

I want us to think about our worship of God, and particularly of this service of Holy Communion. We try to worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness because God himself is the source of all beauty. We are well-blessed at St Michael's because we have the building, the traditional liturgy and the music to help us mightily. Let us look at how we begin this morning's service: *In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost.*

This familiar little formula is a shorthand way of drawing us close to God. It repays much meditation because, although it is only the briefest statement, it contains worlds of wonder. God reveals himself everywhere in the form of Trinities. Father, Son and Holy Ghost is also the Trinity of Truth, Beauty and Goodness. And God does not stop there. He emblazons the mark of the Trinity on the whole world. The three dimensions of length, breadth and height. The earth, the sky and the sea. The major triad which is the basis of all musical harmony. These are the natural imprints of the brooding Trinity. And the Trinity is up close and personal. In *I* and *Thou* and in the love between us which makes our relationship possible and real. So we begin *In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost* – to focus our minds and hearts on the whole reason for our being here. We are here not just for Him but in Him.

Then comes the beautiful Collect for Purity. *Almighty God, unto whom all hearts be open...* It is a prayer for single-mindedness in worship. Thus the *purity* prayed for is to be free from distractions. I get distracted all the time. But don't beat yourself up if your mind wanders. Just dismiss your wandering thoughts and return to what you should be thinking about. It goes on, *all desires known*. This bit is livelier in the original Latin: *et omnis voluntas loquitur* – which means *to whom every wish speaks*.

The ninefold *Lord have mercy; Christ have mercy; Lord have mercy*. The form, three sections of three, is of course yet another invocation of the Trinity. It is one of the most ancient prayers, first used in churches in the 4th century.

Glory be to God on high is a wonderful poetic and musical attempt to glorify God who is glorious. Even before this is set to music, it is a progression of ecstatic utterance, the rhythms breathtaking; the cadences sublime. *Gloria in excelsis Deo. Et in terra pax hominibus bonae voluntatis*. And just as miraculous – even if the meaning is slightly changed - in Prayer Book English: *Glory be to God on high. And in earth peace, goodwill towards men*. These rhythms and cadences are part of the glory which we are giving to God. Without this inspired poetic expression the prayer would wilt.

And that is exactly what happens in the modern version. Unbelievably the new version says: *Glory to God in the highest; and peace to his people on earth*. (da-da-da-dah-da-da-dah-dah and dah-da-da-da-da-da-dah). It is a crass piece of doggerel. Doggerel where we are meant to have

glory! There is a word in Hebrew – *ichabod*. It means *the glory has departed*. And that is exactly what has happened in this modern trash. It is the desecration of a glorious prayer. The modern musical setting of this rubbish are naturally appalling. I know someone who reacted violently to this mindless, tasteless innovation. When I arrived in my country parish years ago, I found I had inherited a brilliant organist. Tim Tunnard had been Master of the Music at Birmingham cathedral. When they brought the new service book in, Tim resigned because, as he said, *the new words didn't fit the old music*. Birmingham's loss was our village's gain.

Now I want to insist that there is something called the *religious register*. We recognise it in Latin and in *The King James Bible* and *The Book of Common Prayer*. The words there are supercharged. They resonate and shine out, full of the sense of holiness, something radically different from the way we speak in the street. The language reserved for talking with God and about God. You can't get rid of that religious register and expect the sense of holiness to remain. *And with thy spirit* is religious. *And also with you* is banal, almost crude and it always reminds me of *Up yours!*

Back to the Gloria, and we see a clear example of this. The Latin says: *Qui sedes ad dexteram Patris* which translates well into *Thou that sittest at the right hand of the Father*. It is hard to believe that anyone could be so numbskull as to replace these magnificent locutions with *You are seated at the right hand of the Father*. Anyone who thinks he can offer *You are seated* for *thou that sittest* is theologically and poetically destitute and fit only to be a member of the General Synod. It reminds us of *Please be seated*. Where? Up and a bit to the left of the Liturgical Commission's filing cabinet. It is devoid of religious content. A kind of bureaucratic atheism.

The Gloria, ancient and modern, is a perfect illustration of the fact that you cannot debase the language and expect the religious sense to stay the same. This is true and obvious because it is a consequence of the Incarnation: all our words are derived from The Word which was in the beginning with God. What we have seen in our day is a treason of the clerks: the bishops and clergy who were ordained to uphold our religion have deprived us of it. In the words of *The Preface to The Book of Common Prayer* they are *men as are given to change, and have always discovered a greater regard to their own private fancies and interests, than to that duty they owe to the publick*.

These are not small matters. They go far beyond mere notions of literary taste. It is not a negligible thing to have one's religion taken away.

And so we come next to the gems in our religious register, the magnificent Collects, one for every week in the Christian Year. These featured in a confrontation I had with the Chairman of the Liturgical Commission on *The Today Programme* some years ago. He was an urbane man,

but under his urbanity – an urbanity that would have graced a character out of Anthony Trollope – he was a sort of liturgical Pol Pot. He believed that one could make everything up from year zero. And towards *The Book of Common Prayer* his policy was of slash and burn.

Anyhow, there we were with Brian Redhead conducting the debate. The chairman of the Liturgical Commission insisted that modern people cannot use *The Book of Common Prayer* because, and I quote him, *the language is beyond their parameters of discourse*. I begged to say that my grandmother left school aged twelve and didn't know anything about parameters of discourse: but she taught me all the *Prayer Book Collects* which she knew by heart.

Let us leave these desperate issues for a while and make progress through the order of Holy Communion. Let us leave England and the 21st century behind for a moment and go in our mind's eye to the ancient Middle East at the time of the Apostles. The warm sunshine would be nice! Imagine you are a citizen of Corinth or Thessalonica, Galatia or Rome. You are in church – perhaps in someone's house and a letter is being read to you. This letter is from St Paul himself. Now, when we listen to the Epistle each Sunday, we can know that we and those members of the early church are as one in the Body of Christ. And the reading of the Epistle is what joins us everlastingly to them.

After the Epistle, we hear the Gospel. And we stand up for it because the Gospel always features Our Lord. Let your imagination take you to the Gospel landscape – to Capernaum, the Sea of Galilee, the Temple in Jerusalem, the Garden of Gethsemane, the green hill far away and the Empty Tomb on Easter morning. Imagine you are standing beside Our Lord wherever he is: in the wilderness, by the lakeside, on the Cross. Do this, and you will find intimacy with Him and exceeding great joy when at the end you make the response: *Praise be to thee O Christ!*

I will continue this commentary on the Holy Communion another day.