

Sermon for the Friends Day 2017

Worship the Lord in the Beauty of Holiness

I go in the Autumn with my husband Peter as he trains for the priesthood at Mirfield in West Yorkshire – leaving this beautiful Cathedral and wonderful people after seven years of service here. So my mind goes back to remember well the first visit I made, when I had been shortlisted, and before the interview. I came one cold February day, and had a good look around, and ended up sitting in the Transfiguration Chapel, enjoying the light and beauty of the place. I remember too the Elisabeth Frink statue, hanging as it did then at the top of the stairs, and marvelling at its beauty. My first thought was how much better it would be if it were hung in the Chapel. Little did I know then that the Friends had given it. The statue, and so much more.

The Friends have contributed significantly, over the years, towards the beauty of this place, and I want to thank you. Thank you for your reminder that we come to this holy place to worship God, in the beauty of holiness. In a hectic, busy, anxious world, it is a crucial thing to remember.

For we do live in an anxious and fearful world. Personal worries can pre-occupy us; the state of the world; the threat and challenge of climate change. We will all know people who are struggling with fightings and fears, within and without. So often, then, a place like this is somewhere to come.

For many, the best way to hold fear at bay is to shield ourselves with purpose. We make ourselves busy; we find a purpose in life to block out fear. We measure ourselves by success. Then the greatest fear we face is the fear of failure. Which is easy to manage, for we work harder; we make sure we succeed. It's a pattern very familiar in today's society, beset as it is with an anxious busyness that enables us to avoid the fear.

Romano Guardini said this in his book *The Spirit of the Liturgy*:

The soul must learn to abandon, at least in prayer, the restlessness of purposeful activity; it must learn to waste time for the sake of God, and to be prepared for the sacred game with sayings and thoughts and gestures, without always immediately asking "why?" and "wherefore?" It must learn not to be continually yearning to do something, to attack something, to accomplish something useful, but to play the divinely ordained game of the liturgy in liberty and beauty and holy joy before God.

Herbert McCabe has said something very similar: that prayer is about wasting time in God. Wasting time with God; playing the divinely ordained game of the liturgy in liberty and beauty and holy joy before God. So perhaps when we come into this Cathedral we should see ourselves as entering a place of the Lord, here to waste time in the beauty of holiness. It's an intriguing thought.

When I was a child I thought, reasoned like a child. When I was an adult I put away childish things.

Perhaps as we grow, we should continue to play, to transform our anxieties by continuing the important art of play.

It was Donald Winnicott who wrote so powerfully of the importance of play in a child's life. That in order for them to develop as human beings, and grow into adult life, they needed to opportunity to play; to take risks emotionally and physically, to learn to cope with danger, to find resources within. And for adults, Winnicott argued, the playfulness continues in art and culture. That's why art and beautiful objects are so important. They are, simply, an expression of liberty and beauty and holy joy before God. Adults play when they go to a play; they play when they paint, or stand in awe and delight before a glorious sculpture, a piece of embroidery, or read a Donne sonnet. The play of the child, in which he is lost, is continued as the adult loses herself in the contemplation of beauty. For then we touch truth. Or the truth touches us.

There is a profound relationship between truth and beauty. John Keats said so: that truth is beauty, beauty truth: that is all ye know on earth, and all ye need to know. Beauty is not beauty if it doesn't in some way witness to truth. When we become caught up in fear, in anxiety, in the busyness of the world and its fears, beauty is lost before it is found.

If a society has no time to play, it sees no sense either in worship.

So thank you to the Friends who work hard to enhance our worship, to make this place a place of holiness and beauty. Who contribute to make this Cathedral somewhere where people can come simply to be in the presence of God, to be encountered by the truth. Can come to waste time for the sake of God. To enjoy liturgy, full as it is of profound significance.

As we worship, we enter a realm that is not ours. A realm not curtailed by the petty purposes and mundane routines of our lives, but a realm of God, of delight, of holy joy that transforms us and reminds us that our souls find their rest in God's eternal glory.

The moment of judgement of our lives is anticipated each time we enter the realm of worship. Each time we approach God we are stripped and pruned, heated and refined, distilled and purified. The sins we recognise are taken out of our hands, and we find ourselves aware of what we have not begun to comprehend.

The liturgy holds us through that encounter: the grace-filled liturgy that brings us to repentance and assures us of absolution; that consoles and feeds us with word and sacrament; that challenges us out of our anxiety, self-absorption and into service and love of neighbour. We come into the real presence of Christ, coming back to the touchstone of the truth of our lives as we encounter God, here, in Church, in the play of worship.

This Cathedral offers so much. This is a place where we know, each of us, that we are made for God's sake. You and I – we are children of God, here to play, with Eternal Wisdom. Here we enter into a different time and space – a time and space that belongs not to us, but to the Lord. We come to encounter our first and only end, which is to glorify God.

So thank you, my friends, for all you do to enhance the beauty and holiness of this wonderful Cathedral of ours. To remind us of the presence of God who is found in beauty and truth, and who reminds us of our real purpose in life, which is to serve him in perfect freedom. Come let us worship, in the beauty of holiness.