

24th July 2011
Why are we in church?

+ A couple of weeks ago I was on a conference with another 70 or so priests. It was a rather enjoyable time away for three days and we had some wonderful worship and some good speakers. One of them was the Bishop of St Asaph who held us captive in his cathedral with a really good lecture about being a priest.

I don't think he said a single original thing in over half an hour but what he said recalled us to what in a way we had always known but might have forgotten or filed away somewhere in the back of our memories. For me it stirred thoughts and feelings that were perhaps thirty or more years old. It was really useful.

So I thought I'd risk spending the next ten minutes saying nothing original in front of you in the hope and expectation that it will at least do us no harm to remind ourselves of a

few basic things – things that might answer the most basic of questions for us here at St Stephen's on a Sunday morning:

Why are we here?

There could be all sorts of answers to that question and most of them would be good and valid answers as far as they go. We might be here because we want to say our prayers; because we want to see old friends and make new ones; because we enjoy singing the hymns.

We might even be here because from time to time we pick up something useful from the sermon.

But I want to suggest the core reason, the thing that should lie at the heart of what gets us out of the house on a Sunday morning.

We are here to worship God. Everything else fades into the background when we consider that we are here for an hour or so simply – or

at least primarily – to worship the God who made us, saved us and sustains us. It's what a church is for.

Countless generations of Christians have built places of beauty in which to worship God and to receive God's love, forgiveness and strength. We are no different from them. We stand in that very long line of our ancestors drawn to worship in the midst of a busy, joyful and sometimes difficult world.

Now Christian worship has taken many forms over the centuries but always at the heart of it has been the Eucharist – for two simple reasons.

The Eucharist is the only thing Jesus actually told his followers to do and it the one divinely promised means we are given to receive God's life and love into our own lives. It is the one assured way in which we take God into our own messy lives so that slowly and steadily we grow to be more truly human by becoming more and more Christlike.

It's because Christians have sensed the massive significance of this very act of worship we are engaged in this morning that they have surrounded it with beauty, ceremony and powerful symbolism.

The reverence we show to the altar pinpoints it as the spot where heaven and Thornton Heath will meet. The incense we use is, like that brought by the Wise Men, our acknowledgement that God has come close to us.

Even the way we sit and stand – facing the altar, focussed upon it, highlights what it is we are doing here. What we are here for. All our eyes would, in an ideal world, be fixed upon the altar not following our noses into the service book.

One day put the book down – you know what happens from the offertory hymn onwards. Focus on the altar as we celebrate the Eucharist together.

Focus on the bread and the wine that Jesus tells us to take, bless and share for it is through that bread and wine that we will be fed with the risen life of Christ. The life of Christ, the Body of Christ that will transform us as individuals and as a community into the Body of Christ, his Church.

Ultimately what we are here for this morning is to be put in touch with the reality of God. We don't come here relying on our own holiness or intelligence or our cleverness with theology.

What we encounter as we worship in the Eucharist is the reality of God. A reality we grasp not by our own efforts but by God's effort. We bring ourselves into church, yes, but it is God who comes to us, not we to God. God comes to us in the form of bread and wine.

Suddenly we are no longer in the realm of symbols and ceremony because in the reality of God's life in bread and wine there is no

need for symbols any more. We have done what Jesus told us to do. We have made real once again that supper in the upper room where Jesus gave his first disciples a share in his life.

Some people have been a little perturbed by the use of white wine in the chalice. It's white here as in many other churches – including our own cathedral – because no symbolism is required at that moment of Communion.

The wine brings to us the risen life of Christ as much and no less than the bread does. Christ comes to us in one and both ways.

In other words don't let the appearance of anything get you stuck in symbolism at that point. See through to the reality of God's desire to come to us and feed us.

What we are doing in church this morning is the greatest thing any bunch of Christians can do. It has been done for every reason under

the Sun and in practically every place on God's Earth.

When we come here to celebrate the Eucharist with gentle splendour on a Sunday morning, or quietly during the week or by the bedside of one close to the end of their Earthly life, we are making present, making real the love and power of God.

Hymns, sermons and all the rest fade into the background as the King of all creation comes into our midst. Taking the bread and wine we offer and returning it to us charged with his love and life.

Why would we want to believe anything else or anything less? Why would we want to do anything less or anything else?

Amen