

St Mary Magdalen Festival Weekend
Evensong and Benediction
Fr Christopher Chessun

It really has been a very great joy to return once again to Mary Mags today. As for many of us, it is a place which I know and love well, and where, many years ago I was nurtured and formed in the Catholic Faith, albeit Catholic Anglican Faith. Since then I have been so glad to see how this wonderful community of faith has flourished, changing and developing in some things but remaining the same in what is of first importance.

Fr Peter has asked me to reflect for a few minutes this evening on presence and worship, which I am very glad to do, the more so as we have been led so well in our worship this evening by the reunited choir.

One of the deepest dynamics in the Christian life is summed up in a saying of our Saviour which Matthew, Mark and Luke all record: “Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it” (Mt 10.39, Mk 8.35, Lk 9.24). This theme runs throughout the

Scriptures. What we have is what we let go of. We only truly receive when we give. We become ourselves when we deny ourselves.

Thus if we are to be truly present in worship, we must be, in a way, absent. Not the absence of thinking about our emails as we sing, nor the absence of arriving late. But the rich, full absence that comes from striving beyond ourselves, reaching with our attention to all the beauty that surrounds us before and behind. At its best this is a form of that self-emptying, that kenosis, of which St Paul writes –“Christ Jesus... though he was in the form of God... emptied himself... being born in human likeness.” (Phil. 2.6-7)

Not an emptying so as to become hollow, but an emptying so as to fill others. Not a draining away, but a pouring out. This is not an altogether easy matter, though. For worship is demanding, complex and beautiful. It takes skill and concentration. It is something at which one can excel even if always only as beginners. And it is no good saying that this appertains to the “mere outer forms”. There are no “mere outer forms”:

our worship is embodied, using heart, mind, lungs and lips to the full.

So there is always a danger that our own “performance” of worship comes to predominate. Worship becomes about us and our skill and the beauty that we create. And this is not presence, but the wrong kind of absence.

I want to make two suggestions that may help here. The first is to trust in place and space. We are richly blessed in the Church of England with a heritage of buildings which, through long use for good purposes by good people, trusting in the Holy Spirit, have acquired a sacramental quality. “The very presence of the building speaks of other values, other hopes”¹ as Andrew Davison and Alison Milbank have said. Indeed, Andrew Rumsey, a Priest in my own diocese, writing from a more Reformed perspective, has just the same insight: “The Church’s narrative does not portray human ‘belonging’ – either here or hereafter – as detached from the natural world:

¹ Andrew Davison and Alison Milbank, *For the Parish* (London: SCM, 2010) p. 151

rather, it relocates it in a vision of resurrected creation”²

This building consecrated by St Hugh of Lincoln and hallowed by the continual worship of the faithful – this and not another – is where I came to appreciate the deep presence that is possible in true worship in the resonance of particular place and space, in company with the great cloud of witness that have worshipped here before us, known down the ages for a deep joy in the Gospel.

Fr Charles Smith as Vicar in the 1970s (whose year’s mind was on Monday) encouraged and nurtured me in my vocational journey and for this I remain profoundly grateful. When visitors to Mags from overseas on experiencing the Sunday liturgy asked him in some amazement whether this really was Church of England, he retorted without a moment’s hesitation, ‘This is the Church of England as God intended her to be.’

² Andrew Rumsey, *Parish – An Anglican theology of place* (London: SCM, 2017) p. 182

Place and space are set in the context of our worship within which, secondly, our looking and listening come to the fore. True harmony is not forged by each of us merely singing or playing the right notes, but by all of us listening with keen, self-giving attention. So it is with prayer. And as we enter into the sacrament of grace in Benediction and dare to gaze on the divine presence in our midst we look with a purposeful looking that empties us into that which is infinitely greater than we are.

This is the key to being present in worship and to presenting 'ourselves, our souls and bodies to be a reasonable, holy and living sacrifice' (BCP 1662). We bring our skills, energies, gifts and commitment to our singing, speaking and moving: but it is in acute listening and looking that our worship is perfected. As we listen and gaze ever more deeply we come out of ourselves, out of isolation into community, out of finite humanity into perfected divinity and thus we are equipped for joyful, eager and loving service. It is this which makes true worship the bedrock of the whole Christian life, characterised by being both Christ-centred and outward focussed. We look, we listen, we allow ourselves to be

poured out. And then in that mysterious self-emptying absence we are at last truly present, and know and indeed may know the fullness of God's presence with us now as in the words of St Thomas Aquinas:

 Thee we adore, O hidden Saviour, thee,
 Who at this blessed feast art pleased to be;
 Both flesh and spirit in thy presence fail,
 Yet here thy presence we devoutly hail.

Amen.