

Bartholomew and the Liturgy of Life

Firstly, I just want to say a big thank you to all of you for turning out this morning in spite of the continued uncertainty surrounding daily life. We all know that our Christian life requires sacrifices to be made, and sometimes difficult decisions balancing a number of pressures, but coming together as the people of God all in one place to direct our intentions towards him is so important to both our individual and corporate spiritual wellbeing. Thank you.

What does it mean to be one who serves?

Yesterday, I had to go on a longish journey. As I was journeying home I listened to the radio. The news was littered with story after story of present scandals and mini apocalypses on the horizon. Each reporter seemed to be trying to accuse someone else of lying or present their topic in the darkest way possible. If our commercial media has a true grasp on the world, then it is clear that our world is a very dark place.

It is beyond doubt that there are dark places in our world. As Christians we must try and bring a bit a light. One issue roars at us and we need to think about our response very carefully. When did we lose the ability to see the best in people and give them the benefit of the doubt?

Cynicism is the death of faith. It isn't any wonder that faith struggles in our modern climate.

Today we are celebrating the Feast of St Bartholomew. In the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, Bartholomew is mentioned alongside Phillip. But in John's Gospel, Bartholomew is not mentioned at all, instead he seems to be replaced by Nathaniel. This has led many to believe that they are the same person going by different names. If they are the same person, then in John's Gospel we see Bartholomew, known as Nathaniel, begin his encounter with Jesus from a cynical perspective. When told by the other disciples that they had found the Messiah, Nathaniel's response is 'can anything good come out of Nazareth? But something profound happens in his early interactions with Jesus, that finishes with him saying to Jesus, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God. The King of Israel".

Tradition has it that Bartholomew became the great missionary of India and North Africa following Jesus' Ascension. Something about his journey with Jesus

transforms his character from cynic into charismatic missionary and preacher. Once Bartholomew meets Jesus, he serves him to the end.

So, what does such service look like in today's world and how might our cynicism be transformed into life-giving faith?

Well, there is a strong piece of Church teaching which says that we are all called to serve the liturgy. That may sound rather odd. The liturgy is another word for the good order and direction of our worship. It includes all the words and actions that take place during worship. So what does it mean to 'serve the liturgy'?

As our gospel reading today makes clear, every believer is called into service. Our Christian faith and worship are not centred on making ourselves feel better – like some new-age spiritual fad. We come to Jesus with the intention of healing and forming our souls – and to do so requires genuine servanthood exercised in the service of others. Servanthood can take many different forms, and all are valid. We can serve God and others through our livelihoods, the things we do for our community and a whole host of other ways as well.

But we can surely do all that without ever stepping foot through the church door. None of it seems to have very much to do with worship. What does the liturgy have to do with anything?

Well our liturgy derives from very early church practice. The Eucharist itself is clearly modelled on the Last Supper of Jesus. But the way 12 people can celebrate such a holy gathering clearly can't accommodate 100 people. So, the Early Church began bringing a certain holy order to this worshipful gathering. As this structure matured, so a certain order grew across the entire church, a liturgical order. In these gatherings, Priests were those who served the Church by convening the community, offering prayers and blessings, stepping into Jesus' shoes at those essential moments and serving the people. Deacons were those who served the Church by assisting the priest and the people, visiting the sick, organising the alms for the poor and taking communion to the housebound. The gathered people served the Church in other ways, such as reading scripture, assisting at the Holy Table and caring on a more practical basis for the poor and the sick. This all enabled the liturgy to be conducted in an appropriately ordered manner, and this included serving each other. Service started in worship at the Altar and from there, the entire people of God, literally took the liturgy out into the world, through acts of kindness and care.

Our Anglican practice today continues with much the same ordering because we believe it is an ordering laid down by Jesus himself, evident in scripture and the practice of the Early Church.

For the Early Church, the liturgy didn't come to an end when a worship service finished. It formed believers into the worshipful people they were called to be and resonated throughout their daily lives. This 'liturgy of life' continued in the world as the Priests, Deacons and People took prayers, communion, alms and other acts of service out to the housebound, the poor, the bereaved and their own Christian households too. But we must be clear, this good service came out from the church and in many places the Eucharist was so important for fuelling this kind of ongoing liturgical service in the world that it became a daily offering – 'The Daily Eucharist'.

So taking the witness of the Early Church as our example, we see that serving the liturgy is not some abstract thing. Serving the liturgy is at the very core of the mission of the Church. As Christians we are all caught up in this mysterious 'liturgy of life'. And that liturgy finds its purest heartbeat in the Holy Eucharist, because in the Eucharist we engage most authentically with the Sacrifice of Jesus – it binds us to him. As we meet Jesus in the breaking of bread, we, like Nathaniel, find our cynicism turned into faith and conviction. The more we engage with the Eucharist with pure intentions, the more positively it affects us and our service in the world.

So how does this work? How can the liturgy resonate out beyond church worship? Well, the worship of heaven is eternal. It is sometimes called the eternal banquet or the liturgy of heaven. When we worship on earth, we simply join the eternal worship of heaven in a particular moment and way. But that eternal worship of heaven doesn't stop once we step outside of the church door – it is eternal, never ending – going on always and everywhere. Wherever we go, it goes with us.

Jesus tells us that our route to heaven is found in service. So, we remain in contact with heaven only so long as we continue our Christian calling to service. But it is only true service if we are doing it with the right intentions. Service designed just to make ourselves feel better or to exert power over others isn't genuine service. It is self-serving. But self-giving service sees the eternal liturgy of heaven moving with us and within us. That is exactly what we are doing today. An expression of the rich liturgy of life and the church serving the world.

What we do in church should always be central to our lives as Christians because it helps mould how we serve in the world. And so, we serve the liturgy here in church

in a way that ensures it flourishes, ensures that there is no human-made obstacle between us. We engage with it not just for ourselves, but the good of each other, and we take that out into the world. What we offer here, we offer for the world as a gift of service and blessing. As we do so, we provide the world with fleeting glimpses of heaven.

Amen