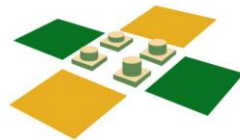


REFLECTION

RECONCILIATION OF PENITENTS

JUNE 2010



THE
EXPERIENCE
OF WORSHIP
IN LATE MEDIEVAL
CATHEDRAL AND
PARISH CHURCH

Reflection of a Penitent

My reflections and thoughts, on Monday 28th June 2010

Because I missed the first rehearsal for the reconciliation rite, I was genuinely ashamed and penitential during the second rehearsal! Interestingly, even though I am not usually very good at forgiving myself my mistakes, on this occasion I was: it is as though the physical pain and discomfort involved in remaining prostrate on a cold floor for twenty minutes helped to ease my mental suffering, usually caused by guilt or shame. I felt, therefore, after the second rehearsal, that I had served a penance, and could walk out of the church with my head held high!

During the first iteration of the rite with an audience, I was in considerable discomfort: either out of self-consciousness, or out of the conviction that to fully enter the spirit and the mood of the occasion one shouldn't move at all, I remained completely immobile. I didn't even twitch my toes, with the consequence that soon I lost all feeling in my feet. When I rose therefore, I nearly toppled over because I didn't know where to put any weight, and my two companions had to hold on to me for a couple of minutes. For me this raised questions about how accustomed our medieval predecessors were to kneeling for long periods of time, and whether they did in fact remain stoically immobile during the length of the penitential psalms.

During the second iteration of the rite, which was performed in front of cameras, I was very preoccupied about ensuring that the same occurrence did not repeat itself. It therefore became a physical exercise, during which I was constantly thinking about keeping my limbs moving!

Finally, during the third iteration for a local congregation of four, I was relaxed and less mindful of what others may be seeing or thinking of me. Interestingly, it is during this iteration that I was the most productive in my thought processes, and I became aware of certain features of the rite which I had not noticed on the two previous occasions:

Corporate worship and sense of church: everyone in front of the rood screen was also praying. While they may not have been thinking of me or of the other penitents, they were, by virtue of performing the same physical action as me, praying on my behalf. This produced a real sense of corporate worship: as if the actions and words of the main protagonists involved were all necessary to enable the reconciliation of the penitents to God, and not merely the contrite thoughts of the individual penitents.

Upon reflection, this is hugely comforting for the penitent, who does not have to worry too much about what he or she is thinking or praying: indeed, the whole church is working towards his or her reconciliation. Pressure is taken away from the individual to behave and think in a particular (contrite) way. Moreover, the impersonality of the office curiously lends it more intimacy: the clergy and the musicians are rarely, if ever, thinking about the penitents themselves, and the names of the penitents are not mentioned, like they might be at a confirmation service. Yet this corporate act, performed by a community for the sake of a few individuals, creates a bond between the people involved.

Male imagery: as a female penitent it was difficult to ignore the distinctively and exclusively masculine imagery. Everyone in front of the rood screen was male; even a crucifix may have been visible. There was indeed no sign of the Blessed Virgin Mary for the kneeling penitent. Would rosary beads have provided a reminder of femininity, and maybe also a focus during the psalms?

Self-consciousness is a feeling I often have, and one which I had in abundance during these re-enactments. Is it a modern feeling, in this day and age, when we are so preoccupied with our body image? Or is it just a question of personality? If self-consciousness and vanity are closely linked, is it an inappropriate feeling and one which should be condemned and avoided? Moreover, how does a self-conscious person, who is a product of the modern age in which we acknowledge and express our feelings, respond to this natural unease?

The scenario which I was given, that of the learned lady questioning the presence of Christ in the Eucharist, confused matters a little for me: as a believer, I do question the presence, and therefore my dramatis personae as learned lady and Judith became confused. What is problematic here is that Judith does not feel perturbed about her questioning attitude, whereas the learned medieval lady might have done. How does one therefore re-create, in this free-thinking age, the sense of fear and shame of thinking heretically? Also, why was it that when my part in the rite involved movement I was more acutely aware that I had a role to play? But when I went down onto my knees for the psalms, I became Judith again?

Solemnity: “Where was the joy?” one member of the congregation later asked? It is true that there was not much laughter or light-heartedness. Is God’s grace a form of joy? Aquinas, among other medieval theologians, taught that the sacraments are visual and tangible signs of God’s grace; the rite for the reconciliation of penitents would have been followed by a mass, and thus the penitents would have witnessed and received two sacraments, absolution and communion. Joy, in the eyes of the Church, is experienced through receipt of the sacraments, in which case the penitents would have gone home very joyful!

This needs researching and thinking through, but maybe our feeling of the joy of God’s grace is not down to us. We experience God’s grace because we have received the sacraments, whether or not we actually feel it.

Eye contact: sometimes it was difficult to know when and where to look. There was the issue of re-enacting the rite along with familiar people and wanting to smile, as if to mutually acknowledge one another as actors in the same drama. There was also the element of play-acting and wanting to look sheepish for the offences committed. Finally, there was the issue of humility: were we entitled to behold the priest absolving us, or were we to keep our eyes lowered? And if we act humble, do we become humble?

The issue of eye contact was raised once again when the deacon stepped over the threshold to present us to the priest: it was desperately hard to make eye contact without smiling here. Surely some kind of acknowledgement or smile is natural here, as the penitent knows all the people involved, and feels grateful for being allowed back into God’s presence and the community? Or is this a situation where the penitents have to remember that they are sinners, and where a smile makes light of their offences and of the solemnity of the occasion?

The beginning of the rite: the most striking image for me, as I was standing waiting on the path leading up to the church, was the great door being opened; seeing the cross and these ghostly white figures stepping out of the darkness and inviting us penitents to step in. The symbolism throughout the first five minutes or so of the office was really powerful: the deacon stepping over the threshold of the church to get me, an outsider, and to bring me back into the fold of the church; the deacon presenting me to a higher authority figure who will ultimately be absolving me from my sins; the priest leading me to the back of the church, where I am as far away from the sacred space as is possible – and I imagine that this is where I would have felt the most ashamed, as everyone had the opportunity to turn round and see my face - and then the procession of the cross and clergy (should we have bowed to these?) from the entrance of the church, up the nave to the sanctuary, which reminded me of my place within the hierarchy of clergy, acolytes, choir and laity; finally, the opportunity of going to kneel closer to the sacred space. It is interesting that the penitents were not kept at

the back of the church until they were absolved, but instead were given pride of place, in front of the congregation and closer to the sanctuary than the non-penitents. Space was used really effectively in the re-enactment to express the need and desire to be closer to the sacred space, the sacred people, and to God.

The Venite: when we first heard this, were we to know that this was our cue? In other words, how familiar would our predecessors have been with the ritual and the chant? If they attended other reconciliation offices, then they would know what to do at this point. Or is it possible that they would be hearing this for the first time, and were therefore hesitant about what it meant? The same matter arose when we were entreated to go down on our knees. How were we to know what to do? Were we supposed to look surprised at this request? Or should we have just been expecting it? Also, do we want to look full of shame and regret, or is the action of kneeling down sufficient in itself? I get a sense from what I have read recently that the contemporary treatment and easy articulation of feelings is a product of our time: it is not that people in the Middle Ages did not have feelings, but the emphasis was on what you did, rather than on what you felt when you did it. At the risk of over-simplifying matters, being present at the seven penitential psalms is tantamount to saying those psalms and meaning all the words which they contain; looking and acting contrite was the way to gaining a contrite heart, and therefore the worry about whether or not you were genuinely contrite, a preoccupation we might have nowadays, might have been of less importance. Maybe we are too purist nowadays.

The text of the psalms and the liturgy: the first time, it was incomprehensible but beautiful; the second time, it became a linguistic exercise, during which I was trying to identify key words I knew were contained in the text. Complete unfamiliarity ensured that I was mesmerized by the beauty of the chant. Having a vague knowledge of what was going on, I found off-putting, as it gave rise to an internal dissatisfaction at not understanding fully what was being said.

Conclusion: overall it was a powerful experience, which as a believer I will have absorbed and appreciated in a different way to some of the other participants in the workshop. What I have retained from the experience in particular, is this sense that other people were worshipping on our behalf, a sense of corporate worship and a sense of church in the truest sense, where a community honours God and the teachings of the wider Church by performing a liturgy for one another.

Another really striking aspect of this iteration was the sense in which personal feelings and thoughts become subsumed into the greater act of the worship: it is not that the individual penitent's genuine feeling of contrition is unimportant, least of all in God's eyes; but these are not the decisive factor in the conferment of absolution and grace. In other words, the penitent's participation in this rite, and the church's performance of the rite as a group of people, ensures that absolution and grace are bestowed upon the penitent. Maybe this is too Greek, and further reading will enlighten me on this; but I do get a sense from what I have read so far, that the personal response of the individual to the liturgy are secondary to his active participation, with others, in that liturgy.