

Sibyls' Evening Prayer 10 September

Leader: The light of Christ has come into the world.

All: Let our prayer rise like incense before you, O God.

Leader: May the blessing of light be upon us.

All: The lifting up of our hands like an evening offering.

Leader: Open our lips, O God.

All: and our mouths shall proclaim your praise. Alleluia!

Hymn

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5JPgHS53g1c>

Psalm 2

All: Happy are all who put their trust in God

Why this turmoil among the nations,
Among peoples this useless murmuring?
They arise, the rulers of the earth,
And plot against God and the anointed:
“Come, let us break their binding chains;
Come, let us break off this yoke.”
The Eternal One looks on them and laughs,
Laughs them to scorn.
With sharp words of warning God speaks:
“It is I who have chosen the Anointed One
On Sion, my holy mountain.”
I will announce the decree of the Holy One who said to me,
“You are mine. It is I who have begotten you this day.
Ask and I shall give you the nations as your inheritance.
With a rule of justice you will be firm and shatter evil like a potter’s jar.”
Now, O rulers, understand and take warning,
Serve God in awe and reverence,
Giving honour and praise,
So that you do not perish from the just way.

Glory to the Holy and Undivided Trinity, one God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now and will be forever.

Amen

All: Happy are all who put their trust in God

Reading

Therefore I beg you, I who am a prisoner in the Lord, to walk worthily of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, putting up with one another in love, being eager to keep the unity of the Spirit, in the bond of peace: One body and one spirit (just as you were called in one hope of your calling) one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

To each one of us the grace is given according to the measure of Christ's free gift. Therefore it says,

“Going up the height, he took captivity captive,
He gave gifts to human beings”

Now what is “he went up” other than that “went down” to the lower regions of the earth? The one who “went down” is the same as the one who “went up”, far above all the heavens, that he might fill everything.

Ephesians 4: 1-10 translation by Nicholas King SJ

How can we see the vast diversity of humanity and understand ourselves as “created in the image of God” (Genesis 1:26-28)? Can we embrace a liberative imago Dei that has the capacity to include the multiplicity of human reality...the range of skin colour, cultural identity and gender construction and performance?

I believe we are compelled to image God in the ever-changing, shifting, diverse and multiple transgender realities that human beings embody. To encapsulate God into any single gender identity or sexual expression limits the possibilities of God's manifestations in humanity.

We need a trans-God...one that transgresses all our ideas about who and what God is and can be, one that transports us to new possibilities for how God can incarnate in the multiplicity of human embodiments, one that transfigures our mental images from limitations, one that transforms our ideas about our fellow humans and ourselves, one that transcends all we know or think we know about God and about humanity as the imago Dei.

From God is a many-gendered thing, by the reverend Dr B K Hipsher, a Minister of the Metropolitan Community Church, published in Trans/Formations, SCM Press 2009.

Reflection

This service is based on one of the evening prayer services we had at the Quest conference in Manchester in July. Quest is the pastoral group for LGBT Catholics. It was an inspiring weekend and made me realise how much I miss the consolations of Catholic spirituality and the pleasures of worshipping in person with others, of sharing oneself openly with them. It's what the church should be like but sadly in my experience isn't. The question I have been asking myself since I decided to leave the institutional church is whether it can ever change in the radical way I feel is necessary or whether what we are now seeing is a church on life-support, a church in a sense already dead without realising it, a church reduced to a small hard core of dogmatic purists, clinging to their old certainties to the bitter end. Can this, I wonder, really be God's will? Is this how I now see the church to which I committed myself heart and soul almost 40 years ago, trusting that it was the church founded by Jesus to continue his work of salvation, through which sacramental grace was objectively given? Well, as St John Henry Newman said, to live is to change and to be perfect is to have changed often. The church has made him a saint but doesn't seem too ready to follow his advice – or to approve of his sexuality. I did feel called by God to become a Catholic. The church for a long time did feel like my spiritual home. And when I transitioned and was told by a priest that gender surgery would be a mutilation, it felt like I had another calling: to show that a trans woman could still be a good Catholic. I certainly tried hard to do that and I hope that my friends at church do now have a better idea of what it means to be a trans person than what they will have received through the media and the pre-conceived, ill-informed and ideological pronouncements of the church. So I may have done a little good. But in terms of bringing about radical change, no good at all. People say that we must be patient, that the church changes very slowly. That is true: it took the church 359 years formally to admit that Galileo was right and the earth moves round the sun. Maybe in a few centuries or so the church will accept that there is such a thing as a transgender identity. Can this be the church I believed God had entrusted with our salvation? Should not rather the church be a prophetic voice in the world, leading the way in denouncing discrimination and systemic injustice in all its forms? In, like its founder, reaching out to the marginalised and oppressed, those at the bottom of the pile, like trans women of colour and gay black men, rather than colluding with and upholding the oppressor, the establishment? The motto of the Catholic bishops seems to be not the ringing words of Cardinal Newman, but anything for a quiet life, unless they rouse themselves to condemn abortion and gay marriage. We all know that Jesus reserved his maledictions for the hypocritical and self-righteous religious establishment and his blessings for the sinners, the outcasts, the poor. What would he make of today's church? Of the priests who literally keep God in a box to which they have the key, bringing God out from time to time for the faithful to adore before God is safely put away again. Who say you have to be a member of the club before you're admitted to communion but allow a twice married serial adulterer to marry in Westminster Cathedral? Who have to be men and if they're gay men, live lives of who knows what self-loathing or hypocrisy?

I could go on. I want to be more positive. I want to believe that something perhaps far better can emerge from the wreckage. I have no idea what that might be but I hope that God does. That perhaps God is leading us to a more mature form of Christianity. That the church of the future might actually embody and proclaim the Universal Christ, the Christ who fills everything with his presence, with his reckless, extravagant generosity. A church, as we heard, of a trans-God, a church truly made in the image of a God who transcends all we know or think we know about God, a God of limitless possibilities.

I do have faith that such a church is possible. I believe we are now seeing a movement of God's spirit calling us to something new. Maybe the greater visibility of trans people is one small sign of that. It's quite an exciting thought, to believe that we ourselves are actually a part of God's plan for renewal and new life in the church and the world. And why not? We shall shortly be hearing the Magnificat, Mary's song of praise to the God who looked with favour on God's lowly handmaid, but who casts down mighty kings from their thrones. God makes very surprising choices of the people God chooses to work with, to bring about God's will in the world. God definitely has a preference for using the weak, the flawed and vulnerable, as the world perceives it. All we need to do is believe that we too can be chosen by God, that we too have a role in the unfolding of God's providence, if we are willing to play our part, however seemingly humble and insignificant. It all counts. Nothing is wasted in the economy of the kingdom of God. Our lives, if we make them available, have a meaning and purpose beyond anything we ourselves can assign to them. We just have to trust.

Let's now hear some music.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cNM9AYYaXYY>

Leader: Your salvation is near to those who fear you; that glory may dwell in our land

All: Your salvation is near to those who fear you; that glory may dwell in our land

Leader: Mercy and truth have met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other.

All: That glory may dwell in our land

Leader: Glory to the Father, and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit

All: Your salvation is near to those who fear you; that glory may dwell in our land

The Song of Mary (Magnificat)

My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord
My spirit sings to God, my saving God,
Who on this day above all others favoured me
And raised me up, a light for all to see

Through me great deeds will Gd make manifest,
And all the earth will come to call me blest,
Unbounded love and mercy sure will I proclaim
For all who know and praise God's holy name

God's mighty arm, protector of the just,
Will guard the weak and raise them from the dust.
But mighty kings will swiftly fall from thrones corrupt.
The strong brought low, the lowly lifted up.

Soon will the poor and hungry of the earth
Be richly blest, be given greater worth.
And Israel, as once foretold to Abraham,
Will live in peace throughout the promised land.

All glory be to God, creator blest,
To Jesus Christ, God's love made manifest,
And to the Holy Spirit, gentle Comforter,
All glory be, both now and evermore.

Intercessions

Leader: From deep within our being, we call upon God through whom all can be made whole.
For those who cry out in physical pain or who suffer silently and those who long for the healing that human hands cannot offer.

All: Comfort them, Divine Healer

Leader: May your love in us overcome all things; let there be no limit to our faith, our hope and our endurance.

All: Comfort us, Divine Healer

Leader: We pray for all who feel desperate or alone, especially all queer, transgender, bisexual, lesbian and gay people who lack community, that they may know the company of loving friends and supportive family, and that they may have the creativity and fortitude to envision new spaces and give birth to chosen families.

All: Comfort them, Divine Healer

Leader: We pray for the people of Afghanistan, that you will protect and comfort all who are persecuted, oppressed and victimised and keep hope alive within them.

All: Comfort them, Divine Healer

Leader: Welcome into paradise those who have died this day and help those who mourn to comfort each other with the assurance of faith. Let us also remember in prayer our dear departed brother Jack Simmonds.

All: Comfort them, Divine Healer

Leader: Into your hands, ever-present God, we commit ourselves – our souls, our bodies, our minds, our futures –
For all things come from you,
And are best kept in your care.
We ask this in the name of Jesus your Son.

All: Amen

All: May we work and walk in the strong love of the Trinity, and may God bless us: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, all our nights and days. Amen.

Hymn

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dXDhCEnM-bQ>