

ABOUT OUR WORSHIP

AT ST. GREGORY NYSSSEN EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Newcomers to St. Gregory Nyssen at San Francisco (founded 1978) are often surprised to find diverse traditional sources supporting the worship of one contemporary American parish. The space seems exotically arranged, and shines with folk art from west to east; the congregation shares in much music and dance crossing cultural borders; the rites combine prayers and customs from churches long divided. Yet they say this rich mixture feels harmonious, authentic and lively, and welcomes each worshipper's progress in knowing and loving God.

That progress – in every human being – was the passionate concern of the fourth century Greek bishop we have made our patron. “The one thing truly worthwhile is becoming God’s friend.” This ending to Gregory of Nyssa’s last book, *The Life of Moses*, typifies his life work: humanistic, wholistic, progressive, mystical, and democratic. Without implementing Gregory’s liturgical ideas (he wrote none down) or reconstructing the worship he knew (he discouraged historicist piety), worship at St. Gregory Nyssen follows him in affirming the whole human experience of God as a boundless progress in friendship, rich with gifts for Christ’s people to share.

Our worship is modern in Peter Berger’s sense, reflecting rational choice rather than givenness.¹ Our liturgical choices mirror our choice of Gregory for our patron: from many times and places we take practices still powerful for people’s participation in receiving and celebrating God’s word. Like the bishop of Nyssa, our chief early models are eastern: these underlie the longest and sturdiest traditions of vernacular congregational worship. They have figured in most historical Christian revivals, particularly the Anglican Reformation and later Anglican reform; and they serve well today’s interest in participatory liturgy, and our ecumenical hunger for one Christian fellowship spanning ages and cultures.

Early Syrian Christian synagogues inspire our layout,² a rectangle of two equal squares. The western square holds seats in rows facing each other across an aisle (“choir seating”), and serves for the service of the word. The aisle (*solea*) runs up to a platform (*bema*) at the endwall, holding a broad chair for the presiding presbyter (it is a handsome Thai elephant howdah) flanked by chairs for deacons and cantors, and bowl-shaped bells from Japan and Tibet. (These produce a long ring that helps the whole congregation to fall into deep, reflective silence following each reading. They are already our mostly widely copied adaptation.) At the aisle’s other end, centering the building, rises a lectern with a standing censer before it and candelabra either side; and behind the lectern, a menorah (the Egyptian tree-of-lights first set in the Jerusalem temple courtyard, and later set in synagogues to recall the temple service). Behind the menorah, where synagogues once set a curtain (another temple memento), we set a small forest of lacy brass Ethiopian processional crosses with their colorful cloth streamers, at once closing the square for the service of the word, and leading the eye eastward to the altar square. On the

¹ *Pyramids of Sacrifice* (1974), p. 169.

² L. Bouyer, *Liturgy and Architecture* (1967); J.W. Crowfoot, *Early Churches in Palestine* (1971).

walls hang large Ethiopian icons of Christ's nativity, baptism, passion and other symbols of his victory over sin and death.

The eastern square is open, with a table standing alone in the center, where the congregation will give thanks, feast, and dance together. We cover the table in eye-catching cloth from African, Asian or native American folkweavers and dyers, following a calendar scheme of richness rather than color. Our table is D-shaped, like dinner tables in Jesus' day: a shape that invites people to stand around it, and enables the clergy to reach vessel's easily from the table's flat western side, as ancient servants naturally needed to do. Thus the clergy preside at both gatherings among the people, rather than opposite them, and face always east, unifying both gatherings in a common movement, greeting Christ in his eucharistic banquet.

We greet Christ with an ocean of song. Music is the most powerful element in worship, and the strongest agent for participation, education, and reform. St. Gregory's people take part in more music of higher quality than congregations are usually given; almost everything our people do together, they sing, march, or dance to. Our musical fare joins plain, polyphonic, and alternatim chants, old and new, and metrical hymns from wide-ranging sources, including our own compositions and anonymous folk works. We sing in parts, improvising these when appropriate, and we usually sing unaccompanied, or support singing with hand instruments scattered through the crowd. Our music director fills the church's most prominent lay office, and shares equally with the deacon in running our liturgy; the job demands skill in choral conducting, and at inviting people to join in no matter what their level of musical proficiency.

The opening sets the service's context, especially for newcomers, and by adapting the popular entry ritual from early Byzantine cathedrals,³ we welcome and involve people from the start. The clergy and people gather in our open altar area, greet one another with the universal Christian greeting, *Christ is risen! / He is risen indeed!* and rehearse music for the service. Then all pour into the seating area together, chanting a rhythmic *Alleluia* refrain to psalm verses, and lighting the menorah and candles around the lectern. This entry procession ends with the blessing to open the liturgy of the word, and the first incensation: the deacon puts incense in the standing thurible as all sign a hymn (normally the early Christian morning hymn called *Gloria in excelsis*), which the president ends with a morning collect (normally a classic prayer by Erasmus⁴).

Recalling Jewish worship as Jesus knew it, we normally open the scriptures by singing the *Shema*,⁵ and add two further readings from the Episcopal Church's three-year Sunday lectionary, ending always with the Gospel. Laypeople read all readings under the deacon's guidance – that includes the Gospel, which a soloist or chorus chants to one of several traditional melodies. Each lection leads to two full minutes' silence, begun and ended by deep bells (see above), and then a song suiting the texts or the occasion. The Christian liturgical year is basically a plan for

³ T. F. Mathews, *The Early Churches of Constantinople: Architecture and Liturgy* (1971), ch. 6.

⁴ “O God of Love, you are the true Sun of the world, evermore risen and never going down. We pray you to shine in our hearts: that the darkness of sin and the mist of error being driven away, we may this day, and all our life long, walk without stumbling in the Way you have prepared for us, which is Jesus Christ our Lord.”

⁵ Deuteronomy 6:4. “Hear O Israel: the Lord our God is one Lord.”

reading the Bible, so we let the appointed passages govern our choice of prayers and songs. Because popular liturgy thrives on familiarity, we sing some texts constantly with a few varying musical settings; and the changeable processions and dance hymns serve for two or three weeks at a time. “Seasonal” changes are scarce and simple. (Our people joke that there are two seasons at St. Gregory’s: *Easter*; and *Easter’s Coming* – a pattern early Christians would recognize.) From Easter to Pentecost we borrow the lively eastern Orthodox custom of singing the *Easter Troparion*⁶ from Jerusalem repeatedly through the service, each time to a melody from a different ethnic heritage, sharing the musical gifts of every Christian people.

Following the Gospel, and another silence, the president preaches on the scriptures just read, sitting among the people as before and holding the Gospel book open for reference, and drawing always on personal experience. After a third silence the congregation share their own experience in response: this is no time for questions or argument, but rather completes the sermon by allowing the Spirit to speak from this church’s own life. Visitors have likened this conversation to Quaker meetings, whence of course it comes. Soon the preacher thanks everyone and shoulders the Gospel book, carrying it around the church while a cantor chants psalm verses and the people sing *Alleluia* refrains, pressing forward to touch and kiss the Gospel as it passes by – a warm Jewish and Ethiopian Christian ceremony enabling all to revere the Christ who speaks to us in scripture.⁷

Announcements follow; then the people’s prayers. We adapt the Lord’s Prayer’s likely use in New Testament times, for starting and guiding the congregation’s petitions. All sing the Lord’s Prayer (without doxology for now), and add their own spoken petitions and thanksgivings freely in a litany. The president concludes these with the collect appointed for the day; the congregation respond to each free petition, and all sing the Lord’s Prayer doxology at the last. This method allows both fixed and free prayer, and wraps each worshipper’s prayer in the prayer of Christ himself. (At this point we may also welcome new members, or baptize using a portable font set on the *bema* where all can see.)

Congregational dance is a powerful primitive medium, that European churches kept until modern times, and Ethiopians – the largest eastern church – still keep. Twice each liturgy, and for nearly an hour on Easter, St. Gregory’s people dance to hymns, accompanied by Ethiopian sistrum rattles and African and native American drums. Our first dance follows the prayers, as the clergy lead the whole congregation to the table for the eucharistic banquet, hands on each other’s shoulders, singing and marching the simple *tripudium* step (three forward, one back: an ancient step still used in Luxembourg for this purpose). We circle the table, censing it with belled Ethiopian thuribles, and then all exchange the kiss of peace in a loving *mélée*. Our children have been following their own service of study, play and prayers in Sunday school; now during the hubbub they join us. And while the peace continues the deacon takes bread and wine from the sideboard, setting them out on the table, at last calling everyone’s attention for the preface and

⁶ “Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death, and on those in the tomb’s bestowing life!” See *Book of Common Prayer*, p. 500.

⁷ We do not say the so-called “Nicene” Creed here. Our people have already responded to the sermon; and the Creed’s content duplicates the great thanksgiving prayer, in which they will shortly participate. For the Creed’s unsavory liturgical history, see G. Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy* (1945); modern congregations increasingly dispense with it.

great thanksgiving prayer. Thus our “offertory” involves the whole congregation, in early Christian style, as the people move from prayers to peace to preface to feast, not stopping to watch the clergy gather their donations until after communion.⁸

The president blesses the congregation⁹ and summons their hearts heavenward. All stand round the table praying with hands raised high – the favorite early Christian prayer posture – while the president sings the entire great thanksgiving prayer, normally using an ancient Jesus Passover melody; and the people sing traditional responses and acclamations. The president prays simply, without any manual acts of any kind; the deacon attends to turn pages and shoo flies. Besides the prayers written out in the *Book of Common Prayer*, we often pray thanksgivings we have composed as the Prayer Book recommends:¹⁰ these follow an early Syrian format, reciting salvation history in the light of this Sunday’s scripture readings, and end with the congregation singing the Sanctus and Benedictus hymns. The Agnus Dei (another Syrian text) follows while the deacon brings extra vessels, and the clergy divide the bread and wine for communion: they then raises these gifts, inviting all to eat and drink.

Following eastern custom, we give the eucharist to each person by name, and all including the president receive Christ from a fellow Christian’s hand.¹¹ The clergy give bread to each worshipper; the laypeople administer chalices to each other while lay ministers see to it the wine reaches everyone; and children receive from the clergy or their parents. Thus the fraction and communion are one functional process of sharing Christ with one another; what we do in worship, we do in life. As the remaining bread and wine return to the table, the president recites a prophecy from Baruch,¹² promising salvation for all God’s lost or oppressed people: a theme dear to Gregory of Nyssa. Then in thankful response to all God has given us, we gather money for the church’s work and food for the hungry, and lay these on the table with the remaining eucharistic gifts.

Our second dance, the “carol,” follows the collection: singing another hymn, the people spiral around the gift-laden table, dancing a repetitive Greek step that matches the hymn rhythm, and accompanied again by drums and sistrums. (Greek steps supremely suit this moment: they move gently sideways, affording dancers a continuous sensuous experience of the community moving

⁸ A. Schmemann long argued that this was the most natural chain of events, whether or not the early church used it; R. F. Taft, *The Great Entrance: a history of the transfer of gifts and other pre-anaphoral rites of the liturgy of St. John Chrysostom* (1975), proves it was the original byzantine order; C. Buchanan, *The end of the offertory—an Anglican study* (1978) finds it in early Roman and Anglican use also, and argues it fits biblical theology best: we give in response to God’s gifts to us.

⁹ This Syrian usage, recommended by the *Book of Common Prayer* (p. 404), warmly and naturally fits the flow of events.

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ R. F. Taft, “Receiving communion – a forgotten symbol?” *Worship* (1983).

¹² Baruch 5: “Arise, Jerusalem, and stand on high and look about toward the east, and behold your children gathered together from the rising to the setting sun, at the word of the holy one, rejoicing that God has remembered them. For they went out from you on foot, led away by enemies; but the Lord will bring them back to you riding high in honor, as children of the kingdom.”

together. Six easy Greek steps will fit nearly half the hymns in the Episcopal *Hymnbook* of 1982; the oldest of these steps was certainly known to New Testament Christians.) The carol ends in one last congregational songburst, as the deacon leads us singing “God grant you many years!” on a famous Russian melody to people celebrating birthdays and anniversaries, to new members, and to our occasional guest preacher. Coffee and cakes now join the other gifts on the table, and the feast continues until the congregation have consumed the bread, wine, coffee treats, and each other’s company to satiety. Thus the one eucharistic table centers and supports our whole community life.

INCLUSIVE RESOURCES AND INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE FOR WORSHIP

Alongside the Episcopal Church's *Hymnbook* and other publications, St. Gregory's worship includes many creations from the wider Christian world. Our English language and imagery vary, too, as we seek to expand our common language for prayer. The Episcopal Church's Standing Liturgical Commission, together with Bible translators and liturgical writers today, offers diverse approaches to ethnic and gender imagery, with fuller faithfulness to scripture: for example, maternal imagery as well as paternal imagery for God. We welcome all these, together with more familiar expressions; our goal is to enrich, not replace, the living tradition of Christian prayer. Please take and read the pamphlet, "*Inclusive*" *Language and Language about God*, by Professor Richard Norris, about issues important for all Christians who pray together.

ST. GREGORY NYSSSEN EPISCOPAL CHURCH

St. Gregory Nyssen Episcopal Church is a contemporary Christian community living by St. Gregory's words from the fourth century: "The one thing truly worthwhile is becoming God's friend." We invite people of the San Francisco Bay Area to discover that they are God's friends, and in practicing God's friendship to find their unity with all people.

The Episcopal Diocese of California organized St. Gregory's Church in 1978, to lead worship renewal with the new *Book of Common Prayer*, and to develop further new designs for the Church's life and mission. Our chief liturgist is the Rev'd Richard Fabian, a graduate of Yale and Cambridge Universities, the College of the Resurrection (Mirfield, Yorkshire) and the General Theological Seminary, instructor in New Testament and Liturgy at the California School for Deacons, a member of the international Societas Liturgica and the North American Academy of Liturgy, author of *Worship at St. Gregory's*, composer for the Episcopal Church's *Hymnal*, and past conference chair of the Association of Diocesan Liturgy and Music Commissions.

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