



Liturgical Practices in our Parish

1. Introduction

The following thoughts on some liturgical practises in our parish are an attempt to enable the parish council together with the pastors to come to an informed decision regarding the use of certain words and rituals in our services and spiritual life.

It is fundamental in questions of liturgy and spiritual life to distinguish between

- a) **issues of vital theological importance** (latin: *status confessionis* – the confession/teaching of the church hangs on a certain decision; there is a right and a wrong position) – i.e. where we separate rituals which are against Lutheran Dogma and Teaching (e.g. infant baptism is central to Lutheran Theology and can not be compromised on), and
- b) **issues of secondary importance** (greek: *ἀδιάφορα* - the teaching of the church is not directly affected by these practises) – i.e. In 1577, the Formula of Concord declared, that adiaphora are "church rites which are neither commanded nor forbidden in the Word of God"). The Adiaphora (such as use of musical instruments in the service, use of incense or bells) are neither commanded nor forbidden. They can be abused or used in a good way to promote the gospel.

It is important to note, that in the following I will talk about two adiaphora – two things, which are neither commanded nor forbidden in our church: 1. the use of „Jehova“ as a name of God and 2. The use of incense and bells in the sunday service. By classifying these two concepts as adiaphora, I am merely stating, that the Lutheran confessional documents and the Lutheran Dogma does not prescribe any particular position in regard to their usage.

The apostle Paul mentions some adiaphora, such as the eating of certain food:

„But not everyone knows this. Some people are still so accustomed to idols that when they eat such food they think of it as having been sacrificed to an idol, and since their conscience is weak, it is defiled. But food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do. Be careful, however, that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling block to the weak.“ (1st Corinthians 8:7-9)

It is clear, that although Paul sees these adiaphora as not important in themselves, he does stress the way in which certain customs or rituals should be implemented, if one decides to use them:

„And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.“ Colossians 3:17

Jewish faith is considered too common for this use. The Tetragrammaton was pronounced by the High Priest on Yom Kippur when the Temple was standing in Jerusalem. Since the destruction of Second Temple of Jerusalem in 70 AD, the Tetragrammaton is no longer pronounced, and while Jewish tradition holds that the correct pronunciation is known to a select few people in each generation, it is not generally known what this pronunciation is. Instead, common Jewish use has been to substitute the name "Adonai" ("My Lord") where the Tetragrammaton appears.

In the first version of the Hebrew Bible (completed 100-135 AD) all words were written in the common way which consists only of consonants – vowels were not written, but were known due to common usage. Only much later did the Jewish scholars add the vowels with punctuation (finished around 1000 AD, by Jewish scholars called the Masorites). When it came to the name of God, יהוה, which was not to be spoken aloud, the Masorites used the vowel for other terms, which were to be used in stead of the name of God. These words were Adonai (אֲדֹנָי), meaning „my Lord“ and Elohim (אֱלֹהִים), meaning God. Thus the term for the name of God was written יהוה with YHWH's consonants with Adonai's vowels. But – following Jewish tradition – they read the words Adonai (or Elohim) when the term יהוה appeared in the text.

When Christians, unaware of the Jewish tradition, started to read the Hebrew Bible, they read יהוה and thus said or transcribed Jehovah. Today this transcription is generally recognized as mistaken; however many religious groups continue to use the form Jehovah because it is familiar.

There is still no consensus on the original pronunciation of יהוה. Most scholars prefer „Yaweh“ as the most likely one.

d. Theological Considerations

For a long time the term „Jehovah“ was used widely in most churches and also found its way into several hymns. However, the catholic church in 2008 in a circular to all bishops from its vatican leadership stressed, that as an expression of the infinite greatness and majesty of God, his name should not be pronounced but be replaced during the reading of sacred Scripture by means of the use of an alternate name: „Adonai“ or just the english term „Lord“ – thus following the original intention of the Masorites.

On the other hand, the name of God „I am who I am“ shows that He revealed himself to his people Israel by making his name known to them. A name expresses a person's essence and identity and the meaning of this person's life. God has a name; he is not an anonymous force. To disclose one's name is to make oneself known to others; in a way it is to hand oneself over by becoming accessible, capable of being known more intimately and addressed personally.

In revealing his mysterious name – I am who I am - God says who he is and by what name he is to be called. This divine name is mysterious just as God is mystery. It is at once a name revealed and something like the refusal of a name, and so it better expresses God as what he is - infinitely above everything that we can understand or say: he is the "hidden God", his name is beyond description, and he is the God who makes himself close to humankind. God, who reveals his name as "I AM", reveals himself as the God who is always there, present to his people in order to save them.

Theologically regarding the usage of Gods name, one will have to balance on the one hand the urge to express his infinite greatness and majesty – and so see his name as unspeakable – and on the other hand, the personal dimension of a God who is to us like a loving father: approachable and certainly with a name. The dimensions of

- i) God, the allmighty, powerful, unimaginable great ruler of heaven and earth and of
- ii) God who cries over his people Israel and who speaks to Abraham as with a friend.

As the pronunciation „Jehova“ is mistaken (see above), one would have to use either the more probable pronunciation „Jahwe“ or follow the catholic church (and the original Jewish practice) of replacing the term with „Lord“. This should however not lead to the belief in a „nameless“ God in the sense, that our awe at His greatness makes us see Him as inaccessible and distant. This is exactly the opposite of how we experience God through His son Jesus Christ.

e. Practical Considerations

The written resources most widely used in our church in this context are the bible and the altar book. Both in their isiZulu version use the term „Jehova“. This term has now been found as being most probably mistaken (see above). There is no consensus on the right pronunciation. The term „Lord“ is already being used in the English Bible and Altar Book. It would therefore make most sense, to use the equivalent isiZulu term: iNkosi.

Another consideration is the use of the term Jehova in hymns. In both english (Guide me oh thy great Jehova) and isiZulu Hymnal the term Jehova can be found numerous times: 277 (Mesabe uJehova) 269 (..uyakukukhweza uJehova), 256 (uJehova uyalonda abantwana abancane), 185 (2.UnguBaba uJehova, osibekezelela) or 11, 226, 352 in isiZulu Lutheran Hymnbook.

This is an area where the question of what is an „adiaphora“ (see 1.) comes in. Is the term itself, which is used for God, of central importance to the faith, or rather the meaning of the terms, the intended description of this attributes (holy, almighty, loving father, creator, etc.). For me, the intended description is central – the specific term for God’s name on the other hand not.

Consequently, Jehova may be used in songs. There is no need to censor hymns, where the rhyme and rhythm might be lost. On the other hand, it is much easier to replace the term „Jehova“ in the liturgy. It only appears a few times. This question has been solved in the english Altar Book already – the isiZulu Altar book should thus follow suit here. Generally, it might make more sense to use the more ‚neutral‘ „iNkosi“ in the Liturgy, as oposed to „Somandla“.

The practice of using „Somandla“ in the bible occurences of the term „Jehova“ is widespread in ELCSA-SED. Translated with „Almighty“ it is – as all names of God – a limited description of what ‚wants to describe. Care should be taken not to overstress the holiness יהוה might and power at the cost of his mercy and accessibility as a loving father. If this is properly explained to church members, the term „Somandla“ might be used, especially as it seems to be used quite commonly already (especially when reading the bible).

Furthermore, the term Jehova might confuse some members, who associate it with the „Jehova’s Witnesses“. For Jehovahs Witnesses the name of God (in their view: Jehova), is not an adiaphoron, but a central truth to their faith. They have not been swayed by centuries of research suggesting otherwise.

3. On the use of Incense in the Sunday Service

a. Common practice in Durban Central Parish

The use of incense in Sunday services was first introduced to our parish a few years ago by former parish pastor now Dean of Durban Circuit Rev.T.C.Nzama. He also trained the acolytes in the use of the thurible and other implements. This practice was discontinued after the arrival of the new parish pastor Rev.Dr.J.Lüdemann. After some time, some congregation members and acolytes asked, why incense was no longer used. The parish pastor was tasked to present a paper on the use of incense in Lutheran Sunday Services.

b. History

The burning of incense had widespread use in antiquity: in many religions, in the Roman pagan and emperor-worship as well in ancient Judaism. Because of its connection with the pagan emperor-worship in the Roman Empire, it was not used during the first three centuries of Christian worship. At the end of the fourth century, however, a detailed description of incense being used in Christian worship was found in historical documents, which related its use in Holy Week and Easter services in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. Limited at the outset to honour the celebrant's entrance and the book of gospels before the gospel reading, the use of incense grew rapidly as an honorific for ministers, choir, congregation, at the elevation of the bread and wine and other parts of the service as well.

Nowadays incense is used in several mainline churches, especially the Catholic Church, Anglican Church and some Lutheran Churches. Examples for use might be:

- The Easter Vigil (Easter night service) is one time when incense is often used. After the fire is lit in the darkness outside the church building, the Easter candle, lit from the fire, is "honoured" by incense. The thurifer (the person who carries the incense container known as the thurible) walks ahead of the candle and leads it and the procession of ministers and worshipers into the darkened sanctuary/ church building. As the service proceeds incense is subsequently used to "honour" the Baptismal water, the Bible, the altar, the clergy and the congregation.
- During Midweek Lenten Devotions incense is used in some churches. Then, used as a symbol of prayer, it may be burned in a vessel sitting stationary on the altar while the congregation sings from Psalm 141, "Let my prayer rise before you as incense; the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice."
- In some churches, incense is used in all holy communion services with varying intensity: sometimes incense is only used to „cense“ the altar, sometimes during the procession, the reading of the gospel, the liturgist and even the congregation.

c. Theological Considerations

Just like with the use of the term „Jehova“, the use of incense belongs to the „adiaphora“ – the issues of church practice or ritual, which are not by themselves essentially important (see 1.b. above).

Quite a few **biblical references** to Frankincense can be found – especially in the legal and historical books of the Old Testament (Ex. 30:34; Lev. 2:1; Lev. 2:2; Lev. 2:15; Lev. 2:16; Lev. 5:11; Lev. 6:15; Lev. 24:7; Num. 5:15, Neh. 13:5; Neh. 13:9)

Next to several other meanings and symbolism in other religions, in the Christian context incense symbolises prayer ascending from earth to heaven (Psalm 141). It is a visible and sensuous connection between heaven and earth.

Frankincense, which is "pure" incense, was one of the gifts of the Magi to the infant Jesus (Matthew 2:11) and was considered more valuable than gold when used in trading in early

times in Arabia. It was procured as irregular lumps of resin from an East African and Arabian tree of the genus *Boswellia*. Resin for incense is collected from a number of other kinds of trees as well. Granules of resin are sprinkled on coals burning in the thurible, a metal pan whose cover is pierced with holes. The thurible is swung back and forth on its chains allowing the scent to waft into the air as a symbol of prayer ascending to heaven or as an "honorific" -- to honor persons and objects.

But the dangers of abuse of incense and „offerings“ are also mentioned.

„What do I care about incense from Sheba or sweet calamus from a distant land? Your burnt offerings are not acceptable; your sacrifices do not please me.“ Jeremiah 6:20

“I hate, I despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your assemblies. Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Though you bring choice fellowship offerings, I will have no regard for them. Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps. But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!” Amos 5:21-24

A visitor of a diocesan rally, when he saw the colourful procession of acolytes (izikhonzi) using incense and bells, commented: when the proper protocol during a service – including all the gestures by acolytes – seem more important than the practical social outreach by the same congregation, then the prophet Amos and Jesus himself would be moving out of this „circus“. Other visitors – especially from Germany – found it difficult to accept, that the liturgical elements, which reminded them of the Roman Catholic church, were „creeping back“ into the Lutheran Church. One visitor said: „I come from Eisenach, the birth town of Martin Luther, who fought against these excesses in church, against the ‚show‘, against the magical belief, that taking part in certain rituals might benefit the believer. If these rituals drag attention away from the word of God and the sermon, then we are fooling ourselves.“

The proper place of incense in the service and its relation to the sermon and to the social action/ outreach activities in the congregation definitely need to be considered. If the smell of incense and the sound of ringing bells drowns out the cry of the poor and the stench of poverty, then we have left the path Jesus walked on.

Nevertheless, it is also important to not rely only on the sermon as the presence of the Word of God, as stressed in a speech by Bishop emer. Dr. Manas Buthelezi.

*„I think that we Lutherans sometimes wrongly identify the proclamation of the Word with the medium of a formal sermon. Yet the sermon is only an explanation of the Word, which has been proclaimed through the liturgical reading of Scripture, the Epistle text and the Gospel text. The Word is not only read and heard, but it also seen, smelt and felt. The Word during the liturgy does not only mean the reading of the texts from the bible and the sermon, but also *everything that happens and is heard*, namely, the liturgical silence, the prayers, the hymns; and *everything that is seen*, namely, the cross, the altar, the church vestments, the various forms of the liturgical art; and *everything that is felt*: the touch of the hand shake and pastor’s hand during the laying on of hands. In the case of the Catholic liturgy during my student days, there was also the *smelling of the presence of God* during the rite of the burning of incense. No matter how you qualify or disqualify these things theologically, their spiritual impact could not be missed by us students. All of us felt the presence of God during the morning mass.“* Bishop Dr. Manas Buthelezi in a speech held in 2003.

Furthermore, it has to be stressed, that liturgy is alive and evolving. A church, which in its structure, its constitution, its hymns and liturgy always stays the same is slowly dying. Just as the reformer Martin Luther talked about the „*ecclesia semper reformanda*“ (the constantly evolving, developing, reforming church), we should guard against a conservatism, which seeks to cast our worship in cement. This criticism of conservatism can be levelled for and

against the use of incense – some see the use of incense in Lutheran Worship as a way of reverting back to the „old ways of Catholicism“; others see the conservatism in a Lutheran Service in South Africa, which stays with the Liturgy brought by Lutheran Missionaries from abroad and argue, that the church has to reform its Liturgies in order to be relevant: introduction of african melodies in the liturgy and a more wholistic worship, which involves all our senses (see speech of Bishop Dr.M.Buthelezi above), and thus argue for the use of incense.

d. Cultural Considerations

Especially during childhood, but also later on, believers „emotional memory“ and the „memory of the senses“ play an important part in their lifelong journey of faith. Many of us know prayers, which we heard our mother pray with us, when we were children. Many remember songs and hymns from our childhood – we remember the candles, the choirs, the pastors in their robes, the cross behind the altar, the uniform of the prayer women (abasizikazi) and maybe a big bible. These and other memories of church are part of our faith journey and should be nurtured from an early age. Incense, when used in the right way, may be one of those deeply spiritual and emotional memories, which even later can draw us closer to God.

In our South African context, the burning of certain substances during religious rituals is widespread. Tellingly, in isiZulu the same term (imphephu) is used for incense in the church as well as for the material burnt when visiting a diviner/ traditional healer during the perceived communication with the ancestors or even when conducting certain rituals of african traditional religion at home. What implications does this have for the use of incense in Lutheran Worship? Are we reminding members of african traditional religious practices which are widespread (even amongst our church members), but which might not be compatible with our christian faith?

Many times in the history of Christianity rituals, words and festivals of other religions have been taken up and „baptised“ to be used in the christian service. There are countless examples of this practice of inculturation – expressing the gospel and the faith not only in the language but also in other aspects of the culture of certain population groups. In Germany, before the advent of Christianity, big round wheels made of wood and set alight were rolled down steep mountain slopes as part of a celebration to honour the Goddess „Ostera“, Goddess of Light and fertility or the advent of the season of spring, new life and procreation. Today big fires are still lit in the night before Easter, but now it is a sign of hope, that God’s love shines even in the darkest night. From this fire the light of hope is brought into the church through the Easter Candle. Other pre-christian symbols which were „baptised“ and then used in the christian faith or in „christian societies“ are for example the christmas tree and the easter egg. Most important consideration is, that believers who use incense (and other symbols) are properly educated about the meaning and aim of its use: to worship God, to experience his presence with all our senses. All other expectations and myths must be dispelled: Burning incense does not by itself cleanse us of our sin; being „censed“ does not make a person holier than others; the incense rising up does not „magically“ open God’s ears and eyes to our prayers (as might be believed with the use of imphephu in the context of ancestor veneration) – it does not make our prayers „more successful“. What incense is supposed to do is to help us focus our thoughts and mind on our merciful God. It may help us realise the loving presence of God – a presence which is not dependant on rational thought or good deed, but which is lovingly given unconditionally. The experience of the mystery and majesty of our God may also be enhanced by the use of incense.

e. Practical Considerations

Use of incense in Lutheran Services needs to be carefully considered. The parish councils and the congregation members need to be informed on the origin, the history of its use in other religions and in the history of Christianity and – most importantly – on the reasons for its use. Any myths of magical „powers“ of using incense need to be dispelled.

Just as a pastor should not unilaterally introduce and impose the use of incense on a parish, a council should not impose its use on a pastor. A compromise which will make all sides feel comfortable and of which the main aim is the glory of God should be reached.

When introducing the use of incense, a congregation or parish must also consider the question of diversity of spiritual expression amongst congregations and denominations (other christian churches). In ELCSA the use of incense is not known in the majority of dioceses (mainly SED and CD use incense – but not in all of their congregations). This liturgical practise should not jeopardise the unity of our church. The same goes for multicultural parishes such as ours, where English-speaking congregations do not know and do not practice the use of incense and may have quite different feelings about this topic than others, who are more used to it. Especially during joint services, rallies on parish and circuit level, this fact and the aim of unity in diversity will have to be considered. The use of incense should never become an issue that divides a church, a parish or even a congregation.

Proper training of acolytes and pastors using incense is important. Otherwise the whole ritual will not be practices to the glory of God, but to the amusement, distraction or even shock of the believers. Wooden floors, altar cloths, even clerical vestments and robes of pastors have been ruined by careless, untrained and wrong use of incense. Even health issues have to be taken into consideration – in a confined small worship venue, especially on a hot day, the use of incense can convert the church into a steam room, making breathing difficult – especially for members with certain allergies. A sneezing and wheezing congregation or pastor has nothing to do with focus on God’s presence. When using other venues, such as rented halls, the owners will first have to be asked for permission to use incense – some might object to the smell, that might stay, others point to fire safety regulations.

Finally – the introduction of incense and other liturgical elements or rituals should also always be balanced by the growth and support of projects or initiatives to pass God’s love on to the poor, the sick, the depressed and the marginalised. A one-sided enthusiasm of congregations towards liturgical „theatre“ with no apparent love or urge towards social-outreach work will lead us away from God and His will for us.

This paper was presented to the Durban Central Parish Council by Parish Pastor Rev.Dr.Joe Lüdemann. Further topics (eg. on the use of bells in the service) are forthcoming. This paper was accepted by the Parish Council and it was resolved to disseminate it in all congregations in Durban Central Parish from October 2010 onwards.