

EVENSONG – TRINITY 12 (YEAR C)

Many of you will be aware of the report by the Bible Society on trends in church attendance, and the subsequent phenomenon that has been dubbed *The Quiet Revival*: whilst not entirely statistically reliable, the salient point of the report is that church-going has increased among 18- to 24-year-olds by a considerable percentage between 2018 and 2024. In London, at least, this has been borne out, with many churches reporting a similar trend; and here, I'm pleased to say, we regularly see new, young faces, who, though they may drop in every few weeks, sit at the back, and try their best to avoid the Vicar – who wouldn't? – are tentatively exploring the realm of the spiritual, and have plucked up the courage to walk through the doors of their parish church.

But, in spite of this obviously good and encouraging news, there was a sad but inevitable backlash on social media in the wake of the publication of the report: the Anglican Twitter police thought it necessary and important to question the motivation of these young people for coming to church, and to suggest that young men, in particular, were doing so because of their conservative political beliefs, which the commentariat found distasteful. And, whilst their assertions may be true, it is worth remembering that none of us comes to church to have our political opinions or secularly-informed prejudices confirmed, but rather we come to be conformed to Jesus Christ, whose Gospel transcends our petty politicking, challenges our obsessions and, if we will allow it, changes us slowly

and imperceptibly by the inculcation of the radical virtues and heavenly vision of the Kingdom of God. As one blogger puts it, 'Nowhere in the Gospels does Jesus say you have to vote Green'.

But, back to the positive: what might be drawing these young people into the life of the Church? Let's move from anecdote to evidence. One Gen Z convert, who attends a fashionable Anglo-Catholic church in the West End, writes on her Substack, 'I had some painful conversations with a good Christian friend when I first started attending church where they suggested that I was going because I liked the aesthetic. To be fair to them, my church is glorious. I do not go to church to hear Byrd... but I'm sure it does help you'. And how right she is! But her experience clearly highlights two misunderstandings: first, that there is a single 'right' reason to come to church; and, secondly, that beauty in and of itself cannot be a vehicle for conversion. Here, we need to remember what S. Augustine of Hippo taught: that the transcendentals of goodness, beauty and truth are fundamental attributes of God, and some of the means by which, through the seen and the material, he communicates to us his life, love and grace. It was this principle that inspired our Anglo-Catholic forebears to enrich the Church's liturgy with the lost externals of ritual and music, which both contribute to the worship of God in the beauty of holiness, and have the intrinsic power to reveal and convert us to the source of all goodness, beauty and truth – God himself. To dismiss such grace is to limit God's omnipotence; and to

belittle the conversion experiences of others – however unspectacular or different from our own – is both a failure of imagination, and a denial of God's presence in mind, music and matter.

And this, surely, is why churches such as ours are well-placed to offer this encounter with God to those who, however sceptical or unsure, seek something more than secular bromides can offer. Architecture, liturgy and choral music combine to create a liminal space, in which the mystery of the divine becomes tangible; where, through the administration of the Sacraments, human lives are nourished and sustained by grace, as individuals find themselves part of a greater whole, and incorporated into the drama of our redemption in Christ.

Now, of course, I am biased; and, having been brought up in the Evangelical tradition of the Church of England, can witness to my own spiritual journey, which has convinced me that the fullest expression of the duty of humanity to God can only be found in the sacramental economy, and in worship that is focussed entirely God-ward, and is not a sentimental and experiential imitation of worldly thrill-seeking and temporary self-abandon. As another convert put it recently, 'Christianity to me seemed to be either slightly sinister or obscure, or in its Anglican guise too often nice but beige and a bit stupid, purveyed by terrifyingly dull, suburban simpletons who sang embarrassing songs about how God had put the "cold in the snowflake" and "the hump upon the camel"'. Ouch! But, if a little harsh, I have to admit that that is a fair assessment of the tradition

in which I was nurtured before going to university. And, whilst certainly not seeking to bash or belittle our Evangelical brothers and sisters, we needs must be honest about the fact that so often their worship provides superficial sensory satisfaction, but ultimately fails spiritually and sacramentally to sustain the soul – medleys of vacuous, religious pop songs, and preaching that would insult the intelligence of a five-year-old do not mature and well-rounded Christians make. This, I believe wholeheartedly, is why the Established Church needs to rediscover and have confidence in the converting and sustaining power of the Sacraments, and dignified, unapologetic liturgy: whether it be the majestic language of the Book of Common Prayer, or the music of Howells, Byrd, and the hymns of Charles Wesley, we have at our disposal the tools that God has given us for the evangelisation of this nation. Too often those gifts have been derided, and even despised by a managerial elite, whose panic in the face of decline, and insistence that ‘success’ can only be measured numerically have failed both the Church, and the people whose salvation is entrusted to our care. However, the tide is turning, or so it would seem, and for that we must give thanks to God. And this is why it is all the more important that we, to whom the deposit of Faith and the treasures of our liturgical and musical tradition have been entrusted, must not gate-keep those gifts by questioning people’s motivations for coming to church, or by seeking to make windows into men’s souls. Rather, it is both our privilege and responsibility to hand on what we have

received, not only with gratitude for that which nourishes and sustains us in our life in Christ; but also in humble acknowledgement that we are but the temporary stewards of the mysteries of God, and that it is his grace alone that has the power to make saints of sinners; just as it is the unseen work of the Holy Spirit that opens people's hearts to the possibility of God, and converts them to the truth and redemption that are offered to all humanity in Jesus Christ.

So, whether this revival is quiet or otherwise, and whatever the reasons might be for people turning to Jesus Christ and to his Church, our task is to be faithful and generous: faithful in our own worship of God, and confident in the pastoral, liturgical, and sacramental ministry that is grounded in the parish system, and has stood the test of time; and generous in our welcome, and in spirit, to all whose hearts are restless, and whose souls are profoundly dissatisfied with the secular, humanist orthodoxy offered by our febrile and fractured society.

To conclude, let us listen again to a recently-converted author: 'It was, in short, by exposure to the liturgy and beauty of traditional Anglican worship, and the brilliance of the Anglican intellectual heritage, that I was brought to Christ. It wasn't long before I felt the desperate yearning to be brought to Christ's presence and grace through the sacraments: I felt like a man in the desert craving a cup of water.' I suspect that many people feel like that, even if they are not able to express it so. Jesus says, 'If any one thirst, let him come to me and drink'. So, let people come to Jesus, and his grace will do the rest. Amen.