

# The Offertory

Paper No. 7

In 1990, Robert Gribben said in A Guide to Uniting in Worship, "It is time to think carefully about what we do at the offering" (Gribben, p.54). His concern was expressed in terms of the theological implications of the offering within the service of worship and that it can easily become human-centred rather than God-centred.

However, a very practical issue now causes a re-look at both our practice and the theological understanding of the offertory and its place in worship. Increasingly, in a cashless society where most regular commitments are paid by direct debit, many worshippers are choosing this method as their preferred way of making their offering. This is being encouraged in many quarters for not only is it convenient for busy people, but also it is a way of ensuring that people fulfil their financial commitment to the church.

For the liturgist, the questions are not to do with convenience but with meaning and purpose of the offering as art of the worship service. Practically, how does this cultural change in the handling of money affect the ways we make our offering within the context of worship? And how is the content of offering prayers affected by this growing trend?

To place these issues in context, the theological and liturgical history of the offertory will be considered.

## The Early Church

In the early church the offerings of the People included not only the offering of bread and wine, but of such things as oil, olives, and cheese. From these gifts of the faithful, the priest chose the bread and wine to be used in the Eucharist, and the remainder was used to support the priests and to meet the needs of the poor in the community. The gifts would be brought by the people to the altar, and the priest would then offer these gifts on their behalf to God. It is not clear from the early documents at what stage in the liturgy this offering took place.

By the fourth century the emphasis usually was that the offerings are presented "in thanksgiving, in propitiation, or on behalf of the dead" (Jones, et. al, 1978, p.190 ). However, Augustine taught that the baptised were to see themselves identified with the eucharistic offering.

## The Medieval Church

Prior to the Words of Institution in the medieval rites of the Western church, prayer was "made to God that offerings be accepted, that they be consecrated through his power and that the participants be granted unity" (ibid., p.223). By the middle all the gifts were considered a contribution to the sacrifice, and that in the offering of the gift members were expressing in a concrete way their active participation in the service, and through their gifts were offering themselves. The symbolism of the offering of themselves was enhanced by the fact that the gifts were usually produced by them.

However, even this was changing. By the ninth century unleavened bread was used for the Eucharist, and not that which had been brought by people. With the move to a money economy, the gifts were eventually collected in the offertory plate / bag for this was still considered an important means of expressing one's participation in the service.

## The Reformers

Luther saw it to be essential that the relationship between the congregation's offering and that which God has

done in Christ be clearly differentiated. Luther had the bread and wine prepared during the singing of the creed so that it was very clear that the offertory was not a prelude to a propitiatory sacrifice.

In the Book of Common Order, the bread and wine was to be prepared and placed on the table prior to the beginning of the service. The offertory sentences were to do with the giving of alms, and this money received for the poor was placed in the "poorman's box". The oblation of the eucharistic prayer, "We . . . do celebrate and make here before thy Divine Majesty, with these thy holy gifts, which we now offer unto thee was eliminated and the offering of our selves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy and living sacrifice unto thee was placed after the people received communion" (Price and Weil, 1979, p.84). In 1662 there was a significant change when the bread and wine were placed on the table at the time of the offering (see, *ibid*, pp.86 and 197).

### **The Twentieth Century**

The American book of Common Prayer of 1928 "directed that money should be presented and placed on the Holy Table, and that bread and wine should be offered and placed on the Holy Table" (*ibid*, p:197). So while there remained a differentiation, the offerings of bread and wine and money were brought together as part of the one action of worship. The offering is "the representative gift of the baptised and forgiven people of God" (*ibid*, p.198). This offering of money, bread and wine was seen to be the congregations offering of itself and its world. For as Price and Weil say: "Money represents the work of the congregation... a part stands for the whole. We give part of what we make. That part stands for ourselves, our souls and bodies'. Otherwise the meaning of the gift becomes distorted" (*ibid*, p.198).

In *Uniting in Worship*, the conscious decision was made to make the offering of money distinct from the offering of bread and wine. Gribben in explaining this decision says: "They draw on the Jewish tradition of blessing God over bread and wine - the grace which may well have been used by Jesus when at table with his disciples. Modern liturgical scholarship acknowledges that this kind of prayer underlies the Great Prayer of Thanksgiving at the communion table. In which case, the 'offertory prayers' have pre-empted the central prayer of the sacrament, have given thanks and blessed - just before the Great Prayer does exactly that..." (Gribben, pp.61,62). Theologically, it remains important to show clearly in the liturgy that the sacrament is purely a thanksgiving for what God in Christ has done for us. We have no part to play in that central act.

### **So what is the meaning of the offering today?**

We have seen that throughout the centuries the offering of the gifts of the faithful (whether in kind or as money) has always stood for more than that which is being offered. It is representative of all that we have, a symbol of the congregation's life and work, and the reminder that all is gift from God. As Abba says: "It has also a still deeper significance: it is the token and symbol of another offering which Christians make - the offering of ourselves. Here is the climax of all true worship" (Abba, 1951, p.4).

There remains something highly symbolic about the bringing of our gifts of money in worship. For it is the tangible expression of the gift of ourselves - all we are, all we have - to the God who has given everything to us. It reminds us individually and corporately of our reliance on God.

Apart from the ones who choose to give through direct debit, in any given worship service there will be others who for a variety of reasons will not physically place offering in the plate. In rural areas there have always been farmers who give spasmodically as they receive the money from their harvest. There are always some who are receiving no income, have forgotten to bring an offering with them, or have already given their gift of money.

Some offering prayers are simply a "dedication of the money", and fail to en-capture the wholeness of what the

offering is as an act of worship, and as a response to the grace and love of God. The offering of "first fruits" or a "tithe" has always had the connotation of the giving of the whole, and with the gift, the offering of one self in love and service.

Whatever the method used for the giving of one's offering of money for the work of the church, what is central is that worshippers are able to offer themselves in the gathered community of faith. After the Ministry of the Word, it is useful to see the offering of the Creed, the prayers, and of self (perhaps with the receiving of the offering of money) as belonging together as a significant dimension of worship.

The prayers in *Uniting in Worship* Leader's Book give models not only for when the offering of money is being received, but as an offertory of self to God. For example,

"Lord God,  
you have given and more than we ask for  
and more than we deserve.

or

May we show a like generosity  
in all that we do for you and for our neighbours;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord." (ibid, p.607) or

or

"Everything in heaven and earth comes from you, Lord.  
We give you only what is yours.  
May you be praised for ever and ever." (ibid, p.605)

### **New expressions of the offering**

Throughout the centuries, the gifts of the faithful have needed to find renewed expression as the cultural circumstances have changed. The present changes in patterns of giving are simply one more facet of this historic reality. So while one's offering of money to the church may be by direct debit, it remains important that there are opportunities given from time to time in worship where the offering of our selves, our gifts, and our abilities can be expressed tangibly.

Stewardship responses can occur as an act of worship. The written responses can be collected, and a suitable prayer offered. Similarly, there may be times when the members of the congregation may be invited to write a specific response to the Ministry of the Word, and these could be collected and offered to God in the offertory prayer.

The Harvest Festival has been a traditional expression of the offering of work, and by derivation, one self to God. It may be useful for congregations to have an annual harvest festival. In an urban context it may be more suitable for people to be asked to bring with them to worship something symbolising their work, or their giftedness, and to offer these to God.

### **Conclusion**

The Christian church has long grappled with appropriate ways of expressing the offering of gifts and self to God. The move to a direct debit method of financial giving, enables congregations to look again at this significant act of worship. In this process the significance of the offertory as response to God's grace and love, and our

commitment to participation in service and witness in the church and the world can be re-affirmed.

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