

Evensong, St Paul's Cathedral – 16th September, 2012

Ship of Fools is a long-running website, which proclaims itself as 'The Magazine of Christian Unrest'. It's a collection of features, articles and message-boards which take a light-hearted approach to the Christian faith; almost an online, churchy version of *Private Eye*.

Perhaps the most popular section of this website is *The Mystery Worshipper*, a collection of reports written by nomadic churchgoers, who turn up *in cognito* at church services and analyse such things as the style of worship, the warmth of the welcome, the comfort of the seating, and, *indeed*, the length and quality of the sermon.

The only indication the Mystery Worshipper gives of his or her presence is a calling card discreetly placed into the collection plate. (I am led to believe that mystery worshippers keep a stash of these cards about their person. Perhaps someone sitting next to you is suddenly ferreting in their wallet or handbag, or has a hand inside their jacket pocket...)

I should say, I am not nor have I ever been a mystery worshipper. In fact, I'm not really sure I approve of the practice of publically yet anonymously judging another Christian community's act of worship. Words of Jesus from our second reading spring to mind: 'Judge not, that ye be not judged.'

What the *Mystery Worshipper* undoubtedly highlights, however, is the importance of worship and, more than that, the importance of *quality* worship. The fact that mystery worshippers go to the effort of writing and submitting reports about the churches they visit demonstrates that the people of God actually *care* about what happens in church. And today, as the Cathedral admits new choristers and a new organ scholar, I want to reflect on what worship is, and how we should approach it.

Worship is, quite simply, our orienting of ourselves towards God. It is the place where we discover the proper relationship between creature and Creator, between human and divine.

Worship is where the human soul, in all its nakedness and depravity, subjects itself to the utter perfection which is God, and, however inchoately, offers praise and adoration. It is the soul's only possible response to the infinite and unconditional love of God, revealed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. 'Christian worship,' writes the splendid twentieth century spiritual writer, Evelyn Underhill, 'is the total adoring response of man to the one Eternal God self-revealed in time.'

And yet, in the realisation of this chasm between humankind and God, worship is also where we stand at the threshold of heaven, where, despite our failings and our brokenness, we haul ourselves up to glimpse the glory of God. That's why words of Jacob from the book of Genesis are etched on the glass doors through which you entered the Cathedral: 'This is none other than the House of God, and this is the gate of heaven.' Almost as apposite are words from Belinda Carlisle's 80s classic: 'Ooh, heaven is a place on earth.' Worship blurs the line between the temporal and the eternal; it is where the boundary between earth and heaven is wafer-thin, and where human beings dare to tread on holy ground.

New choristers and organ scholar, today you are admitted into the foundation of this Cathedral with a share in the responsibility of leading worship in this iconic house of God. As you seek to offer God-oriented, glory-glimpsing worship, I want to suggest that this task demands of us two things. And I don't just direct this at those who have a particular function in the worshipping life of the church, but to all of us. No-one can be a passive observer when it comes to worship. Even in the relatively undemanding liturgy of Choral Evensong, we are *all* called to participate in the offering.

Firstly, worship demands that we offer to God the very best of which we are capable. There is a prevailing culture in the Church of England of dumbing-down our worship to make it more accessible and less exclusive. But this is to misunderstand the very nature of worship. We are to use our God-given skills and talents for that which is their primary purpose, the worship of God. And, as we do this, each according to our ability, we help one other to *imagine*; to be taken to that intersection between earth and heaven.

However, we do this as imperfect human beings, and the worship we offer, this side of the veil, will always be imperfect. For trained, professional musicians, and other perfectionists, this is not easy to admit! But, even at St Paul's Cathedral, there will be missed entries, smudged notes, and dodgy tuning. But, if we are offering our *best*, human error is permissible. After all, liturgical music is not a performance, it is an offering.

And secondly, we are to remember that worship is something over which we do not have complete control. When we worship God we have to *let go* a bit. Because, in the act of offering worship, we are submitting ourselves to God, surrendering our wills to his will, placing ourselves on that threshold between heaven and earth, so that he can touch, transfigure and transform our lives.

However exquisite and ordered our worship might be, it is worthless unless we are open to that transforming power of God. This is not an argument for unstructured, unordered worship; in fact, quite the opposite. It is through the ceremonies and habits which are familiar and accustomed, when we cease to worry about what comes next, or if our music is in the right order, or whether we should be standing, sitting, or kneeling, that God can open our minds and hearts to a greater knowledge and understanding of him. It is by being prepared for worship, spiritually and practically, that we can be receptive to God's renewal and transformation.

Kallistos Ware, in his introduction to the Orthodox Church, tells the story of some *tenth century* Mystery Worshippers. Vladimir, Prince of Kiev, in his pursuit of true religion, sends envoys to various countries of the world to sample their worship. In both Muslim countries and the Christianised West they find the religion too joyless, too uninspiring, and, in one case, too smelly. Finally they arrive at Constantinople and attend the Divine Liturgy in the Church of the Holy Wisdom.

‘We knew not whether we were in heaven or on earth,’ Vladimir’s envoys reported, ‘for surely there is no such splendour or beauty anywhere upon earth. We cannot describe it to you: only this we know, that God dwells there among men, and that their service surpasses the worship of all other places. For we cannot forget that beauty.’

May the new choristers and organ scholar of this Cathedral, and all of us gathered here, seek to contribute to, participate in, and experience such splendour and unforgettable beauty. In so doing, may we orient ourselves to the God who we worship, and glimpse his glory, knowing not whether we are in heaven or on earth. And, committing ourselves to the worship for which we are made and to which we are called, may we experience the transforming power of God in our lives, not as Mystery Worshippers, but as Worshipers of the Mystery which is God himself.