

The Word Made Flesh: Toward an Anglican Theology of the Sacramentality of Language

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Introduction

Liturgy is an event in which God speaks to human beings. In his sermon at the dedication of the church in Torgau, Martin Luther asserted that nothing else ought to happen in worship except that “our dear Lord himself may speak to us through his holy Word and we respond to him through prayer and praise.”¹ But, particularly since the Second Vatican Council, it is not only theologians of the Reformation traditions who have emphasized that God speaks in liturgy: Karl Rahner writes of “a theology of the word which includes as intrinsic to itself and as its own proper supreme point a theology of the sacraments,” and Louis-Marie Chauvet describes sacraments as “the Word of God at the mercy of the body.”² In all these uses, “word” is richly multivalent: it can refer to Christ as the incarnate Word, to scripture, to the word of preaching and proclamation, to the words of prayer, or to all of these at once. It also includes the celebration of sacraments along with the proclamation of scripture as ways in which the incarnate Word of God is spoken to human beings. In all such encounters, God’s speech is prior to—and enables—human response.

In this paper I attempt to develop a theology of language as potentially sacramental, and thus capable of bearing God’s presence to human beings. I consider

¹ Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, trans. John W. Doberstein, vol. 51, American ed. (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959), 333.

² Karl Rahner, “What Is a Sacrament?,” in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 14 (New York: Seabury Press, 1976), 142; Louis-Marie Chauvet, *The Sacraments: The Word of God at the Mercy of the Body* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001).

sacramentality as the mode of God's continual self-communication in the material world—an event that happens outside liturgy as well as within it. For Christians any aspect of life is a potential arena for the encounter with the triune God; yet the corporate worship of the church is a particularly important (and, as I will argue, a particularly reliable) arena for this encounter. I begin by exploring the process of human knowing and speaking, drawing insights from the field of cognitive linguistics to suggest that nearly all of the language available to human beings for considering complex and abstract realities is metaphorical, and that metaphor, far from being a mere ornamental linguistic device, is capable of bearing genuine (if always partial) truth. With this understanding, I reflect on the nature of theology as what happens when God speaks to humans and humans, in response, speak about God—to God and to one another. Because all theology is based on the self-revelation of the transcendent God to human beings who are finite (as well as fallen), theological language can never aspire to complete, exhaustive, definitional precision. Yet it can be true, insofar as it is *apt*: it can carry truth, expressed metaphorically, by which human beings can encounter God and live faithful lives in response to God. Next I turn to the relationship between words and other aspects of liturgy, such as elements and gestures, arguing that words no less than these other aspects can be understood to be material symbols which convey the reality they signify. Thus liturgy is a communicative event in which both word and sign bear sacramental significance. I close with a brief reflection on some elements of my own Anglican liturgical tradition that illustrate a “hermeneutic of polyvalence”: an appreciation for multiply metaphorical language, and a trust in the faithfulness of God's Word to effect the sacramental encounter even without precise definition.

The title of this essay points to the famous Johannine assertion that in Jesus Christ the eternal Word of God has become incarnate—the basic ground for the Christian understanding of sacramentality. An alternate benediction for this project might be the less well-known but equally profound opening of the Epistle to the Hebrews, which along with the Johannine literature provides the New Testament’s other most remarkable example of a high christology coupled with an insistence on the materiality of salvation. Here too Jesus is described both as word and as tangible image, the speech of God resounding through the ages: an appropriate invocation for an exploration of the sacramentality of words.

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. (Heb. 1:1-3)³

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³ Biblical citations are from the New Revised Standard Version unless otherwise noted.