

A sermon preached at St Chad's Shrewsbury

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When I was a small boy in church I knew which was the Vicar's churchwarden and which the People's churchwarden, because they had different symbols at the top of their staves. The Vicar's warden had a mitre and the People's warden had a crown. The other thing was that the Vicar's warden was the large man with the small wife and the People's warden was the small man with the large wife. I was very small.

It wasn't really those churchwardens that set me off on this train of thought, but others, later, when I was an incumbent. Perhaps partly it was thinking back to my time as vicar of St Peter's Streatham; because it was Bishop Ronnie Bowlby, here with us, who instituted me to that living in 1984. Also partly because one of the churchwardens from that parish I went to see the other day. He is only 73 and on his death-bed. It was an encounter both warm and humorous and deeply moving, such is his faith and that of his family.

Not every churchwarden I have known has had such an obviously deep faith. I was really quite shocked many years ago, in conversation with a churchwarden about the purpose of life, when he told me that he had no sense of any purpose in his life at all. I think he was always so busy with his family and work and church and community volunteering that he made little time to reflect. Perhaps that was it.

It is a question worth asking, though, before our death bed or indeed our funeral. What is the purpose of my life? There could be any number of answers, which will vary with time of life, particular employment or unemployment, family circumstances and so on. If we were to be absolutely honest we might say that our real purpose is to become rich or powerful, or to be self-fulfilled. Or perhaps we do really want to make the world a better place.

But surely we should go deeper than that. We might be able to say: I think there is a godly purpose or a whole series of purposes, but I'm not sure at the moment just what. Hear these thoughts of Cardinal Newman.

God has created me to do Him some definite service. He has committed some work to me which He has not committed to another. I have my mission – I may never know it in this life but I shall be told it in the next. I shall do good. I shall do his work. I shall be an angel of peace while not intending it – if I do but keep His Commandments. Wherefore I will trust Him.

However, there is a starting point further back, at a more basic principle. Here we find ourselves talking not about activity, or works but about the heart of the matter. Why does God create life, bring into existence human beings after his own image?

And for an answer to this we can look to today's readings, and to the Gospel in particular. Jesus is talking to his closest followers, the twelve apostles, in the Upper Room at the Last Supper, trying to explain to them what is about to happen and why. The Church has given them to us today in preparation for the feast of the Ascension of our Lord on Thursday and for the feast of Pentecost in two weeks' time. Jesus said to his disciples, 'I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the

world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live.’ Now he says, ‘Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.’

God’s purpose is love, and the means whereby he creates the universe and the reason the universe and human beings exist is for love and to be united in love with God himself, to be at home with God. Jesus said, ‘My Father will love them and we will make our home with them.’

One of the rooms in the Deanery, where I live at Westminster Abbey, is called the Jerusalem Chamber. In 1643, during the Civil War, under the authority of Parliament, an Assembly of Divines met there to draw up what is called the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechism. It remains the basis of Presbyterianism. The first question and answer go to the heart of the matter: our chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever. Our chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him for ever.

The Book of Common Prayer Catechism speaks not of our chief end or purpose but of our duty towards God.

My duty towards God, is to believe in him, to fear him, and to love him with all my heart, with all my mind, with all my soul, and with all my strength; to worship him, to give him thanks, to put my whole trust in him, to call upon him, to honour his holy Name and his Word, and to serve him truly all the days of my life.

My duty towards God includes then to worship him. This ties in closely with our chief end being to glorify God and enjoy him for ever. To worship God; to glorify God: just as powerful and important in the 21st century as in the 17th. Perhaps more so, in a world where so much motivation seems to be to worship the contingent, the material, or worse

to worship ourselves in a frenzy of self-righteousness and self-fulfilment. If we worship God, if we love God, then we shall avoid worshipping ourselves and we shall find the Father and the Son making his home with us. That is our Lord's dying promise to us. That is the way to what is far beyond the tawdry attraction of pleasure: to worship God is the way to true, lasting happiness, to real joy.

Now, worship is not just for church or in church. Worship is about our whole attitude: the word 'worship' in English is etymologically linked to the word 'worthy'. So worship accords true worth. What is above all worthy we worship. We worship God, valuing God above everything.

'You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honour and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created.'

And the Church's worship has always involved music. St Augustine is often quoted as having said, 'Whoever sings, prays twice.' An Augustine scholar claims that the saint said in fact, 'Whoever sings praise praises joyfully; whoever sings praise not only sings but also loves the one the song is for.' So, music is vital in bringing to life and enabling worship to become real. It is a fascinating reflection that the Church's music is these days performed so much more thoroughly in concert halls and digitally than almost anywhere other than the cathedrals and great churches that keep the tradition alive. Those attending performances cannot fail to experience, in some way or another, what it is to worship God. The challenge for the Church is to offer liturgical music of a fitting standard.

Music is however more than simply a tool of worship, a means to an end. Music is itself profoundly spiritual and indeed religious. The contemporary Scottish composer James MacMillan, who is a Catholic,

has lectured on the religious character and impact of music. Writing recently in the *Daily Telegraph*, he said, ‘Thinking of a range of modernist composers, including Stravinsky, Messiaen, and most recently Jonathan Harvey and John Tavener, [and, he could have added, pre-eminently himself] one realises that far from being a spent force, religion has proved to be a vibrant, animating principle in modern music and continues to promise much for the future.’

God’s love and the Spirit’s power are not confined to houses made by human hands – though in this holy place and in the holy gifts we offer and receive, through God’s promise, we know we encounter the living God. May we find our chief end in glorifying the God who loves us and who makes his home with us! And may we come to enjoy Him for ever in the glory of heaven!

Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels surrounding the throne and the living creatures and the elders; they numbered myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, singing with full voice, ‘Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honour and glory and blessing!’