term which has a slight flavor of historical pedantry about it. But it's traditional, so the Episcopalians aren't going to easily let go of it. And I'm not sure they should, because God's kingdom, whatever it is, has this characteristic: it is both realized and unrealized at the same time. We experience the reality of the kingdom, but we do not experience its completion or fullness. To bless God's kingdom means to establish ourselves in relation to something real and present to us, but present only in fits and starts, present in part.

Now, that's not too strange, because that's how we're present to each other. In relationships we believe to be worth pursuing, we seek a deepened sense of presence with each other. And that is precisely the relationship The Greeting asserts we should have with the Kingdom of God. It's present in fits and starts, so it's not fully realized. It's not declarative yet, completely, it's not "is" yet. But it's not something we merely look to experience at some time in the future. The reality of the Kingdom is something which is experienced in ordinary human life. The fullness of it's beauty is sadly marred by the sin and pain of this world. In the Eucharist, through the imperfection of our own offerings, our own understanding of scripture, our own prayer, we seek to discover our place in the Kingdom of God. The

recognition of that experience of the Kingdom is something the church exists to foster.

Now, that is enough on that. Anything else can be saved for the coffee hour. I'm not going to go through the next item in the service, The Collect for Purity. But I want to tell you one story about it, about the "Almighty God to you all hearts are open . . ." Now that's a very old prayer. We can trace it back to the late eighth century, so it's older than anyone in this room. The story, and maybe its apocryphal and maybe it's not, is that it was written by the head court scholar at the court of Charlemagne, a man named Alcuin. He was an Englishman from York, by the way, and so a proto-Anglican. Northern England had the best educational system in Europe in those days and so Charlemagne, who always wanted the best, engaged in a little academic head-hunting and got this character, Alcuin, who was out of the top drawer, to come over to Aachen from England to be his court scholar. Alcuin presided over the court school which was trying to de-barbarize the sons of the Frankish nobles – talk about unruly students. None of my LBCC folks spend three or four hours a day practicing cuts with a broadsword.

Charlemagne was a good politician and knew how to use the appearance of piety for political ends. It happens in our history also. So he decides, for largely political and prestige reasons, to get himself crowned Holy Roman Emperor by the Pope in Rome on Christmas Day of 800 AD. And there was all sorts of pious language surrounding this event in clouds of rhetoric. So Alcuin was asked to write a prayer for the occasion, and this, the story says, was the prayer he wrote. "Almighty God, to you all hearts are open . . ." even yours, Charlemagne. "... all desires known . . ." So we know what you are really after here. "... and from you no secrets are hid . . ." Even the secret that you, Charlemagne, aren't doing this out of a pure sense of devotion, thank you. It then goes on, "cleanse the thoughts of our hearts . . ." In other words, carry us beyond all this political stuff, "... by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you . . ." rather than that imperfect love which loves political power, prestige, the recognition which comes with being crowned Holy Roman Emperor by the Pope. Especially on Christmas Day, come on now, talk about a media event.

In that way it's a very good prayer because it says start from where you are, which is a good thing to say at the beginning of worship, and then go on, not to deny who you are, but to grow from there.

So that's a little preview of what can be done with that second prayer but, I will leave more until next time – if we decided to continue this conversation.