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Dear Friends,

**Previously, in *The Tower*...**Last month I reflected on aspects of the service of Morning Prayer, especially the canticles, or “little songs,” which make up such a large part of that liturgy. We considered the Venite, the Jubilate, the Pascha Nostrum, and went on to look briefly at the Magnificat and the Nunc Dimittis.

Now for something completely different.

Well, maybe not completely, but a little different. I invite you to consider a few exchanges which you could probably make from memory, the dialogue between the Celebrant and the congregation that comes right at the beginning of the Prayer of Consecration in the service of Holy Communion.

The first half of the Communion service centers on words and the Word. It contains the Bible readings, sermon, creed, prayers, confession, and the proclamation and exchange of the peace.

**The dialogue** When we shift to the Great Thanksgiving, we begin with a dialogue between the Celebrant and the congregation. The exchange is so familiar that it is tempting to zip right through it in order to get to what might seem to be the more substantial material that follows. But there may be more to this exchange than is immediately obvious.

**The Lord be with you.** The Celebrant begins by addressing the people, “The Lord be with you.” I have heard some object to this form, wanting to put in its place the simple declarative statement, “The Lord is with you,” on the grounds that the subjunctive mood raises some doubt about the presence of the Lord or implies that unless the priest summons God, the Lord will not appear. After all, this argument goes, is not the Lord already with the people?

I wonder if instead of making a declarative statement or summoning the Lord from somewhere else, the Celebrant is offering something like a prayer, a condensed form of something like, “It is my deepest desire that the Lord will always be with you, the people who today have gathered here to renew your relationship with your creator.”

**And with thy spirit.** And the people's response, "And with thy spirit," is a reciprocal prayer. As the Celebrant expresses a hope that the Lord will be with them, so they reflect back a similar aspiration for the one who is about to lead the next phase of this structured encounter with God.

One could even imagine there being some self-interest in the congregational response: "For what is about to happen to fulfill its potential," someone in the congregation might be thinking, "the Lord will need to be with you since what you offer is entirely of God and not of you at all. With all due respect," this person might continue, "we are not here for what *you* have to offer, but if you can bring to the table the spirit and presence of the Lord—being more like the waiter in this meal than the chef—then we shall all be blessed indeed. So, what we most desire is that the Lord will be with *you*."

Perhaps it is something like wishing your surgeon good luck just before you go under the anesthesia.

**Lift up your hearts.** The Celebrant opens the next subject with a sentence which is an invitation almost with the force of a command: Lift up your hearts. The Latin version of that phrase, *sursum corda*, provides the title for this section of the liturgy. Whether giving most parts of Episcopal liturgy titles in ancient languages clarifies historical origins or obscures current meaning is a topic for another time.

Like much of the liturgy, this simple sentence has a few levels of meaning. On a simple, emotional level, it might be understood to mean something like, Cheer up!—you are about to experience something which will delight you—do not be downcast, things are looking up.

Granted, such an exhortation makes more sense if the congregation is actually somewhere between gloomy and discouraged to start out with. "Cheer up!" is not the sort of thing one says to the preternaturally perky, but then if one is actually down in the dumps, simply being exhorted to optimism is at least as likely to annoy as to assuage.

**What is really missing?** One of the challenges we face with the liturgy is that most people most of the time may not feel that the thing most missing in their life is a lively sense of the presence of the Lord. Further, just as a coping mechanism, I suspect that most people deal with what most troubles them by some combination of denial, distraction, and wishful thinking. It is difficult to maintain reasonably good spirits when one looks squarely at the violence, disease, starvation, and despair that characterizes the lives of millions—maybe billions—of people just like us every day.

And even if one blocks out that global suffering, there are the anxieties of the immediate context of most of our lives: problems at work, the possibility of losing work, children or not having children, one's spouse or partner or the absence of such a one, concerns about being too young or too old, worry about having enough now or having enough in the future, health issues, and on and on.

If we are paying attention, the prospect of having our spirits, our hearts, lifted up offers some hope of relief and release from what can be an overwhelming sense of despair.

But as we may each recall, being told to "cheer up" is perhaps the least effective assistance we can receive when we are in those dark places. On the other hand, if we are familiar with what follows in the Eucharistic prayer, a story culminating in the Resurrection of Jesus and his triumph over the most severe of earthly burdens, death, then, looking ahead, we might find a way to put our own anxiety and distress in a larger context.

But there is more, which brings us to the next level of "Lift up your hearts."

**The next level** The invitation from the Celebrant—"Lift up your hearts"—is to an action, not the receipt of an action. One way of hearing this invitation (or command) is to understand that the

Celebrant does not invite the audience to be comforted, to put on a happy face, to look on the bright side, to think more positively, but actually to *do* something, to “lift up” their hearts.

“Lifting up” is a gesture of offering. If you have watched the Celebrant a few moments before, you will have seen her or him lift up the brass offering plates and then similarly lift up the vessels with the bread and wine about to be consecrated for Communion. When we do not sing the Doxology, the priest says, “All things come of thee, O Lord,” and the congregation responds, “And of thine own have we given thee.” We lift things up to God as a symbolic acknowledgement that all that we have comes from God, belongs to God, and eventually returns to God.

So “Lift up your hearts” may be the exact opposite of “look into your hearts.” The image of “lift up your hearts” calls each of us in the congregation to reach into ourselves, grasp what is at the center of our being, and hold it up in offering to our Lord and creator.

Think of all the things that the liturgy might say at this point: “Isn’t it good for us to be here!” “Aren’t we blessed to be part of this community!” “Look at how welcoming, warm, and friendly we are!” “Let us dedicate ourselves to changing the world!”

Instead, the Celebrant invites each one present to reach into themselves and offer the core of their being and identity. We may well get to some of those other concerns along the way, but we begin by focusing on the deeper matters. On our own, we are not whole people able to take on the sins of the world.

**And a deeper level still** There is yet another way to look at the lifting up of our hearts. Perhaps as a corollary to offering our hearts is the idea that we are presenting them to the Lord for inspection, for repair, for healing. We have done the best we can with our own resources, and now, realizing that there is more to be done, we lift up our hearts to one whose abilities significantly exceed our own.

Whatever the actual mechanism of that healing and repair, the process begins with our acknowledging that we need help beyond our own resources. I suspect that anyone who had been involved with seeking to heal someone with a crippling addiction has at some point realized that until the person genuinely wants to be healed, there are limits to how much better things will get. Similarly, when someone we love is in the grip of a seemingly irreversible disease, the weight of that burden can overwhelm our hearts. Not all trouble is of our own making. Acknowledging that we are in trouble and need help—in any of a number of situations—is the first and necessary step for things to improve.

So when the Celebrant invites the people to lift up their hearts, and they respond, “We lift them up unto the Lord,” the whole community is echoing the Confession made just a few moments before: things are not OK, some of that may be of our own doing, some of it may be due to circumstances beyond our control, and we seek God’s healing, guidance, and participation in the process of recovery.

**We lift them up unto the Lord.** When the Celebrant invites the people to lift up their hearts, there is a specified response: “We lift them up unto the Lord.”

This might be a good time to observe that this is a scripted exchange. No one is making this up as they go along. Celebrant and people alike are following a defined course to take them to a specific objective. The assumption of this style of liturgy is that to get to where we need to be—to get to where we want to be—we need guidance. So we are looking into our prayer books, not our experience-driven personal creativity, because in our prayer books we have distilled the wisdom and teaching of nearly two millennia of people seeking the Lord as disciples of Jesus.

At any moment our individual judgment is clouded by our circumstances, our desires, our preoccupations, and the assumptions of our age and culture. Without a set liturgy, the views of the Rector, the Bishop, or some other leader might define the focus of the liturgy. By claiming to be a “catholic” and an “apostolic” church, we seek to rise above specific local circumstances and put at the center of our community life the witness of the Apostles rather than our own concerns.

Even St. Paul deferred to the received tradition when he introduced one of his core teachings with the words, “For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received...” (1 Cor. 15:3).

The liturgy distills a wide range of voices, perspectives, and experiences so that following it offers some protection from the proceedings being dominated by one person, the perspective of a small group or party, or the assumptions of a single age.

Like musicians in an orchestra or actors in a play, we have come to take part in, and to make possible the realization of, something larger, more interesting, and more profound than we might create if we each played or said whatever we wanted to in the moment. We each bring to bear our own intelligence and even art in how we engage the text before us, but to achieve something greater than what any one of us could offer, we follow the score, the script, the text. And we expect the conductor, the director, the editor, or, in this case, the Celebrant, to be similarly obedient to what she or he has received.

**Liturgy is about God. We are not God. So liturgy is not about us.** In response to the invitation of the Celebrant to lift up their hearts, the people respond, “We lift them up unto the Lord.”

While it might seem obvious, it is nevertheless useful to note that we do not lift them up to one another, we do not lift them up to the clergy or any other person, we do not offer our core identity to our work, our family, our relationships, or any particular ideology.

There is a constant temptation in liturgy to direct it towards ourselves. So one might hear about liturgies set apart to celebrate children or senior citizens, or to focus on a particular issue or subject of social or political concern. It may be that these are matters worthy of attention, and even attention of the entire community. But addressing them is more internal housekeeping than it is worship. That is, unless we think it is meet and right for us to worship ourselves. I suspect we lapse into worshipping ourselves or our own creations (ideologies and value systems more probably than stone or bronze statues), and it is when that worship proves fruitless that we are most open to trying something more substantial.

What makes liturgy holy is that it is focused on God and is the process of our coming before God. So the point is not that our hearts are lifted up, or even that we simply lift them up, with no object identified. We reiterate at this point in the liturgy that we have gathered to come together before God. So when we lift up our hearts, we lift them up unto the Lord.

This may be a good place for us to stop now. To explore the last two lines of this section of the liturgy would take more space than even a letter to be spread over the entire summer months could justify. We will come back to why the Celebrant reminds us at this point that we gather “to give thanks to our Lord God” (rather than to some other object or for some other purpose), and why the congregation responds that “it is meet and right” for us to give that very thanks.

As you hear these familiar lines from the Eucharist service—and may it be often between now and our Opening Sunday on September 13—let them evoke in you a deep response. Let them remind you of deep longings for peace, for security, and for joy. Let these lines remind you to lift up your

hearts to God in a complex act of offering and seeking healing. And let them remind you to consider your life from a perspective which prompts you to be deeply thankful to God. And may that spirit of thanksgiving bring you a holy joy and deep comfort which may pass understanding but will never pass away.

The Rev. Cn. John G. Hartnett

*Rector*