

## Sermon, Holy Communion Trinity IV 2006

We are thinking about the basics of the Christian faith. The Lord's Prayer last week, so now let us turn our attention to the Holy Communion, the Eucharist, the Lord's Supper, the Mass. The Holy Mysteries – any of those titles will do. What is it that we do in this hour or so on a Sunday morning? To begin to understand this, we need first to recover something that has been lost. I mean the idea of the sacred, the idea of the Holy. This is something missing from modern life. When I was a boy Sunday was a holy day. "Holy" originally meant other, it meant "different". Sunday was certainly different. We had Sunday clothes and Sunday shoes and Sunday manners. We didn't play in the street. There was no football on TV. And most of the shops were closed

Now where do we find this sense of difference, of holiness? Well we don't. Except here. Here in this service we can recover it. In fact we must recover it if the service is to mean anything at all. First of all, it's not just a meeting. There are, believe it or not, people who adore meetings. Mention an agenda, or minutes or matters arising and a frisson of bureaucratic ecstasy sweeps over them. But the Holy Communion is different. It is a meeting in the sense that we are invited to meet God. For this *he* sets the agenda. And the agenda is sacramental. There is only one item on this agenda and it is holiness, difference.

What we need to make this real to us is imagination. We have to see this hour as sacred time in sacred space with sacred things. So we have to behave differently, as I had to learn to behave differently on my boyhood Sundays. Let me start with you, the congregation – a better word is "people". For this is liturgy. And the definition of "liturgy" is "the work of the people". So what goes on here is your work.

And it is work. It is not just a drowsy reverie punctuated by musical shocks. You have to work at it. You have to concentrate. You have to use your imagination. Some things ought to go without saying. Don't go in for idle chatter. Don't wonder where she got that hat or why the churchwardens sometimes dress like penguins. Don't just *say* the prayers but really *pray* them. Imagine the closeness of God and you will feel his closeness. Lift yourself up, concentrating your whole body, mind, heart and soul to draw near to God.

When it's the intercessions lift up in your mind's eye and with as much feeling as you can the friends and relatives you are praying for. When you make your confession, remember in the ground of your heart what it cost Our Lord to cleanse you from your sins. When it comes to receiving the Blessed Sacrament, tell yourself this truly is the Body and Blood of Christ. Think of the Last Supper. Here it is again and you are privileged and called to it.

It's more difficult for the churchwardens and sidesmen, because they have practical duties to do. But they shouldn't strut and fret about at the back of the church like Alderman Buggins on Lord Mayor's Day. Above all they mustn't develop an "us and them" mentality. Churchwardens and other officers should not see themselves as separate from the people. Churchwardens too are here to kneel where prayer is valid and not to oversee the congregation like cultural anthropologists or religious police.

It's more difficult still for the choir. You must make sure that your singing is an act of devotion. It's not a concert. But there's nothing soppy about an act of devotion. Your act of devotion will be improved if you really work at the rehearsal and if you try your best when you're singing. Make your devotion musical and your music devotional. And don't think when you come to the end of one of the sung parts of the Mass, "Well that's my bit done till the Agnus Dei". Don't doze off during the said prayers, but concentrate and pray the prayers with the same intensity of intelligence and imagination you put into your music.

What about the organist and director of music? It has been said that playing a great church organ is like patting your head and rubbing your tummy while trying to land a Jumbo jet. Those who lead the music at the Mass have almost too much to think about. Therefore, knowing they are going to be very busy, they should make a few moments before the service to dedicate their musical efforts as an act of worship, as a devotion. That little prayer of an Admiral before battle is very suitable: "Lord, thou knowest that this day I have much to do. If I forget thee, do not thou forget me". And don't forget that an act of musical competence such as conducting the Creed or playing the offertory hymn is and should be a fervent prayer.

And what of those who serve in the sanctuary? This is a great privilege – to handle and distribute the sacred elements. The Fathers of the church gave a singular warning to those who serve at the altar: "Make sure you do not become too familiar with holy things". This is doubly hard, for you have to be so expert in what you do that you're not having to concentrate on the mechanics of it. You should practise until it becomes second nature to you. But you have at the same time to guard against becoming blasé and taking the Sacrament for granted.

And so what about the priest? What about me? I have the same responsibility for the words as the choir, organist and conductor have for the music. And I have some of the same problems of a divided consciousness. But I have to obey moral and spiritual imperatives as well. I mustn't think that because I'm up there at the front that I'm the big cheese, or that I'm any more important than anyone else in church. I mustn't be casting a critical eye or ear on the congregation and choir. I have to facilitate your worship, our worship.

I should perform my actions and the words I have to say in such a way that it makes it easier for you to concentrate and enter fully into your devotions. Every priest, like the Pope, is the servant of the servants of God. At the altar I must sound and look neither offhand nor too fussy. I comfort myself with the Prayer Book's saying that the unworthiness of the priest does not hinder the Sacrament. Well, thank God for that.

This service then is our work, our bounden duty and service. It is our privilege. It is also shocking – to be called into the presence of Christ and to receive him in your hands. We must get so that the whole act is natural to us, but we must never lose the sense of its utter strangeness, its difference, its holiness. Join in with all your concentrated imagination, your intelligence and your emotions. The music will help. Remember the Mass is not a committee meeting or a mere gathering of the likeminded. It is a presentation and re-enactment of the sacrifice of Christ. Here you are in St Michael's for sure. But you are also at the Last Supper in the upper room. You are on Calvary with him.

Be it for real then in heart and mind. Let the presence of Christ fill your whole being.

*You are not here to verify, instruct yourself or inform curiosity or carry report. You are here to kneel where prayer has been valid. And prayer is more than an order of words, the conscious occupation of the praying mind, or the sound of the voice praying. ...Here the intersection of the timeless moment is England and nowhere. Never and always*