

Sermon for Sunday Eucharist at Bangor Cathedral, 12 February 2012

Sexagesima: Creation Sunday

*(This sermon by Dr Sally Harper was intended to complement the three-day conference on 'Voices and Organs before the Reformation', held in the Cathedral on 10–12 February 2012 as part of the Bangor University research project 'The Experience of Worship in Late Medieval Cathedral and Parish Church', with services sung by The Schola of St Teilo.)*

Gospel: John 1: 1–14

May I speak, and may we hear, in the name of the Living God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

‘The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.’

Though it seems a minor heresy to follow St John’s great prologue with words from a mere novel of the 1950s, that oft-quoted opening to L. P. Hartley’s *The Go-Between* has a special resonance this morning. The singers of the *Schola of St Teilo* have spent rather a lot of time over the last year endeavouring to visit that ‘foreign country’ of the past, and these last three days in the Cathedral have seen us asking more questions about the Experience of Worship in the Later Middle Ages, and how music was a part of that. On Friday we sang the ancient monastic Office of Compline in Latin; this morning a mass setting by the London-Welshman Philip ap Rhys, who died in 1566; this afternoon, festal Evensong as it might have been sung in 1559. And enhancing all of this is that magnificent machine up near the altar, specially designed to help us understand more about how the organ might have been used in medieval worship.

But the musicians gathered here this morning have also become very much more than just a group of researchers with an interest in the past. For we have also become a *worshipping* community. That community first came into being at St Fagans Museum just outside Cardiff, where last June and September, we prayed and sang in the reconstructed church of St Teilo, a medieval building moved stone by stone to the museum, and now beautifully furnished and decorated as it might have been during

the 1520s. In this little church, we experienced not only the music and ritual of the Latin services once likely to have been celebrated there, but we also tried to explore what that experience of worship might have been like for a medieval *congregation*. Our passage into that foreign country was helped by medieval costumes, so in looking around the presbytery this morning, I see not just a group of singers, but also a Lord and Lady of the Manor with their steward and maidservant; two bedesmen charged with praying for the souls of the community; a merchant's wife prone to visions; and a group of nuns and their chaplain. But if that all smacks just a little too much of 'Am Dram', our 21<sup>st</sup>-century community also experienced something far more profound. We learned what it was like to worship in a church where nothing was in our own language and where we had no books; where the priest mumbled inaudibly with his back to us; and he alone received communion; where we were denied all but a very basic level of participation in the liturgy. Yet even so, as practising Christians, most of us still managed to encounter somewhere in those enacted medieval rites the same God whom we glorify day by day in the more familiar territory of 2012.

Though I have chosen not to preach directly on the Creation Sunday theme this morning, that magnificent passage from St John's Gospel carries me straight back to a very profound moment experienced several times at St Teilo's. Right at the very end of Mass in the Middle Ages, no matter what the occasion, the celebrant was required to read the Prologue to St John's Gospel before he left the altar. He was told to recite the whole text inaudibly, under his breath, until he reached verse 14, which he sang aloud so all could hear: 'And the Word was made flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory'. As we heard those words we all did just what our medieval predecessors would have done: we bent low to kiss the stone floor, and remained there for a while. Latin or English; detached researchers or fully engaged worshippers; medieval dress or our own clothes; for a moment none of that mattered. It was simply a moment of profound reverence, shared not only by our own modern-day community, but also with those who had gone before us across the continuum of several centuries.

Before we return to those great words of St John, I want to invite you, too, to travel across that continuum to visit two imaginary Bangor communities, both existing outside time as we know it. The first journey builds on actual historical evidence, and

takes us to a much smaller, white-washed, version of this Cathedral as it would have appeared in about 1350. Today, Mass for Sexagesima Sunday is being celebrated in Latin as usual by the Dean and a handful of clerks, who sing some of the chants heard this morning. There are very few seats, and the congregation is prevented from entering any part of the chancel: some wander in the nave; others kneel on the floor. Today there is a visitor – a young Welsh poet called Dafydd ap Gwilym, who is staying with the Dean. He spends some time kneeling before a statute of the Virgin Mary; contemplates a painting of St Deiniol for a few minutes; and later in the Mass moves to get a good view of the Elevation, that point when the priest lifts high the consecrated host for all to see. As it happens, Dafydd is also a bit distracted this morning, not only because he has just caught his first glimpse of the woman who will inspire much of his poetry until his dying day, but also because he is over-awed by the magnificent new organ standing in the chancel – an instrument built not with money from a Research Council, but raised by the people of Bangor themselves.

Our second journey across the continuum of time and space takes us in the opposite direction. It's a bit more frivolous, so in case of offence – and also with apologies to John Bell of the Iona Community – we will replace the Cathedral Church of St Deiniol with a temporary virtual structure dedicated to St Roly Poly and All Martyrs.<sup>1</sup> Today is Creation Sunday in the year 2030. This morning the service is a Eucharist with Aromatherapy, celebrated in accordance with the all-inclusive, fully eclectic Revised Rite W, prepared under the direction of the diocesan Myers Briggs consultant. The congregation gathers to the ambient piped sounds of plainchant underpinned by a gentle rock beat, and at 11 am exactly, the choir, wearing green spangled ruffs in honour of Creation Sunday, begins the Introit, a new bilingual arrangement of an iconic text written some 60 years earlier: 'I'm on the top of the world, looking down on all creation'. The celebrant, clad in a blue denim cassock, proceeds to the altar, disinfects it before censing it, and the acolytes flick on a series of rainbow-striped arches projecting the full length of the nave. Meanwhile the congregation consult their individual Liturgical I-Pads Model 2030 to find the start of

---

<sup>1</sup> This paragraph owes a lot to a lecture given by John L. Bell on 'The Love and Limits of Liturgy', delivered on 1 December 2010 at Liverpool Hope University as the Archbishop Stuart Blanch Memorial Lecture. The full text is published in *Goosegander* (The newsletter of the Wild Goose Resource Group), 31 (2011), 5–11.

the liturgy, responding to the Celebrant's opening greeting: 'The Lord be with you', with the words 'She's here already'.

There is no doubt that another of Wales's finest poets, R.S. Thomas, was sometimes justified in complaining that 'We have over-furnished our faith./ [and] Our churches are as limousines in the procession to heaven' – for each of us, whatever our background, knows only too well that the experience of worship, even when firmly grounded in our 'own country' of 2012, can still take us to some strangely foreign places. Most of us are lucky enough to exercise a degree of choice in our worship, and we seek out the places we find most comfortable or most prayerful for us; the Cathedral liturgy with a range of fine choral and organ music; Book of Common Prayer services in a village church lit only by candles; the more informal service with extempore prayer and the latest worship songs.

But whatever our experience of worship, however we adorn it, and wherever we happen to exist within that great continuum of time and space, it is still fundamentally about the same thing: our encounter with the living God. Worship is where we meet the divine. And worship is also something that we are called to do *together*, as a community. It reminds us that we do not travel alone; that things do not always centre around us as individuals. Here in Bangor Cathedral this morning, we become part of something much more than a mere handful of souls gathered in a single building, for our worship joins us with the universal Church throughout the whole world. Here, too, we are united with the whole company of heaven, with the worship of the angels and the saints.

But none of this, of course, means that our own experience of worship is always easy. Like Dafydd ap Gwilym, we are constantly open to worldly distractions; we are prone to disappointment and irritation when things are not done in the way we like; we may feel unwelcome or excluded or unable to use our own gifts. But perhaps that isn't the real point. In our Gospel, we have just heard again that great statement of Christianity, which those in the medieval church heard so often: 'The Word was made flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory'. On those words hang the purpose and meaning of our worship; on that hangs everything that is worth believing and hoping in; on that hangs our whole life. In Jesus Christ, God, the Creator of the Universe,

comes among us; here infinity is contracted into a finite human space. The Eternal Word, who has always existed outside time, has in Jesus entered our time-bound, human experience. Those foreign countries of past and future cease to become important, for they now become united with the present in this miracle of Incarnation: a miracle that tells us of what has always happened and will go on happening to the end of time, whether our own human existence happens to locate us in 1350 or 2030 or 2012.

So here this morning, as we worship the Eternal Word in a centrally-heated medieval cathedral with a range of melody and text ranging from the first millennium to the third, and with all the sophistication of 21<sup>st</sup>-century people, let's give thanks for our place in that great continuum of worship, and for the way in which our prayer and praise is enriched and sustained by those who have preceded us. For it is here that we can catch a glimpse of God's purposes for each one of us, and for the whole of creation; it is here that we become involved in some way in the life of heaven. And let's also give thanks that the miracle of the Incarnation means that we do not travel alone between those foreign countries of past and future. A voice from the sixth century puts this especially well for me, the philosopher Boethius, speaking of Jesus Christ our Lord: 'To see you is the end and the beginning. You carry me, and you go before: you are the journey and the journey's end.'

Amen.