

*“Worship lifting up the senses”*

Paul was waiting for his companions to join him in Athens. He had caused upset in Thessalonica and had fled for his life. Now he waited in Athens for Silas and Timothy to catch up. He had time on his hands so he toured the Greek capital. He saw that the Athenians were religious people for the city's streets were dotted with shrines.

As we heard in today's New Testament reading, after some time Paul went to the Areopagus – a public meeting place – Athens's Speakers' Corner – and he addressed any who would listen. He spoke of the God who is everywhere, unknown,

the God in whom we live and move and have our being

the God who is the Ground of our Being, the beginning and end all of our lives, the beginning and End of all that is.

the God who is not far from anyone of us,

the God who gives breath to mortals and life to all living things,

the God who does not live in shrines made by human hands.

And, this morning, Paul's 'description' of God leads me to ask, if God is everywhere, and if we live and move and have our being in God, why go to church, this shrine made with human hands? What's the point? Can't we commune with God, can't we worship God anywhere?

Some of you have come this morning for a special reason – to celebrate Michaela's baptism but you know as I do that this is not the only time you will come to church. There's an open invitation to come anytime, but the question remains: apart from coming for those special occasions, why come? After all, even the rosier assessment of recent statistics suggests that less than a third of the people in Britain who say they believe in God choose to go to church.

Last month one of our church newspapers ran an article asking four different people why they went to church. One, who was less than enthusiastic, said that going to church is like visiting a museum full of old things that no one wants any more, or like attending a society for the preservation of outdated practices. It's the only place you can go where they expect you to sing out loud whether or not you know a note of music

and the only place you can go where you are expected to sit quietly and listen to a single droning pontificating voice saying not very much for at least ten minutes.

And there lies the problem. Churches are faulty; they are earthly and shabby. Built with human hands and run by frail human beings, they are susceptible to all human frailties and can be disreputable and even disgusting. They readily descend into petty-mindedness and blinkered attitudes. But, there's potential also: at the same time, churches can be places transformed by awareness of the divine. They can be full of God and God's saints. The earthliness of church may disgust us but so too can churches' focalised, intense transcendent awareness of the divine transfix and transform us.

Sometimes unexpectedly. A young man cycling in the countryside came across a country church and, once he was sure there was nothing going on, he stepped inside and the door thudded shut behind him. In awkward reverence he removed his cycle clips and ran his hand around the font. He sensed a tense, musty unignorable silence yet began to explore. He stepped into the lectern and pronounced 'Here endeth' louder than he had intended. His voice echoed and sniggered around the room. Back at the door he signed the book, donated a useless Irish sixpence and reflected that the place was not worth stopping for.

But Philip Larkin, that young cyclist, *had* stopped and the empty church led him to write a poem called *Church Going* in which he asked what will happen when churches fall completely out of use.

Will they remain places still visited by superstitious folk? And who will be the very last to go to the church for what it was?

Ultimately though, Philip Larkin, although a non-believer, an atheist, realised that it had pleased him to stand in silence in that church – he was glad he had gone to church – because it was “a serious place on serious earth.” Church was somewhere that mattered, a place to grow wise in. Church going may be going, but church going matters.

It matters because churchgoing leads to change and action. The coolness of the shrine fuels the heat of activity. What we do here, feel here, meet here and say here provokes service and action in the world and helps us find sense in the changes of history, the perplexities of the present and the promise of tomorrow.

So I have often heard people talking of the church as an oasis, a watering hole in a dry and thirsty land, and a place where hungry souls can be replenished. It’s no accident that we call our café The Oasis Café! Yet we can also think of the church as a desert,

a sacred space offering space for silence in a noisy world,

offering space to breathe in a crowded world,

offering a place to wait, as Paul did in Athens, for our companion-God,

and offering space for emptiness in the sickly abundance of western capitalism.

People just pop in to Trinity sometimes when it’s empty to sit. It is in such wildernesses, such emptiness, such wild spaces, that God is found.

Why go to church? Because God might be there.

That’s why my expectation is that after going to church you will feel better. If you come lonely, you return having met friends;

if you come feeling guilty, you return forgiven;

if you come feeling burdened, you return feeling free.

If you came this morning for the special reason of Michaela’s baptism you have done something significant, and if you came because you habitually do, you have still done something significant. In worship something will have touched and lifted up the senses.

Of course, this scares the pants off people like me, those who run church, those who lead worship, those who make worship’s music and those who serve as deacons running the place. How can we rise to such responsibility?

Well, we relax and we trust that in coming to church we will hear whispers of divine love and echoes of divine mercy, that we will see visions of rapture and be lost in God’s love. But the first step is to put ourselves in the place where God may be found. Of course, you would not expect me to argue *against* churchgoing and, true to type, the point of this sermon has been to argue for it and to invite you:

come again, for here we aim to make space to meet the God who is everywhere and in whom we live and move and have our being, the God on whom our very being relies, and the God to whom we ascribe all praise and power and glory.