

3 October 2021

Dear Friends of Elmwood,

Three cheers for Angus Sinclair. He has regathered the Choir and put them through their paces. Their rehearsals have restarted, all with a view to the Choir's return to the sanctuary. One day they'll sing there again, and so will we, yes?

The old saying, "Who sings well prays twice," is true. When we sing a good hymn, we pray the words and simultaneously pray the music. Singing – especially singing together – calls forth regions of our souls that words alone cannot reach.

Celebration does this too. Not all celebration should be happy-clappy frivolity. My inner Eeyore couldn't take that. Celebration can be solemn, serious, and even, oddly, sorrowful, though that's rare. When sorrow marks their mood, we might call them 'ceremonies' instead.

But no, they're still celebrations. 'Celebrate' comes from the Latin word *celebrare*, which means "to assemble and honour", as we do at a funeral, let's say.

(*Assemble*, not scatter. *Ergo*, we cannot 'Zoom to honour' and then pretend it was a celebration, or worship, either. 'Anti on-line worship' is my hobby horse *du jour*, and I'm going to keep riding it, dammit. Delete me now if you must.)

Where was I? The best celebrations, like the best artistic forms, touch the source of tears within the laughter, and the source of laughter within the tears. There. That's the point I was heading for.

Daniel Barenboim, an extraordinarily talented conductor, said that whenever the Chicago Symphony played Schubert's 'Funeral March' – (or was it Schumann? Angus would know) – some musicians would always tell him how much *joy* it gave them to play such a sombre score.

An Eighteenth-Century Time Warp

Like others – but not all, I know – I'm rather fed up with our truncated style worship in these pandemic days. It's as though we've reverted to the Church of Scotland and it's the 18th century all over again, a dismal 'low point' in Scottish worship (which has too few peaks as it is).

Back then, there was no Choir, no anthems, no responses (neither sung nor spoken), no instrumental music, no organ, no stained glass, and no hymns. A

precentor 'lined' the Psalms and the people repeated it, seated, in a near monotone. There was no 'ritual' whatsoever, no 'movement', and precious little beauty.

Their celebration of Holy Communion undid the meaning of the word 'celebrate'. It touched the moralistic sources of anger, guilt, and woe, but it did little to *honour* the sources of joy and lament within us.

Holy Communion happened, at most, once or twice a year. (Still, that's more than we've had for eighteen months). It was bounded by many hours of preaching at a 'preparatory service' on the day before. On the day after the sacrament, there would be a 'thanksgiving service'. Guess what. Many more hours of preaching!

(When someone tells me my sermons are too long – and they do – I want to say, "You don't know what you're talking about.")

On the day the sacrament was observed – I eschew the word 'celebrate' for the reason you now know – *more* hours of preaching encircled the sacrament like a moat. Their aim was to instill penance and guard against superstition.

There were copious prayers of confession, too, comprising a jumble of rambling words that had been carelessly contrived on the spot by clergy who believed they had a gift for extempore prayer – but didn't. They're still around.

There was an elaborate 'Fencing of the Table', also, to warn away impious riff raff, lest they 'eat and drink unworthily'.

The tradition of 'Fencing the Table' explains the origin of Communion Tokens. They were entry visas to Holy Communion the way tickets admit you to a theatre today. If your elder didn't think your piety was up-to-scratch, he may not have given you a Communion Token. The drawbridge would not be lowered for you.

This instilled an air of solemn seriousness into the whole affair, and that is good. (I crave a return to seriousness, infused with deep joy, to counter the shallow frivolity that too much Church worship has become.) But it did so at the cost of instilling a deathly fear born of excessive guilt, and that is *not* good.

The problem with excessive guilt is not that it's joyless. It's that excessive guilt is one small step away from morbid self-loathing. This kind of guilt preys upon those who least need its prodding.

The lecturer who taught me most about the theory and form of Presbyterian worship carefully pointed out that 'Fencing the Table' against

impious riff-raff accomplishes just the opposite of its intended effect. It repels those who *should* be there but admits those who shouldn't.

How? Those who think its admonitions could *never* apply to them are the most morally callous and arrogant of all, and therefore the least prepared to 'come to the Table of the Lord' – yet they do! Whereas those who are most morally sensitive and humble, and therefore well-disposed to come, too *readily* see themselves as 'unworthy' – so, they stay away! An ex-pat Highlander in my first parish never came to Holy Communion for just that reason. It was like trying to convince an Anti-Vaxer to take the jab.

The preaching that surrounded those rare observances of the sacrament in 18th century Scotland also drove home the point that this wasn't a *Superstitious Papist Mass*. Many of our forebears were deeply prejudiced against the Roman Catholic Church (the feeling was mutual). They feared Papist Practices the way we fear the Covid virus today.

So, in the meantime, our 21st worship wears the straitjacket Covid has buckled us into. For now. Only, it feels as though we're governed, now, not by dark-suited Elders and Ministers frowning down upon us from the eighteenth-century, but by the censorious Nurse Ratched in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, enforcing the sanatorium's rules.

I know, I know, I ought to be grateful that we still have a sanctuary at all. I should be glad that a small contingent of people still feel called to gather, to hear the Word of God read and proclaimed, to pray, and to be blessed by God.

There's vitality in this, and I *am* glad, believe me. You can't see this vitality flashing on the surface, no. But you can feel it when you take a big breath, plunge right in, exert yourself, and abandon yourself to it.

Our showing up is what matters. It matters far, far more than the subjective thrill of the experience itself, if there is one.

Our *experience* of worship is only worship's by-product, not its point. That's because the point of worship is to offer the best of ourselves, in the best way we can, to God, for God's enjoyment, whether *we* 'like' it or not.

Hmm, that sounds rather stern, doesn't it? Maybe I'm channelling my eighteenth-century predecessors in Scotland. Maybe they weren't so bad after all.

Time Spent in a Choir Stall

When Angus told me about the return of Choir rehearsals, my memory made its way back to the years I spent in High school and early University.

That's when my brother and I sang in the Choir of the Presbyterian Church my family attended in Toronto's north end.

Though we weren't true 'basses', but only 'baritones', we were assigned to the bass section. The tenors' top notes were too great a stretch for us, especially at the 'early service' on Sunday morning – doubly so if we'd been, you know, 'partying' on Saturday night.

The chancel was arranged the way Elmwood's used to be. The Choir processed up the main aisle as we all sang the opening hymn. My brother and I would take our seats in the back stall on the south side for two services every Sunday morning.

It was fun. I love music. I love to sing. The Choir members were lively people – fun, kind, and friendly. Singing together *brought* us together, and it brought out the best in each of us. Parish Church Choirs excel at this.

I was not especially pious back then – not like I am *now*, you know, being so holy and righteous and everything. And humble too. If it hadn't been fun, I might have dropped out and not attended Church anymore.

But maybe not. The Minister was worth hearing and knowing. He projected a warm and wise humanity. He presided at Communion with great solemnity and barely repressed joy. Its being barely repressed somehow made the joy stronger. His humanity and character were genuine. They didn't impede his preaching or hinder the truth that came through it. They were a vehicle for that truth, though I doubt he was aware of it.

Two older men sat on either side of us in the bass section. One was cut from the same sort of cloth as my father – he was tall, trim, courteous, well-dressed, professional, competent, well thought of. He exuded a serious air of responsibility. He had a job on Bay Street, something to do with high finance.

On our other side was a burnt-out teacher counting the days to retirement. There was booze on his breath and a glint in his eye at Thursday night rehearsals. He was a wonderful man. He taught typing at a high school – not my school, but a school nearby. He also taught me to play cribbage. He was somewhat depressed and cynical, but he was also incredibly funny in the way such people can be.

And we did have fun. I didn't discourage him, despite the occasional glare of reproach from the high financier.

Since we had to hear the sermon twice each Sunday – once at each service – we began to give them scores at the interval, the way the Olympic Games score

gymnastic routines. Often, we'd revise it, or give a second score, while we disrobed in the Choir Room after the second service.

"That was a 'seven-point-fiver', I think. Better than the 'six' at the first service." If the Minister was going a bit longer the second time, the typing teacher would whisper, "Padding. He's padding it out again."

He had a Welsh flair for breaking into song. Often it was "Love Lifted Me". To the best of my knowledge, this one has never made it into Presbyterian hymn books. It probably never should. It's a kitschy evangelical song reminiscent of American revival meetings in tents. But its robust melody wouldn't be out of place in a pub, either. The chorus goes this way:

*Love lifted me, love lifted me!
When nothing else would do,
love lifted me!*

– only he sang this in a way that half-suggested carnal love, not the divine kind. That's pretty funny when you're seventeen years old – or even much older.

Sometimes he'd meet my brother and I at a pub near the University in the early evening. I believe he *did* sing "Love lifted me" on one of those occasions, after two pints (or three?), to the applause of a nearby table (or were they groans?).

On one of those occasions, while he was fully in his element, a voice called out from across the room. It was aimed at us.

"Dad? Dad?!"

He turned around.

"JULIE!"

It was his daughter. She trotted over. He stood up, a bit unsteadily, and they hugged.

"I've just popped in with some friends after work," she said. Then she pointed at my brother and me. "Are these some of your delinquents?"

Beaming and smiling like a Cheshire Cat, he introduced us to his daughter.

I do wonder what those years spent singing hymns and sacred music, twice every Sunday, did to me. Did love lift me? Did faith find me? I don't know. But something sunk in.

Yours in the faith,
Andrew