Courage to respond: Worship: Act Three

by Samuel Wells in the May 31, 2005 issue

If the creed is the point in the liturgy where the congregation learns to reason theologically, it is also the place where Christians learn the virtue of courage. Over and over again in the Gospels, when people are challenged to declare whether they believe, the issue is not whether they have enough knowledge or understanding, but whether they have the courage to face the consequences. When Peter claims, “Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you” (Mark 14:31), he sets himself up for the time of trial concluded by the twofold cockcrow. When the thief on the cross says, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom” (Luke 23:42), the moment is a decisive break with the values of the other thief, and a definitive statement of faith in the face of death—not just his own, but Jesus’ too. So the question the members of the congregation ask themselves when they are invited to stand and confess their faith is, “Do I dare to say the creed?”

Then faith turns to hope. The needs of the people are not identical to the needs they were aware of when they came to worship, but have been altered in four important ways by what has happened in the service. First, they have confessed their sins before God and in doing so have learned the difference between pain and sin. Confession has stripped away the sins of greed, of selfishness, of laziness, of lust, envy and pride—but has left behind a great catalog of pain for which there is no one to blame. This is the stuff of intercession. Learning the difference between pain and sin teaches Christians compassion—that quality that recognizes in others a common experience of need and pain.

Second, the members of the congregation have received absolution for their sins, and in doing so have begun to distinguish between healing and forgiveness. Forgiveness removes the weight of blame and punishment and fear from the sinner; while healing names those aspects and consequences of sin that take longer to repair, and names those dimensions of creation’s fallenness that inhibit the well-being of the community of believers. Reconciliation with God is something that only

God can offer, and it is appropriately situated at the beginning of the service. But the process of repair, restoration, relocation and eventual flourishing in community is something in which a whole range of people may participate—friends, family, medical staff, legal officers, professional caregivers, fellow disciples, teachers and colleagues.

Third, the people have heard the proclamation of the gospel in scripture and sermon and have begun to separate suffering from evil. Just as not all pain is sin, so not all suffering is evil. The plea for God's mercy is a longing that God will intervene to end suffering. But the plea for God's justice is slightly different: it is a longing that God will intervene to overturn evil and oppression. The whole of the liturgy embodies a process by which God addresses, transforms, outnarrates and overturns evil. The intercessions are the moment when the congregation brings to God particular and general instances of suffering, not unaware of his justice but seeking his mercy.

Fourth, those coming to intercession have paused to discern God's voice in the sermon and in the life and witness of their fellow worshipers. As they listen, they note a difference between what they need and what they want. Lanza del Vasto, the Italian follower of Gandhi, taught his followers, "Strive to be what only you can be. Strive to want what everyone can have." In similar spirit, through regular intercession a congregation discovers that the things its people need are things that everyone can have. The things they *desire*, by contrast, are things that they may choose to keep to themselves. It is here, in intercession, that God's voice educates those desires.

The intercessions not only educate the church's desire and constitute its humble offering but also shape the congregation in particular virtues. Three stand out. The first is patience. The practice of repeated intercession, of relentless knocking on heaven's door, teaches Christians that God's time is different from their own. In God's time, all bad things come to an end. In God's time, there will be no more tears. In God's time, there will be no more death, no more mourning, no more pain. God has prepared things that they cannot yet understand and do not yet see. "But we do see Jesus" (Heb. 2:9), and this vision characterizes the hope and the patience that Christians discover through regular intercession.

The second virtue is persistence. As members of a congregation look back over years of weekly pleadings, they can see that change did come in South Africa, peace did come in Ireland, and peace must somehow come in Palestine/Israel. Persistence

does not imply that as Christians repeatedly offer intercession they get better at it and thus become more “effective.” Rather, persistence makes the church shape its life around the pain, suffering and need of the world.

Persistence changes the shape of the church. It is not so much that “you will always have the poor with you” (Mark 14:7), but that through intercession, even if not through daily experience, you will always be with the poor. This solidarity in the end redefines what the church means when it says “poor,” for the prayers of the church, and the actions that make those intercessions informed prayers, challenge the isolation that is generally inherent in poverty.

The third virtue is prudence. The story is told of a church whose members were appalled when a nightclub opened up next door, bringing with it a variety of attitudes and habits that collided with their practices and convictions. Concerns about the nightclub environment were raised in the intercessions; hostility was dressed up as pious prayer. One night the nightclub burned down. The owner wanted to prosecute the church, for he knew that members had prayed for just such a turn of events. But they denied any involvement and said he should claim the fire as an “act of God”—which was not their responsibility. It is often said that there is only one thing worse than not getting what you want. In this case, the congregation came close to getting what members prayed for. They needed to learn how to let wisdom shape their prayers.

Prudence emerges as the members of the congregation learn to request only what they can cope with receiving. It helps Christians to see the difference between what God can do and what they believe it is in the character of God to do. If patience teaches Christians about how God works in time, and perseverance shapes Christians to pray more informed prayers and so get to know the people and places they are praying for, prudence encourages Christians to pray better prayers, prayers that more accord with the way God works in the world.

The result of these prayers should be a people at peace. The sharing of peace, together with the intercessions that precede it and the offering of gifts that follows, is a celebration of the right ordering of creation in preparation for participation in the heavenly banquet. The peace between members of the congregation and one another, between them and strangers, between them and enemies, and between them and the whole creation is an emblem of the overarching peace between God and God’s people, brought about in Christ. This is God’s gift to the church and, through the church, to the world, embodied at this moment in the liturgy.