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Dear Friends,

Why we are out of step The service of Morning Prayer, once the staple of Episcopal Sunday worship, has fallen into disfavor with most of our church since the institution of our current Prayer Book in 1979. Most congregations now offer the Rite II Eucharist as their principal Sunday morning service just about every week. Perhaps because I am of the generation that grew up before this shift, and remember the power of Morning Prayer to shape attitudes and identity, I view this change with regret. When I came to St. Elizabeth's, I continued the schedule which was current when I arrived, with Sunday mornings basically alternating between Morning Prayer and the Eucharist, with the Eucharist always being used on principal feasts. As St. Paul would say, I deliver to you what I also received.

The welcome and introduction Canticles, "little songs," are principal elements of Morning Prayer. They come right after the Confession and Absolution (once we've cleaned up we can come in and join the party) and set a tone of welcome and invitation, (hence "Invitatory" canticles) for all that follows. We rotate through three (which go by Latin titles derived from their opening phrases), but for most of the year we use either the Venite or the Jubilate.

O come, all ye faithful The Venite ("O come, let us sing unto the Lord") is specifically a welcome and introduction to worship. Perhaps you recognize the title from the Latin refrain of the Christmas carol, "O come, all ye faithful": "Venite adoremus" (O come, let us adore [him]). The Venite is to Morning Prayer what "O come, all ye faithful" is to Christmas Eve. The canticle continues to make the case for worship and praise: God made all that we see and know, God made us, and we are God's people. The text reminds us that as beauty and awesome grandeur characterize God, when we come before God it is entirely suitable to do our best to offer corresponding excellence: "O worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness; let the whole earth stand in awe of him." Literally and metaphorically, we dress up to come before God, and we come to offer, from our hearts, thanks and praise.

Worship offers the opportunity to experience here and now something of the glory and power of God, an idea which reached its height (often literally) in the twelfth through the fifteenth centuries

when throughout the Christian world rulers and peoples diverted a large percentage of their resources—material and intellectual—to creating spaces and experiences which would convey in earthly terms something of the majesty, grandeur, and even awe-inspiring glory of God. Simply talking about the wonder which God inspires was thought to be insufficient—they sought to evoke something like the actual experience of “coming into his courts” to be in the presence of God.

If we are dazzled by walking into the grand cathedrals of Europe from this era, imagine the experience of people who lived in villages made up almost entirely of one or two room huts constructed of wattle and daub which were occasionally shared with the family’s livestock. The scale and beauty of the architecture, the music written especially to be offered in those highly resonate stone spaces, the windows filled with color and images, the candles, incense, and elaborate vestments and processions—all of these were to evoke a sense of the majesty and grandeur of God. And they were reminders that “real” life was not what they experienced day in and day out, but this manner of being which transcended all that they normally knew.

For us the gap between our daily circumstances and where and how we worship is not so great. Perhaps for us it is more the community than the building which represents for us the Kingdom of Heaven—a place where three and four generations sing, talk, eat, and often laugh together, a place where we all try to be on our best behavior, and where those who find other places challenging—work, school, or even home—may find peace, welcome, security, respect, and even honor. We build our own grand “cathedral,” but we just use different materials from those wonderful medieval masons and stone carvers, carpenters, sculptors, roofers, glazers, and textile workers.

Be joyful... The second option for the Invitatory Cantic is the “Jubilare Deo” “O be joyful in the Lord”. “Serve the Lord with gladness,” the text continues, “and come before his presence with a song.” Consider the irony of the contrast between the literal meaning of these words and the mood, and energy level, with which they are often sung. Somber sobriety and decorous deference are far from what the text suggests. The assumption seems to be that when we are fully aware of the blessings we receive from God (“For the Lord is gracious; his mercy is everlasting”), our response will be spontaneous joy and delight. The next time this appears in our liturgy, do what you can for your facial expression, posture, and the energy of your participation not only to reflect, but to embody, the meaning of the text.

...but don’t fake it Consider whom you might want to “serve with gladness.” What would your boss, your supervisor, or your senior partner have to do and be so that your “service” would be a joy and not a burden, and that your smiles would be genuine, and not the face you felt obliged to put on to please those who had authority over you? Before the service begins—if you arrive early or if you are making your way in at the last minute—quickly review the blessings, small and large, of your life, especially those of the last week. If we come into his gates with thanksgiving, being joyful will be entirely natural and not artificial at all.

Both the Venite and the Jubilate are strong about the difference between God and us. God is our “maker”; “he is the Lord our God, and we are the people of his pasture and the sheep of his hand.” That it is not our pasture may sound like an obvious point, but think how often we say “my” house, or “my” career, or “my” children/family, or even “my” church. One principle of Anglican liturgy is that what we say over and over shapes what we both think and believe, whether we are aware of it or not. Consequently, consciously choosing what we say is how we shape whom we want to be. As you use possessive pronouns through the week, let your inner voice remind you that all of these come, one way or another, from God.

It's not a sheep cooperative The Jubilate makes the point, “be ye sure that the Lord he is God, it is he that hath made us and not we ourselves.” And, echoing the Venite, the verse concludes, “we are his people and the sheep of his pasture.”

It seems to me that one of the principal challenges of our age is to resist the urge to view the world as a neutral, blank slate on which we may do what we choose. While we might not actually claim to own the earth, we often act and talk as if we did. The Invitatory Canticles remind us that the earth is the Lord's—not ours, not “nature's”—and if we would prosper here, we would structure our lives to be more coherent with God's will for ourselves and our relations with others.

One sad irony of our recent history in the Episcopal Church is that while we (arguably with good intent) make more and more public statements about environmental politics and policies, the Church has, at the same time, by in effect removing Morning Prayer from Sunday usage, removed from common consciousness some of the strongest environmental images in our tradition. If we grow up from our earliest childhood regularly hearing, saying, or chanting, “the sea is his for he made it, and his hands prepared the dry land,” then by the time we are adults, such ideas are woven into our consciousness much more deeply than any position based solely on intellectual argument.

Playing from our strengths There is a place for politics, policy statements, and speeches, and God can certainly work through those media and the people who use them. But the Church has different resources and a different style. Giving up what we are good at for the sake of imitating the government, the press, or a political or social movement is to yield our very strong resources for the sake of tools which are less effective and with which we are less adept. The Invitatory Canticles, regularly done, can powerfully shape our attitudes and perspectives.

The Venite and Jubilate also contain some of the clearest and strongest teachings about our place in the universe. Following Jewish and Christian tradition (and both the Venite and the Jubilate come from Psalms, sacred texts of the pre-Christian Jewish tradition), these two Invitatory Canticles remind us that peace, security, and joy are to be found not through the pursuit of independent agendas, but through seeking to know and follow the will of God: “He is the Lord our God” and “Be ye sure that the Lord he is God.”

Thinking for ourselves While we might like to think that we can be independent thinkers and actors, we will always be serving something. We might be tempted to base our security on our families, or on our careers and professional abilities, on our standing in our own eyes or, even more precariously, in the eyes of others. More abstractly, we might base our world view on an ideology—we might be liberals, conservatives, libertarians, humanists, or disciples of some other collection of assumptions and principles which offer a lens through which to view the world and our place in it. Whatever it is that we look to for a sense of security and identity, that is our functional Lord and God.

And the Jubilate asserts, Be ye sure, which is liturgical English for something like, “Hey, you, listen up and don't miss this, because if you don't get this, nothing else is going to work” Be ye sure that the Lord is God [because] God is the one that made us—it's not like we made ourselves. We can certainly choose to live as if we had made ourselves, but, that being a false premise, it is unlikely to lead us to good results. As Jesus observes, the foundation you choose will determine the stability of what you build on it, especially when hard times come.

The third way Our Prayer Book has a third canticle especially suited for the Easter season, The Pascha Nostrum. Unlike the Jubilate and the Venite, the Pascha Nostrum comes entirely from the New Testament, being excerpts from three of St. Paul's Epistles.

While the Venite and Jubilate focus on God the Father, the Pascha Nostrum begins each of its three sections with the word "Christ." The text begins with an emotionally complex line: "Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us." We recall in the Exodus story, immediately prior to their escape from Egypt, each Hebrew home sacrificed a lamb and put its blood on the lintels of the door as a sign to the angel of death to "pass over" that house and move on to exact from the Egyptians the terrible penalty God visited on those who held and abused his people as slaves.

Christians from the earliest days understood Jesus' death on the cross as having a strong resonance with that same action. Jesus offered his own blood, rather than that of a lamb, to become the medium by which those who partook of it would escape the old life of slavery and oppression so that they might make their way to the promised land of life with God and without all that encumbers us here.

While the theology of this image is compelling, the idea that our sins, or our nature, were the cause of Jesus' death is sobering. My first response to hearing that someone had to be sacrificed on my behalf is not exactly, "therefore let us keep the feast."

But the text moves on to the happy consequences, not just for us but for Jesus as well. "Christ being raised from the dead dieth no more," begins the second section. As we all do, Jesus went through his death, but, that being over, he need never make that journey again. That he lives and need never face death again, we can genuinely celebrate.

The text concludes harkening back to the very beginning of the Biblical story. Humanity, symbolized by Adam, spoiled the harmony between us, God, and all of creation by turning away from God and choosing to prioritize independence over obedience. Jesus reversed the consequences of that choice as it were by hitting the replay button, going back to a garden (Gethsemane, this time, not Eden) and choosing this time obedience despite fears and doubts.

In his obedience, both by action and example (and maybe his example is easier at first for us to understand and accept), Jesus sets a new course for humanity, not following Adam's cycle of rebellion, consequences, despair, and death, but defining a new pattern of obedience, transient trial, and final vindication and deliverance. Since by man, Adam, came death, by man, Jesus, came also the resurrection of the dead. Just by Adam's work we all end up dead, so by the work of Jesus we all end up beyond the reach of death. By the time we have made it through that complex sequence, the final declaration, "Alleluia" has some genuine feeling and meaning.

The other two canticles We regularly include two other canticles in Morning Prayer, The Magnificat and the Nunc Dimittis. The Magnificat is an eloquent testimony to God's deep longing for justice and, by extension, the thoughtful and good use of the resources God gives to us. It is worth noting that through the Magnificat we claim Mary as a principal teacher and prophet in our tradition.

In the Nunc Dimittis, Simeon, an old man, makes peace with the finitude of mortal life. His song is a powerful and eloquent example of how we might face the end of our own lives as our own powers and abilities fade away. Imagine approaching death with deep hope, thanksgiving, and peace, rather than with anxiety, fear, and a desperate holding on to a failing body and a diminishing

consciousness. Simeon gives us an example of that attitude each time we sing the Nunc Dimittis, and thereby Morning Prayer regularly addresses one of our deepest needs.

The basic sequence Much of our history with God, be it personal, national, or biblical, can be summed up in the fairly simple sequence: God calls us, we respond, then we decide we know better, bad things happen, we blame God for the consequences of our choices, we eventually figure out that we were the problem, not God, and we return to God. And then we repeat the sequence.

If we were to think of our distress as something like a particularly virulent and recurring infection—just when we think it’s gone, it returns—then the regular application of the Invitatory Canticles is something like a course of antibiotics. Anglican liturgies, like antibiotics, work best when they are regularly taken. Take antibiotics sporadically, or stop as soon as obvious symptoms disappear, and their effectiveness is significantly reduced—we can blame the drug, but the real issue is that we did not use it as it was designed to be used.

Morning Prayer functions more effectively as an exercise routine than as a source of answers to a set of questions. Regularly used, it has great value; admired from afar, dipped into on rare occasion, consulted in times of stress, scorned, or just ignored, it has considerably less impact. Morning Prayer is a great gift from our tradition. May you share in it, and its blessings, on a regular basis.

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