

Liturgy Sermon

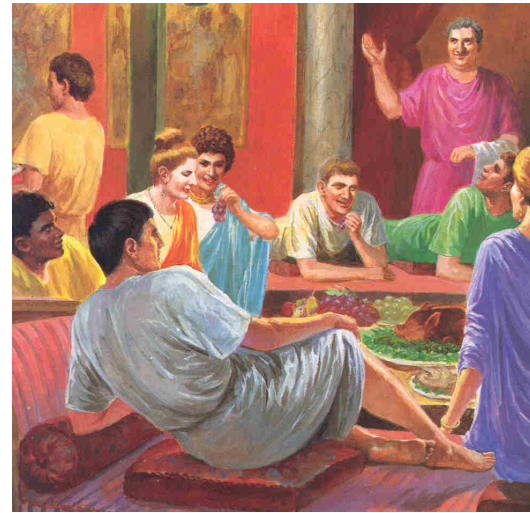
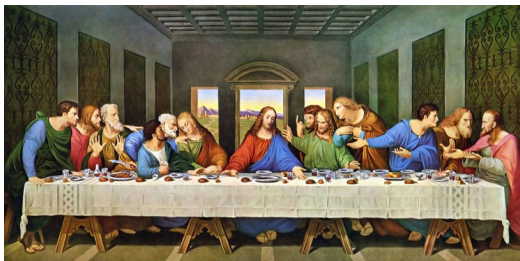
Last week I jokingly said that I hope you don't like having the Mass in the Hall too much as this is only temporary and that we will go back into church. Tony then said something which goes right to the heart of the matter, he said: I like the people but I prefer to be in church.

Tony, I am afraid you basically said everything I am going to say in one sentence, but I am still going to explore this a bit further.

There is a tension in Christian worship right from the beginning between being in community and experiencing the awe-inspiring presence of the Holy.

The Last Supper

- Not on one side of the table
- No high table like in Oxford Common Room
- recline to eat, more comfortable, eat more etc.



So in the last supper the disciples probably sat around the table, and if the table was rectangular it had a particular place for the host.

Very quickly the setting of the Mass become more formal and suitable for larger groups. Early churches had no seats apart from a row of benches around the edges for the older people or mothers with young children – the weakest go to the wall. Otherwise you stood for entire services and went to where the action was – to the lectern, to the altar, to the place of the sermon.

The tension is between an experience of the Holy and being in community with others. Christianity is by definition a community religion, we pray to OUR Father, not my Father, one word for our main act of worship is called Communion, coming together and as nice it would sometimes be to do only our own stuff and as annoying and stupid and unhelpful and irritating other Christians can be (and that's just me) we are bound together – Christianity on your own is not on offer. We are commanded to be in community and in communion – and I keep saying it's one of the joys at St Andrew's that it brings together people totally different in background, ethnicity, origin, culture, wealth and income, age and jobs who would otherwise never meet.

The other aspect is experiencing God and to catch a glimpse of the Holy. We all do this in different ways – on mountaintops, during a country walk, lighting candles in the bathtub – you will have moments in your life which give you a wow feeling. Church buildings and our acts of worship are supposed to allow space for that. Moments of silence, moments of sitting quietly with your God, moments of awe even.

I mentioned before that my two transformative experiences forcing me to rethink my atheism was

- sitting in the dark church of Taizé chanting for an evening with a few hundred other people and
- having an afternoon off in Florence and sitting in Florence cathedral more or less on my own and having a sense of peace which touched me rather deeply.

For me these wow moments have often been connected with architecture and music. We are all different – it may work utterly different for you. This is why our liturgy is so formal and somewhat sober: you are not here to witness my emotional breakdown but to have enough space for yourself to feel your own feelings. I nearly strangled a former curate of mine who had a habit of being very emotional in giving me communion: Johannes, the body of Christ, given for you. Well thank you sunshine, you have just taken away any feeling I might have had...

The point is that all we do here is supposed to help with an experience of the beauty of holiness of God. I am always touched when people come into St Andrew's for the first time and say 'wow, I didn't expect it to be so amazing.'

Hence whatever we are trying to do with our church building has two goals, which don't always sit easy with each other:

- to allow people space to pray and experience the Holy
- to bring us together in community

One thing which has been in place from the beginning is the orientation of churches. Orientation comes from Orient, and the orient simply means the east. It's a custom we inherited from our Jewish ancestors – expecting the coming of the Messiah and in our case the 2nd coming of Christ in the morning – particularly the morning of Easter. Hence since ancient times our churches are orientated, facing towards East, towards the rising sun. Usually the pews and the standard direction of prayer is towards the east. There is one exception in the middle east where churches often face towards Jerusalem rather than towards the east, but with few exceptions you have the orientation principle.

The opposite used to happen with the gospel reading, it is traditionally proclaimed towards the North, the side the sun never shines – Christ is the light of world, the Sun of Righteousness and his light shines into the darkest places of this world.

What is a highly controversial subject is the way the clergy face. As I said, the last supper and in ancient times people

reclined or stood around an altar. In medieval times the direction of prayer towards the east became very normative, altars moved against the wall so you could only access them from the front.

There are advantages and disadvantages:

- eastward facing means we all pray in the same direction
- it does not single me out and makes me less special
- Westward facing is more community focussed
- It sometimes can feel like I am standing behind a bar
- It can be awkward as praying people looking into each other's faces feels intrusive
- For me eastward facing can be more intimate and private as it allows me to look at the cross and feel more as part of a group of people, but I don't have strong preferences.

What I do know is that our church was built and constructed in a particular way, with levels of height and sightlines and lighting etc. You can go against the construction of a building but by doing so you pay a price: it changes the impact of the building, it compromises and sometimes the price is too high.

I think the 1970s scheme has not worked. They wanted to move the altar closer to the people and make the action

more accessible – but that came at the price of lowering the altar and rip it away from the candles. The scheme finally failed when the first pews were removed, pushing the people away from the sanctuary.

So what we are trying to achieve is several things:

- To move the pews closer to the sanctuary and make them more comfortable by spacing them out a bit.
- To restore the former visual impact of the building, if you look at the altar where it is now you see that it is meant to be there.
- To make the building more flexible, so that we can use the High Altar as well as a smaller one facing westward. That small altar yet needs to be built, and for the time being we will use this one.

Important point to make: we are not just going back and things will work as before, it will take us some time to get it right. Which altar are we going to use most of the time and when?

From where do we lead the first part of the service?

Where do we do the gospel reading?

Where do we do communion?

To get this right will take some time of trying stuff out. The High Altar needs reconsecrating, so it won't be used until 12th June when Bishop Peter Fox is with us to do this.

My hope and prayer is that St Andrew's will work better for mission, that it is a space with a bit of wow, a space where you can sit and pray with your God and where the drama of the Mass is going to work in such a way that you can catch a glimpse of the Holy.

And secondly that it is a place where we can grow closer together, be in communion, get to know each other better. In order for all this to work and have an effect it needs to be beautiful; it needs to feel cared for and loved, not least it needs to be clean. The space in which we are in matters hugely, otherwise none of us would be sick to death of Zoom and Teams. It matters to be in a place of beauty which helps to see and experience that God is love and God is beautiful. We are far from finished – and getting our space right is a missionary priority. If you can, help us making our church beautiful – I tell you in the notices what comes next.