

A sermon preached by John Harper on Sunday, 16 November, 2014, in the chapel of Magdalen College, Oxford<sup>1</sup>

There are two themes to this sermon: one concerns our experience of worship, the other concerns giftedness and creative opportunity.

Over the past five years I've been leading a research project into the experience of worship. That may sound like a project for a sociologist, cultural anthropologist, or even a psychologist. But this has been a project focused on the experience of worship in medieval cathedral and parish church, and the research team has consisted of historians, musicologists and liturgists. And it's exemplified what I've always thought really important in teaching, research and performance (not least in this chapel): making the two-way connection between study and practice. There are things you learn through scholarly investigation that change your practice; and there are things that you can only discover through practice that transform your understanding – even of liturgy and worship.

In the research project, we've been asking the question: what was it like to worship in a building like this at the end of the Middle Ages? What were the experiences of those present? In tackling that question, we've enacted medieval liturgies in medieval buildings as valid acts of worship, and as the basis for investigation, reflection and analysis. We've teased out how very different the experiences were for the priest and other clergy, for the servers, the singers, the organ player, and the lay people. We've become alert to the ways in which different buildings, and different configurations of buildings have affected that experience of worship. That's not only given us new historical insights, it's also raised important questions about present-day worship. What is our experience of worship? And how do we engage in it?

For several years I was a member of the Liturgical Commission of the Church of England, who were charged with shaping the revised forms of liturgy under the umbrella-title of Common Worship. The primary activity of the Commission was drafting, revising and polishing texts. Yes, there were underlying debates about the theology, the form and shape, the historical precedents; but mostly it was about text, lots of text

After our research into the experience of late medieval worship, I'm uncomfortable with that overriding emphasis on text. For our experience of the liturgy is far more than textual. We experience worship not only with our minds, but with all our senses: the experience is physical and emotional, spatial and temporal. It can be totally immersive, engaging mind, body, heart and spirit. Our engagement and our experience are both collective and individual. We share a common journey through the liturgy, and we are able to follow our individual pathways. Being part of what could have been a very artificial and dry reconstruction of late medieval liturgy has for me transformed my alertness to the whole physical, sensory, emotional and intellectual experience of worship.

In the 1980s, I don't know how many hours I spent in this chapel in rehearsals and services, or how many times I came through the doorway into the chapel. I was alert to the space, and to the impact of the sound of the choir on that space; alert to how it felt to worship here. But there were lots of details I took for granted. I'm not sure I ever noticed the two angels on either side above the doorway as you enter; and certainly not the texts on the scrolls they each hold.

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<sup>1</sup> John Harper was Informator Choristarum at Magdalen from 1981 until 1990.

One scroll reads ‘quia fecit mihi magna qui potens est’; the other ‘hic est domus Dei, et porta caeli’. The first is a text sung most days in this building. It comes from the Magnificat: ‘for he that is mighty hath magnified me’. The other comes from Genesis.<sup>2</sup> Jacob uses a stone as a pillow; and he has a vivid encounter with God in a dream. And when he awakes, the experience of that place is so strong that he says: ‘This is the house of God, the gate of heaven.’ Both texts are responses to God’s transforming power. That brings us back to the Gospel we heard a few minutes ago: the parable of the talents.<sup>3</sup> And I want to take a modern reading of the word talent – giftedness, and above all the God-given, transformative giftedness of imagination and creativity. And I’d like to think of that giftedness not individually, but collectively, and not just now but across time – specifically the giftedness embodied in this chapel across more than 500 years.

Under the carpet in front of me is the memorial brass of William Tybard, the first president of the college. It was he who presided over the concept and building of this space in the 1470s; but we need not just to think of him alone, but of all the craftspeople whose skill, imagination and creativeness engaged in that act. The black and white marble floor, the brass lectern, the windows in the ante-chapel come from the time when Accepted Frewen was president, especially the 1620s and 1630s. It was he who oversaw the transformation of the interior of the chapel, re-introduced an eastern altar and an organ located in a newly built organ-house, bringing in the best craftsmen he could find. And in the 1830s, at the end of the half-century that President Routh was in office, the present interior of the chapel was shaped under the guidance of the architect Lewis Cottingham: the reredos behind me, the very bold, sculptural stalls, the stone screen, and not least the almost unique stone organ case cantilevered with cast iron, made to encase an organ installed almost a century earlier in the 1730s. None of this could have been created by a single person; only through collective imagination, skill and creativity was that achieved. God’s transforming power has been at work across the centuries, and we experience it in our worship here with all our senses, spatially, aurally, visually, and through physical encounter, even if we need words to articulate our response to the experience. It is that same transforming power that Mary articulates in the Magnificat ‘quia fecit mihi magna qui potens est’, and that Jacob encountered in his dream.

And what of the present? The outstanding collective, transformative act in this chapel is the singing, particularly that of the choir. The human singing voice is an extraordinary phenomenon in its own right; but combining voices in choral singing should always fill us with wonder. There is enormous physiological, emotional, sensory and intellectual complexity of choral singing: just think how many thousands of decisions each singer makes in a single service. Not only is there technical and interpretative complexity, but the sounded music this morning links us in a living way with the creative imagination of sixteenth-century composers like Lassus. Present creative realisation of past creative imagination expresses a continuity across the centuries that aspires to the eternal – As it was, is now, and shall be for ever. As such we may indeed come to glimpse – as it says on the angel’s scroll outside the chapel – a gate of heaven.

The parable of the talents is introduced as a simile: ‘The kingdom of heaven is like ...’, and it ends with the ruthless treatment of the timid servant who buried his talent to preserve it. And that I suppose is a challenge which faces this chapel and those who serve it today. This chapel does not have the diocesan responsibilities of a cathedral, or the pastoral responsibilities of a

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<sup>2</sup> Genesis 28.10-17

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 25.14-30

parish church – indeed some Christian members of the college often prefer to worship in a different style elsewhere. That freedom from specific responsibilities allows opportunity. It cannot bury its talent like the timid servant. Yes, there needs to be stability and continuity: but there is scope here for exploration, and even experiment and research.

I came here as an innocent from a provincial university and a Roman Catholic cathedral. Exploring new ways of doing things was what we did in both those places as a matter of course. Looking back, I am fairly horrified at my audacity and haste to make change in this venerable institution. But some of those early explorations have persisted. Concerned about the lack of opportunity to celebrate Christmas or Holy Week and Easter in those days, we made the week our liturgical cycle, Sunday the focal day. The Sunday Eucharist, the simpler, more prayerful form of weekday Evening Prayer introduced as a temporary experiment, the sequence of music and readings for Advent, and Carols by Candlelight – all of which still persist – were introduced in 1981 and 1982. Some things we got wrong and abandoned, and some have disappeared or changed over time; others have been taken forward elsewhere and in other ways.

Any change involves risk. Risk is as much a part of our exploration in worship as is the security of continuity from our forebears. Recalling those angel scrolls above the chapel door, both Mary and Jacob took risks as part of effecting God's transforming work among humanity. And from the example of Peter, we know it's OK to get it wrong.

So, I'd like to ask you to reflect not just on the text or the music of the liturgy, but on your whole experience of worship in this space at this time; to reflect on the challenge of the parable of the talents, and how the experience of worship here today draws on the giftedness of skills, imagination and creativity of past centuries; and to consider how to seize the opportunities to take forward God's transforming work on earth as in heaven.

And if Matthew's Gospel seems threatening in casting the timid servant into darkness and damnation, perhaps we should all take assurance from Luke's Gospel. If you were at a Eucharistic celebration on Thursday you would have heard Jesus's response to a question from the Pharisees. Asked when the kingdom of God will come, Jesus replied: the kingdom of God is among you and within you.<sup>4</sup> We pray that in passing through the doorway into this chapel we may in some small measure perceive a gate of heaven, that here we may experience and engage with the kingdom of God among us and within us in this Eucharist; and we pray for the courage and strength to take that experience out into the rest of our lives. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Luke 17.20-21. NRSV translates the last phrase as 'among you'; Nicholas King SJ translates it as 'within you'.