

Trinity XX (17-10-10)

“singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord” (Epistle)

This is not a simple proof text for church music. At least, a little care is needed. It is *not* to be read directly as spiritualising – commending an inner, private action. Maybe Richard Rolle (a fourteenth century English mystic venerated as a saint until the reformation) did receive a gift of *inner* song and consequently, as he said, could not endure the *outward* music of the church. That is the special vocation of the hermit. We do not generalise from special vocations.

This is a case where it is useful to check the Greek of the Epistle. All the personal references “be filled, speaking, singing” are plural. (“Heart” is singular, but “your” is plural in the text quoted above.) This is not about personal private devotion, but about the action of the Church *together*.

One might think it obvious that that had to be an outer, audible action. And yet Anglicans have to beware of “Dear Lord and Father of mankind”. That poem, unfortunately included in our hymn books, is a Quaker attack on the very possibility of expressive, outward worship, as opposed to “waiting on the Lord”. That is why I do not allow it to be used. Not that silent devotion, whether alone or together, is wrong; but it is not the central form of worship.

Indeed, we are commanded otherwise, if we accept the guidance of the Spirit in both the Old and New covenants. The Temple cult is outward and expressive. The synagogue worship, which developed after the Exile and is the basis of modern Orthodox Jewish worship and of our Ministry of the Word, likewise. The table prayers which underly our Lord's Institution and so our Ministry of the Sacrament, likewise. The psalms, which became the basis of monastic spirituality and ultimately of our Morning and Evening prayer, likewise. The essentials of our obligatory worship have outward expression.

This should not surprise us. We do not relate to God with our souls alone, but also with our bodies. This is true whatever one's analysis of what it is to be human. Body, mind, soul, spirit, whatever distinctions one makes, it as *complete* human beings that we are redeemed. In the Resurrection, we are to be complete human beings. We rightly sing “O how glorious and resplendent, fragile body, shalt thou be”. And we do not learn how to be completely human by trying to be like angels, purely spiritual beings, in this life. Traditional eucharistic worship involves all five senses.

In the Orthodox tradition, almost the whole of worship is sung (and the exceptions, apart from the sermon, are modern). Historically, this was also the case in the West, though this has been obscured by the development of the “low mass” and the priest's private recitation of the Office. These may be necessary concessions to practicality, but they are not the norm from which more complicated worship is a departure, rather the other way round. There has been much variation in how elaborate church music should be, but, from the earliest times we have knowledge of, music has been essential. And two major components have been the psalms and the Christian hymn. Singing was for a time marginalized in Anglican parish church worship, but it was rightly restored. The hymn books are not the least part of our Patrimony.

So the outward is obligatory, but isn't it really something of a distraction? No. I think the best chance of inner devotion comes when we just get on with doing the outward properly. This is a paradox certainly of public worship, but probably also of private prayer. You do not pray well by thinking about praying. You will sing a hymn better (more to the glory of God) by giving proper expression to the words and the music as part of the congregation than by trying to be “spiritual” about it. Of course one can with profit privately meditate on a hymn (and some of our hymns, such as those of George Herbert, were poems written for such meditation rather than to be sung), but that is usually a derivative practice, and is not what we are about in public worship.

“To the Lord” is the key point. And as the action of the whole person, not some imagined privileged part of us. For Christ died for the whole person, and it is the whole person that lives in him, and so is able to worship.