

HOMILY 23rd Sunday after Trinity [11 Nov. 2012] Morning Prayer

WHY DO WE GO TO CHURCH?

Richard Spear

“For our citizenship is in heaven; from whence also we look for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ: who shall change the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed unto the body of his glory...”

[Philippians iii:20-21]

By definition, God is everywhere to be found. Even Satan, who has good reasons to keep track of God’s whereabouts, admits that you can find God anywhere—and so, Satan asks us, “Why get up early on a Sunday, when you could worship God this morning without ever leaving your bed?” The Devil’s invitation to sleep-in might well lead us to think about why we attend Church—that is, assuming we were sufficiently awake to think about anything.

Two Sundays have passed since I saw you last; on one of them I enjoyed our beloved liturgy at St. Paul’s in Portland and on the other I attended the Communion service at the Phippsburg Center Congregational Church—a quaint old meeting-house built in 1802. The contrast between these two Sunday services set me to thinking about why we go to Church.

In the first place, our Sunday observance is clearly a social activity. The pronouns of our liturgy are plural: “we, us, our”. This probably about as “inclusive” as one can get! (In fact, the “I believe” of the Creed and the “I” and “me” of some hymns are so clearly exceptions to this togetherness that they call for our special notice.) St. John Chrysostom’s collect speaks of God’s promise “that when two or three are gathered together in [His] name...[He] will grant their requests.” Above all in the thanksgiving prayer after Holy Communion we are reminded that through the sacrament “... we are very members incorporate in the mystical body of thy Son, which is the blessed company of all faithful people; and are also heirs through hope of thy everlasting kingdom...”[Book of Common Prayer, p. 83]

However, we may question whether the corporate nature of our worship should override other considerations and direct a course of folksy informality. When we gather together in God’s name, when we recognize ourselves as “very members incorporate in the mystical body of” Christ, the situation is anything but informal!

The Protestant Reformation hoped to dispel superstitious ideas from people’s minds by replacing medieval ritual with the reading, extemporaneous praying and preaching believed to have characterized the earliest Christian gatherings. Those who thought—or think—to return to the first days of Christianity are ill-advised to make such attempt. While such changes may achieved their goal to some extent, the resulting loss of awe and formality has been a cost whose effects are everywhere apparent today.

Oddly enough a human desire for ceremonial—no longer met by the churches—is now commonly expressed in the secular rituals of political, military, and fraternal organizations. Color and pageantry mean something even in an age that is so intolerantly informal in its habits as our own.

But what is the point of ritual behavior? The sacred place of meeting? The special music? The unwonted clothing? The well-known words? Surely we understand that God can be adored without all the “scenic apparatus of worship,” to use the words of a Reformation bishop?

However, in our attempts to reach out to God, and His to talk to us, the distinctive details of the Sunday service can jar our minds away from everyday concerns. Even the well-remembered words of the Lord’s Prayer or of the Prayer of Consecration may one day strike home, with more effect than the well-turned phrases or shock-talk of some sermon. The memorable wording of a familiar scripture—like last week’s Gospel parable of forgiveness-- can suddenly cause its light to flash up in our minds.

We may bring our everyday life into the church with us each week—but to what extent do we want the service there to reflect the sounds, sights, and even the ideas of that week? We come to Church to receive instruction for righteous living or inspiration through an enhanced feeling of God’s presence and of our need for His mercy. We gather as individuals, but we become the mystical body of Christ.