

Homily – Evensong Trinity XIX

BBC Radio 3's 'Choral Evensong' has been the longest continuously running outside broadcast in history, it began in 1926. It is said that Evensong is the glory of Anglicanism, Cranmer's masterpiece, a jewel born of the English Reformation. It involves the Psalmody of Bishop Coverdale, the reading of sacred scriptures of Old and New Testaments, the singing of the Canticles of Luke's gospel - the English Choral tradition at its best, and prayers in the cadences and syntax of late medieval English, with its beauty and majesty. We heard it this evening in much the same way as it has been said or sung for the last 450 or so years. A fellow server in the sanctuary, once said to me: 'even if it were conclusively proven, without any doubt, that God did not exist' I would still come to Evensong! Even Richard Dawkins is reported to have once said, 'I have a certain love for Evensong.' It is regarded as part of the cultural history of the English-speaking world. Even in an era where attendance at formal acts of worship has declined Evensong has retained its popularity, even more so now with the advent of technology, yesterday I virtually attended Evensong at Christ Church Oxford.

I wonder what you came for this evening? I doubt that any of us can give a watertight explanation. Indeed, many of us would struggle to give a complete, coherent explanation of why we attend church, perhaps we don't need to.

TS Eliot in the poem Little Gidding wrote:

*And what you thought you came for
Is only a shell, a husk of meaning
From which the purpose breaks only when it is fulfilled
If at all. Either you had no purpose
Or the purpose is beyond the end you figured
And is altered in fulfilment.*

We all know about Rites of Passage, baptisms, weddings etc. But to a degree the Church and its worship is itself a rite of passage. Everything that we do is an echo of that which has already been and an anticipation of what is to come. This is the *raison d'être* of the Church to be a passage between the two.

The early Church did just that, the new converts met in homes, recalling the life of Christ and awaiting his return, they often suffered persecution and met secretly away from the prying eyes of the authorities. When Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire things changed, and people began to gather in larger numbers, grander venues were needed and these were often built where extraordinary things had occurred. St Helena the mother of Emperor Constantine discovered a remnant of the true cross and so at that place established the Church of the Holy Sepulchre one of Christianity's sacred sites.

There is a history in our tradition for this to occur. In tonight's reading from the Old Testament Jacob wakes from his dream in which he has a vision of a ladder, the means by which heaven and earth are united, and becoming aware that something extraordinary has occurred he builds a pillar anoints it and declares the place to be Beth-el the House of God. It is right that we should mark these events and the people they memorialise and over the centuries we have built more and more wonderful places to do just, we are gathered in one such place this evening, one of the glories of the Victorian Tractarian movement. But they are simply ladders, elaborate ladders yes, but ladders none the less, the means by which we listen for that echo from the past and look to the future.

In the reading from Hebrews we encounter the 'A listers' of the Old Testament. Abel (Cain gets a mention too), Enoch, Noah, Abraham and Sarah and their heirs Isaac and Jacob. They were all pilgrims seeking their homeland as St Augustine in his Confessions wrote: 'God waits for the soul to come back

to its home with him; without that home in God nothing can have any meaning.' Their raison e'tre? They were people of a promise, and they looked for its fulfillment. The writer tells us that they are bound together through faith and gives us the best explanation of faith in the scriptures: the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.

The Church since earliest times has looked to the Eucharist as the central act of remembrance and rightly so. But unfortunately, the controversies around its meaning and conduct have become such that it has alienated some, barriers have been put up and it is for some no longer a ladder, the means by which heaven and earth are joined; and I wonder if this is why Evensong is so important.

This evening we engage in a rite of passage, in which we seek assurance of things that have been and look for that which is not yet. For the monastics part of this evening's office formed Compline, when they retired in silence, darkness having fallen: 'Lord lettest thou thy servant depart in peace.' The end of the day when they looked back on what had been and to the dawn when all will be made new. We rarely have complete silence and darkness, certainly not around these parts, but nonetheless we are reminded of the passage of time and of past, present and future.

But perhaps it is the Magnificat that most inspires, the central canticle of the old office of Vespers. A statement of radical reversal, the mighty and the proud brought low, the rich and poor in changed circumstances, a great hymn of hope, a vision of a better way. The Church proclaims the teaching of Christ to which this canticle gives voice - a new way, the conviction of things hoped for, the kingdom of God, the home and fulfilment to which we are called.

What are you here for. The answer to this question will be different for each of us. I hope and pray that each of us have a sense of that ladder between heaven and earth, we are all on differing rungs, perhaps sometimes we feel nearer the top than at other times. Perhaps sometimes we might even struggle to even see the ladder. Faith is like that, is it ever consistent? We are seeking after meaning which again will have times of clarity and confusion. We are pilgrim people seeking a home.

And what you thought you came for is only a shell, a husk of meaning, wrote TS Eliot. The Church and its worship is something that is passing, preliminary. It is itself an echo of the past, one that projects us into the future. Its complete meaning is beyond us, we cannot grasp the fullness of that which the Church and its worship prefigures. But perhaps it is evening rites such as these that are means whereby we glimpse meaning, a ladder from which we can see home, and a rite of passage assuring us of that for which we wait.

Since coming among you Susan has been gifted a book by Henry Speagle, someone known to many of you, called Pools of Peace. In it he writes: 'At present the Church is a door to the kingdom, which swings on a hinge of divine ambiguity or, perhaps better, divine paradox only understood by God himself.' What are we here for? Just to hold that door ajar. Amen.