

The Liturgy of St James

by Rev Manoj Mathews

The Liturgy of St. James is a worship service that reflects the majesty of God and conveys the message of salvation through all human senses.

Scripture: Deuteronomy 4:14, Isaiah 61:10, Mark 9:35, John 4:23, Philippians 2:6, Hebrews 10:17, 1 Peter 2:9, Revelation 4:1

Topics: "Liturgy And Worship", "Sacramental Theology"

Description

Rev. Manoj Mathews delves into the significance of the Liturgy of St. James the Just, tracing its origins to Bishop James of Jerusalem, the brother of Jesus. The liturgy serves a dual purpose of leading worshippers into a spiritual realm and conveying the message of salvation through human senses. Despite modifications over time, the core structure remains intact, emphasizing the majesty of God. The sermon explores the rich symbolism, vestments of the priest, and the transformative effect of liturgical worship on believers, highlighting the importance of engaging all senses in worship.

Transcript

The basis of liturgies used by all Malankara Syrian Christian Churches of Eastern origin is the Liturgy of St. James the Just. James was the Bishop of Jerusalem soon after the formation of the Church on the Pentecost. James was the brother of Jesus who was not a believer during Jesus' lifetime and to whom Jesus appeared after his resurrection. But he evidently had been a scholar in the scripture and had a prestige as a rationalist and righteous man according to the law. We should assume that as time went on this liturgy had changed its form in accordance with the times, but the basic structure remained the same. The liturgy reflects James understanding of the majesty of God (his brother). The liturgy plays a double role.

First it is a worship which takes the worshipper out of the mundane world into the dimensions of spirit to worship in spirit and truth.

Second it is an expression of the message of salvation conveyed through all human senses.

The Liturgy of St. James is probably the oldest of the liturgies that ever existed. It is still used, occasionally at Jerusalem and is used on St. James's day by all churches of Byzantine tradition. In Malankara (Kerala) all Syrian and Malankara Orthodox Churches (excluding those of Chalcedonian Orthodox) still follow this great traditional liturgy. In England this was the basis of the liturgy of the Scottish Episcopal Church. The

charismatic church of the Catholic Apostolic Church (Irvingites) of the 19th century borrowed many of the great symbolism in their services. During the course of its development through the ages there had been several modifications and changes because of the impact of modernism. The variations are particularly visible in the first part of the service - the ministry of the word. This portion developed as a result of the development of heresy within the church and to define the faith of the fathers. The culmination of this part of service became the recitation of the Nicene Creed. Further variations can be seen in the various churches of Malankara and in the Churches around the world.

The Mar Thoma Church for some reason removed the audible accompaniment with bells and rings. The reason for this is to be found in the reformation theology where the church repudiated the transubstantiation theory. As the priest holds the bread and wine and bring it before the congregation, there is a loud peeling of bells and thundering hailing and worship and praise which led the congregation to believe that the bread and wine have miraculously turned into the flesh and blood of Jesus. The fact that it is an enactment is lost at least at this point. It is beautiful but leads practically to a sense of idol worship. To avoid this the church removed the wordings "I carry the body and blood of Christ" and the entire accompaniment. The Mar Thoma Evangelical Church further removed the veil and the holy of holies bringing the table in the midst of the people. The concept is that the incarnation was the coming of God into the midst of his people - an old beautiful concept that echoed even in the tent temple in the desert. As a result most of the pageantry of the scene is lost. The emphasis shifted from worship to memorial of the Last Supper.

The Scene

Before we start looking at the details of the liturgy it is necessary to look at the settings. The whole purpose of the liturgy is worship. The worship is replicated in the image of the heavenly worship of which we have a glimpse in the book of revelations.

The setting evidently is a regal setting.

Rev 4:1 After this I looked, and there before me was a door standing open in heaven. And the voice I had first heard speaking to me like a trumpet said, "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this." Rev 4:2 At once I was in the Spirit, and there before me was a throne in heaven with someone sitting on it. Rev 4:3 And the one who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian. A rainbow, resembling an emerald, encircled the throne. Rev 4:4 Surrounding the throne were twenty-four other thrones, and seated on them were twenty-four elders. They were dressed in white and had crowns of gold on their heads. Rev 4:5 From the throne came flashes of lightning, rumblings and peals of thunder. Before the throne, seven lamps were blazing. These are the seven spirits of God. Rev 4:6 Also before the throne there was what looked like a sea of glass, clear as crystal. In the center, around the throne, were four living creatures, and they were covered with eyes, in front and in back. Rev 4:7 The first living creature was like a lion, the second was like an ox, the third had a face like a man, the fourth was like a flying eagle. Rev 4:8 Each of the four living creatures had six wings and was covered with eyes all around, even under his wings. Day and night they never stop saying: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come." Rev 4:9 Whenever the living creatures give glory, honor and thanks to him who sits on the throne and who lives for ever and ever, Rev 4:10 the twenty-four elders fall down before him who sits on the throne, and worship him who lives for ever and ever. They lay their crowns before the throne and say: Rev 4:11 "You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being."

Isa 61:10 I delight greatly in the LORD; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.

This is not the Old Testament temple worship, but the worship in heaven after the enthronement of Jesus. The madhbaha (the Holy of Holies) is usually decorated elaborately to replicate this scene. They include the Seraphim and Cherubim representation and elaborately carved candle stands etc. The throne - the seat of God is intricately inlaid with flowery motifs and gold and silver.

The Priest and his vestments

The priest wears the brightly-lit royal robes and the crowns or golden covering on head because all worshipping community is a royal priesthood, King and Priests. In the Revelation picture we have the 24 elders wearing the golden crowns. As the bishops enter into the presence on behalf of the church, he covers his head. This is often criticized on the basis of the statement that a man should not cover his head. The symbolism here is far different. Bishops do not represent himself as man. He represents the church. The church is the bride of the lamb and the bride covers her head as a mark of respect to the groom - Christ. Notice that the bishops do that only when he is facing the throne and at occasions representing the church as a whole.

He can stand before the throne of grace only because he wears the robe. This robe is not his usual human robe. It is a royal robe. No one can enter into the holy of holies with their own righteousness. Remember the parable of the King's wedding where a man entered without wearing the royal robe. This robe is the imputed righteousness given to each believer by faith in Jesus Christ.

1 Pet 2:9 But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

1 Pet 2:10 Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

Underneath these robes are the dress of the priesthood which actually represents the dress of the servants. The white robe and black string with tassels were the traditional dress of the servants of the royal household. The Christian concept of greatness measured by the service.

Mark 9:34 But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest.

Mark 9:35 Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, "If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all."

The rest of the worshipping scene is completed with the incense. As you can see what is presented here is an image of the heavenly worship in which we are taking part. This worship requires the totality of man. This can be realized only through our five senses. These five senses of communications are: Eyes that sees, Ears that hear, Nose that smells, tongues that taste and the skin that feels. In the St. James's liturgy we use all these five senses to communicate to us the meaning and the feeling of worship. It is for this purpose the incense, the music; the bells are all the visible symbols are emphasized. Many reformed churches like the Mar Thoma Church and the St. Thomas Evangelical Church of India have removed many of the rich symbolism. The whole purpose of the symbolism is to convey the message. The hallowness of the worship is actually enhanced through all the five senses with these additions. A deep sense of the

majesty of God and the awesomeness of the Holy Mysteries which we are privileged to celebrate pervades the whole liturgy. In the Pentecostal and charismatic services, the congregation raising their hands in adoration and chanting together remedies this absence. These are different ways of experiencing the presence of God. Setting the right setting for worship is what is emphasized in the James liturgical procedures. The traditions are different. When the East meets the West, when the Orient meets the Occident, When the Orthodoxy meets Modernism they bring modifications. But let us not miss the true meaning. Let us not compromise the core.

Priest stands before the throne of God as the representative of the entire congregation. It is not only the congregation present but all the believers as one universal church are present. It is also a part of the multidimensional existence. Though we are aware only of the dimension we are in, the concept indicates the presence of all creatures redeemed from eternity being present in the worship. What James tries to portray is the same picture as we see in Revelation. This worship is an ongoing fact in the heavenlies and we are entering into it at the worship service. We can do that because of the right we have received through the body and blood of Jesus. These are represented in the center of the table - the bread and the wine clothed in majesty.

Heb 10:17 Then he adds: "Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more." Heb 10:18 And where these have been forgiven, there is no longer any sacrifice for sin. Heb 10:19 Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, Heb 10:20 by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, Heb 10:21 and since we have a great priest over the house of God, Heb 10:22 let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.

The Heavenly Vision of Worship and Adoration

The Ministry of the Word

The Liturgy of St. James begins (after the celebrant's Prayer of Preparation) with the glorification of God as one in Trinity. It starts with the definition of God and identifies Jesus as God incarnate. It is followed by the Kauma that weaves the thread through the entire liturgy. "Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit.." As these words are intoned, the veil of the Holy of the Holies bursts open and we are at once aware of the majesty of God in the words of the invocation. And we are brought in the presence of the throne of Grace. The adoration of the trinity runs all through the ceremony.

The deacon reminds the congregation that the true faith had been given to the saints once for all and any alteration or change will be an anathema quoting St. Paul. Thus the congregation affirms that the Bible alone is the authority for doctrine. The reading of the epistle follows this. It is imperative that the congregation stand to receive the gospel and the congregation responds "So we do believe and affirm." before receiving the gospel narration or teaching. After the chant of eulogy of the Word of God and adoration of the Trinity the whole congregation end in a common confession of faith in the Nicene Creed.

Here the liturgy breaks to give space for the Ministry of the Word

This is followed usually by the public confession of sins as a preparation for the Lord's Supper. In Orthodox churches private confession is required. Private confessions to the Priest is not required in the Mar Thoma Church. This was done to emphasize the fact the Priest is only a brother set apart for service. The true confession is to God. Confession should be encouraged between and within the members of the

believers, which has a therapeutic value as is now known. The confession to the priest based on standard terms did not do that job. The priest can only give absolution on the basis of the word of God not on his authority.

The Ministry of the Broken Body of Christ.

The Kiss of Peace - Reconciliation

The second part of the service is the preparation for the communion. It starts with the kiss of peace. This part is important in that in forgiving each other the whole congregation becomes one body, the body of believers, the body of Christ. Before we can come together at the Lord's table we need to be reconciled with each other. So the Kiss of peace intones "May the Peace of Christ Our Lord be with us and abide with us." As the children of God we are before the altar to present our sacrifices of praise. If it has to be acceptable reconciliation is a pre-requisite.

Mat 5:23 "Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, Mat 5:24 leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.

Once the reconciliation is complete the congregation is an organic unity and forms the bride of Christ and we can "present to the Lord of all creation, the Father God, the sacrifice of grace, peace and praise in reconciliation and peace" It is at this time the covering of the bread and wine is removed. We are now ready to partake of the table.

Institutional Statements

In the Anaphora, or great central prayer of the Liturgy, we are reminded of the glories of God's creation and our bounden duty to render thanks for it and for all the many blessings He showers upon us. And we join the myriad many-eyed Cherubim and the six-winged Seraphim singing the Hymn of Hosanna.

"Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of Sabaoth, heaven and earth are full of Thy glory. Hosanna in the Highest !"

There is the reenactment of the institution of the Eucharist:

"This is my Body which is broken for you and given for the remission of sins" and then the blessing of the cup :

"Our Lord on the day he was betrayed took the bread in his hands, gave thanks, hallowed, blessed and gave it to His disciples saying: Drink ye all of it; this is my Blood of the New Covenant which is shed for you and for many for the remission of sins"

The meaning of this proclamation is interpreted into the life of the congregation as: "Thy death, we proclaim and Thy resurrection we confess !" The great prayer continues with the remembrance of the saving events of our Lord's Passion, Death and Resurrection, and as we contemplate His glorious second coming to judge both the living and the dead. We ask God to spare us and to receive this sacrifice of Jesus on the Calvary as my sacrifice. The recurring call for mercy on the basis of this sacrifice in the rhythmic kirieleson continues till the end.

Then follows the Epiklesis, or invocation of the Holy Spirit, which came down upon Jesus at Jordan River, and upon the disciple on the day of Pentecost. "Send down, O Lord, elf-same Spirit, upon us and upon

these gifts that this bread may be the holy Body of Christ ... and this cup may be the precious Blood of Christ" It is the indwelling of the Holy spirit that makes these common elements that are set apart to be the body of blood of Jesus for those who believe. Some churches do believe that they become in reality body and blood of Jesus. But it is not inherent in the liturgy itself. Others believe them as symbolic as the whole liturgy is a symbolic reenactment.

As the Liturgy proceeds, the priest elevates the Bread and says, "Holy things for holy persons!" This would imply that these holy elements are only for the holy people. But the response is "Only God the Father is Holy, Only God the Son is Holy, Only God the Holy Spirit is Holy." It is confession of the fact that we are all unworthy to sit at the Lord's Table. But the Priest goes on to say; "The God the father who created the universe is with you." "God the son who has redeemed us with his body is with you" "God the Holy Spirit which gives life to all is with you" It is in this presence of God in the believer that makes him worthy to receive the communion. We do not come before the throne of grace or to the Lord's Table by our own strength, but because of the presence of God within us.

The Great Intercession

This is followed by the great intercession. The prayers include basically church of God in all parts of the world and in particular to the church, which celebrates this memory, and in particular the congregation concerned. It then takes up the people in authority in the church its Patriarchs (Metropolitan), bishops, priests, deacons and all the people and for the needs of all. We then remember Martyrs, Saints and all our fathers who had departed in faith and ask God to give us strength to follow their footsteps.

The Communion of Saints

Then follows the partaking of the bread and wine as symbols of the body and blood of Christ. The form of reception varies. The traditional Malankara style is to receive them into the mouth directly. But in other parts of the world other methods are employed. Some receive the bread in hand and some drinks the wine directly from the cup. St.Cyril's interpretation even the reception of the bread wine is symbolic of the Lordship of Jesus. St. Cyril of Jerusalem (c.315-386), who was bishop of Jerusalem from 349-386, gave his famous Catechetical Lectures. According to Cyril the Holy Body is received in the hand, with the left hand making a throne for the right hand, "as for that which is to receive a King". The Precious Blood is received from the Chalice directly.

Once the communion is over the whole congregation bursts into hallelujahs. In the Last Supper Jesus himself have sung the alleluia with the disciples before they went out. In the same way the congregation carries the message with them into the world

As one enters into the spirit of worship in the liturgy, there is a transforming effect in the believer equipping them for the world. The faith is confirmed, energy is restored, and the rite of intensification is now concluded. Looking from outside, it may look like a drama and so it is. The whole Eucharistic celebration is a message unto all that partake of it and also to those who sees it. The message of salvation is expressed through all the five senses.

The Holy Communion as a whole is a memorial of the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus and an affirmation of faith in looking forward to his Second Coming. It is also an act of worship wherein the 'Lamb slain before the creation' is being worshipped by the church universal in spirit and truth along with the myriad of heavenly hosts and the rest of the creations. To the partaker it is a rite of intensification. For the

on looker it is a statement of the gospel - the good news of Jesus Christ delivered through all the faculties and senses. All these are attained through the ancient liturgy handed down to us by our forefathers.

The relevance of liturgy in worship

During the reformation, especially under the influence of Pentecostal and charismatic movement, liturgical worship had been criticized and practically abandoned by many. The influence of this can be seen in the dilution of liturgical procedures of the Mar Thoma and the St. Thomas Evangelical Church of India. These churches while holding on to the core liturgy have taken out some of the visual and audible procedure. The Pentecostal churches on the other hand have rejected the liturgical style as whole. In its stead new worship rituals have been used. Even though the original intention was to remove all rituals and rites, effectively what it did was to replace the old rites and rituals with some other form of rituals and rites. There are no bells, no incense and no colorful royal clothes. These are replaced by mesmerizing repeated chanting of music - repeated over and over again - a technique, which is familiar to the Hindu bhajans. Pastors replace priests, white flowing shirts and tongues and prophecies replace the royal robes. Thus we notice that actually nothing has changed. They both have the same purpose and structure. They are achieved in different ways. This is essentially a cultural difference and nothing else. As is well known to sociology, each culture achieves their purpose through rites and rituals and practices consciously or unconsciously in their own ways.

In all forms of worship and communication we have to use symbolism. We cannot communicate with each other and express ourselves without symbols. New and varied forms of symbols, pertaining to the senses are being developed as need arises. In all cases there lies a danger of the symbol becoming an idol. This is more so in the case of the visible symbols. All ancient religions employed these symbols.

Rom 1:21 For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Rom 1:22 Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools Rom 1:23 and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles. Rom 1:24 Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. Rom 1:25 They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator-who is forever praised. Amen.

So Yhvh stipulated through Moses:

Deu 4:14 And the LORD directed me at that time to teach you the decrees and laws you are to follow in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess.

Deu 4:15 You saw no form of any kind the day the LORD spoke to you at Horeb out of the fire. Therefore watch yourselves very carefully,

Deu 4:16 so that you do not become corrupt and make for yourselves an idol, an image of any shape, whether formed like a man or a woman,

Deu 4:17 or like any animal on earth or any bird that flies in the air,

Deu 4:18 or like any creature that moves along the ground or any fish in the waters below.

Deu 4:19 And when you look up to the sky and see the sun, the moon and the stars-all the heavenly array-do not be enticed into bowing down to them and worshiping things the LORD your God has apportioned to all the nations under heaven.

If a symbol becomes an idol, it is time to destroy or replace it. Though this danger is less in the case of audible and verbal symbols with the exclusion of others, the damage that these symbols misunderstood is far more serious and long lasting. Just when we thought that we have found a way to worship God in Spirit and Truth, it turned out to be a false alarm too. We do not need to look far than to take a look at the damage the modern faith movements did in emphasizing this verbal and yogic worship form. The Christian Research Institute has amply documented this damage (Counterfeit Revival by Hank Hannen)

Evidently the mistake is not in the symbols, but in the misuse of symbols. In Christological point of view this is the expression of God the Father, Son and the Spirit - One God who is in all and through all. Human was indeed created in the image of God. He is also a trinity - Mind, Body and Spirit. So when Human worships God, he/she worships Him in all these three dimensions. So Jesus indicates the worship to God the Father and God the Holy Spirit thus:

John 4:23 Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. John 4:24 God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth."

But there is also God the Son. There is also another worship - worshipping in the body to Jesus.

Christ Jesus: Phil 2:6 Who, being in very nature God,

Phil 2:9 Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name,

Phil 2:10 that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

Phil 2:11 and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

So we owe Mental worship in Truth to Father, Worship in the Spirit to the Holy Spirit and Bodily worship to God the Son and all these in organic unity . Only when we do that will our whole person is involved in the worship. How can the whole person be involved in the worship? When all the senses and the mind are involved we can realize it much more easily. It is this concept that is realized in the liturgy of St.James.

Not all people are able to worship in all three dimensions with their full person. Thus we see the temple worship in four stages. You can stay outside the temple premise and look at the temple. You are not a part of the worship but an alien. Then you can enter into the outer courts of the temple, make your sacrifices and wash yourself in the laver and remain there. You are saved but still did not enter in full fellowship with the congregation. This is the bodily aspect. rituals have been performed. But then you can go into the holies where the congregation is and have fellowship with the members. Even then the worship is not complete. Only when you enter into the spirit of worship and enter the holy of holies do we finally culminate the worship. So it is with liturgical worship. You can remain outside the church campus alienated and remain in the world. You can enter into the church campus and talk with those who remain there. Or you can enter into the church and be part of the congregation and take part in the worship ritual. But yet this is incomplete. Once you enter into the spirit of worship, the worship is complete.

Apart from all these, rites and rituals have a greater significance in life. They form the anchor on which traditions can be built upon values which can be transferred. We build our rites and rituals ourselves. The way we celebrate, the way we pray, the times, the postures and the routines etc., form a traditional pattern which is transmitted through generations. Even when they lose their content, the outer casket often remains and eventually, is filled. If we remove the casket, then we encounter the missing content, we lose the possibility of it being filled. The purpose of the church service and all rituals and rites are only to provide the avenues of opportunities to worship and to grow. It provides the casket to be filled. One can go away from a church service without being touched. To remove the casket is to reduce this chance. This is the relevance of liturgical services. This need, was known to Jesus when He instituted the memorial Supper - the Eucharist.

(This article has been published not as a study material, but for a basic understanding of the Liturgy and its Importance.)

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