

AUG 23, 2005 Speech to Ex-Choristers Breakfast , St Andrew's Cathedral Chapter House
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I did not have to think too hard about a topic for this after breakfast speech to ex-choristers. My topic is perfectly clear. Because every time I meet an ex-chorister, anywhere, I get asked the same two questions: What's happening to the choir? What's happening to the cathedral? And the stories and the rumours going around in the last two and a bit years are sometimes so fanciful, and sometimes so off the mark, that these questions deserve to be answered in the most appropriate forum possible – a group of ex-choristers.

First, what about the choir? Let me put to rest the rumour that the cathedral choir is or has already been disbanded. Of course, it is unfortunate that such a climate could exist that would nurture rumours such as these. But there has been no threat of disbanding. And it is true that the demise of Sunday night Evensong halfway through 2004 got so much publicity in the press that many in the public jumped to conclusions. During that time I was quick to point out that Choral Evensong on Thursdays remained untouched and the full choir still sings it every Thursday in term time, exactly the same as you would find any afternoon in an English cathedral. Wednesday evensong was changed to Wednesday Matins several years ago, and the choristers have been singing this service of Morning Prayer at 8.15am in the presence of a congregation that is usually treble the number that we ever had in the afternoon. And you might like to know that soon Matins will be introduced on Tuesdays as well, this time sung by the girls choir from the school. This is a school initiative that has my 100% support. There is no room for misogyny in the church of God. And besides, my daughter is a member of that choir.

But what happens on Sundays? It has to be said, that we expect changes with every new dean, the same as every parish with a new rector, and every school with a new head. It would be madness not to expect changes, in most cases we would want to embrace those changes. Some leaders believe in getting the trust and the confidence of the people first, then gradually introduce changes. Others believe that you might as well get the most dramatic changes over and done with as soon as possible. Delaying them does not make it easier. To cut a long story short, on a Sunday morning, the choir is still present and usually will sing a canticle and an anthem, perhaps also a psalm on occasions. Never any sung responses, but we do of course sing these on Thursdays. Indeed, if it wasn't for the continuation of Thursday Evensong we would never have been able to cope with our tour last April to Westminster Abbey and Canterbury Cathedral, where we sang daily Evensongs. On Sunday evenings, perhaps about six to eight times a year, we will visit a parish church if invited, most of who want a full choral evensong. So that is the current situation.

But the issues facing St Andrew's and its choir today are not really about how much we sing or how much has been taken away. Rather it is a fundamental issue of the meaning of worship. So, what about the cathedral?

Let me share with you, very briefly, the attitude to worship and to the cathedral church of the current leadership. You will find this now as far removed as possible from most other Anglican cathedrals in the world, and I believe, deliberately so. The following summary is based on material that is readily available on CDs of sermons, or in the printed form of a conference address by the dean of Sydney on the subject of worship. And now I quote.

“Worship is the grateful response or submission to God in every sphere of life. It is the wrong word when Christians gather together as the church. We look at our current practice and see one thing, we look at the NT and see another. Is it just the natural development of things over time? Or is it a significant departure? Our gatherings on earth are not about drawing near to God. The point of meeting together is for the purpose of encouragement and mutual help. However, the early church

soon took on OT terminology of worship and over the 1st 3 centuries church became more of a formal public religious event. This is foreign to the thought of the NT. OT categories, language, concepts and practices are rather uncritically imported into Christian church practice. There was also influence from the prevailing Greek thought forms of the day. The shift that took place in church life was from that of the fellowship model to that of the liturgical model. We can trace a direct line from Clement and Cyprian and all the rest to the ongoing practice of Catholicism and High Anglicanism today. It's an alternative gospel which we must not get tired of opposing. Little wonder that evangelicals have often been considered deficient in their worship, rightly wary of mysticism in all its forms, having stripped away the gaudy baubles of sacramentalism, with all its theatre and colour and movement. Using the language and categories of worship in church is untenable. We desperately want our church meetings to be occasions of transcendence, of epiphany. It's no accident that feelings of epiphany (transcendence) occur when certain human activities are undertaken, especially music, symbolic acts, drama, certain architecture. And these things induce feelings of transcendence regardless of the content or even the religious context. We need to help people see that nice feelings are nice. They're desirable. But they don't represent contact with God". End of quotes.

So perhaps I can summarise by saying that cerebral, propositional Christianity is in, experiential Christianity is out. And of course, in that lecture, the Charismatics came in for a real roasting. I should also add that in a sermon preached on July 13, 2003, the dean made these points: And I quote again. "When people come to the cathedral they should see the model for the diocese. See what this diocese stands for, see and recognise Sydney Anglicanism, parishes should see models to follow. No discussion in bible about buildings. So we must not make too much of it, it is not central to God's purposes, not important, not the church of God, not a replacement for the temple. Not to say it is not useful or beautiful. (but we) musn't place theological emphasis on the building. St Andrews has a special place in the history of Sydney. Symbols and actions should not contradict the gospel but actually exhibit the gospel. How can anyone see the gospel, the priesthood and ministry of all believers, when we have ordained ministers with titles and robes, special places in procession, and seats of honour."

Now these quotes were taken from two rather long lectures and a sermon, so perhaps a bit unfair to be so selective. But my whole point is to try to give you an idea of the thinking that now governs this cathedral. And I also want to acknowledge that we can always learn much from those with whom we may disagree. Obviously what some call developments, others call deviations.

Just some personal observations. First, there *is* in fact a development of church structure in the NT *itself*, as the church not only grew in numbers, but also realised that Christ's return was not imminent and they were probably in for the long haul. And if the church developed during the writing of the NT epistles, how much more would it develop in structure in the centuries to follow. Second, if God placed a longing for himself in the human heart, then the natural response might very well be one of adoration and wonder and worship and love and praise. Third, the announcement that transcendental feelings don't represent contact with God is indeed a bold claim. It takes a lot of confidence to categorically state how God can and cannot touch the human heart. How do I *know* that someone's experience is not profoundly of the Spirit of God? A back-sliding Christian many years ago once sat in Westminster Abbey, and during the singing of the choir, was brought to tears and back to faith. He is now the rector of an Anglican parish in Victoria and has written of this experience.

Fourth, I might reflect on those spiritual heroes in my life, those that have walked with God, the mighty people of prayer, who have radiated the love and presence of Christ, but who have come from so many of the different traditions and denominations of Christendom, even those traditions that some here would want to discredit. For Jesus said, by their *fruits* you will know them, he didn't say by their doctrinal correctness, or liturgical customs.

I have been here long enough to state with some authority that St Andrew's Cathedral Sydney, with its evangelical emphasis, was a place where visiting Anglicans from all over the world and from all traditions felt at home in our cathedral services. That is, until about two years ago. Now, they certainly would be welcomed warmly, but they don't necessarily feel at home.

Now the Anglican Church has no pope, no final institutional human authority, and *all* points of view like to appeal to the Scriptures. So all we can do is quote one, and another, and then another. I've done some extensive quoting today, but to provide an alternative insight, I quote finally from John Stott, the renowned Anglican evangelical preacher, teacher and author, and who has preached many times in this cathedral. From his commentary on the 1st epistle to Timothy he says: "The church is essentially a worshipping, praying community. It is often said that the church's priority task is evangelism. But this is really not so. Worship takes precedence over evangelism....partly because, long after the church's evangelistic task has been completed, God's people will continue to worship him eternally, and partly because evangelism is itself an aspect of worship....This emphasis on the priority of worship has a particular importance for us who are called 'evangelical' people. For whenever we fail to take our public worship seriously, we are less than the fully biblical Christians we claim to be. We go to church for the preaching, some of us say, not for the praise. Evangelism is our specialty, not worship. In consequence either our worship services are slovenly, perfunctory, mechanical and dull or, in an attempt to remedy this, we go to the opposite extreme and become repetitive, unreflective and even flippant". End of quote.

I have always said to the choir, that our task is to enrich the public worship of the church. And over the years, when occasionally people have told me that the singing of the choir has brought them into a profound experience of the living God, who am I to say that it didn't?