

Grosvenor Chapel, Fourth Sunday after Trinity, 9 July 2017

Matthew 11.16 “But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the market-places and calling to one another, ‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.’”¹

I laughed out loud when I saw this Gospel reading appointed for the day we’d be thinking about our Mission Action Plan! I laughed because Jesus has so obviously got us bang to rights. Mission Action Planning is the process we in the Chapel have been involved for several years and are now moving forward to confirm us in our direction of travel and help us tread the next steps. The risk in Mission Action Planning is that like Christian communities the world over we brainstorm the task with a plethora of ideas about how *we have left undone those things we ought to have done and have done those things we ought not to have done*, leading us to conclude *there is no health in us*² – especially if we start arguing about priorities and goals. “We played the flute for you, and you did not dance! We wailed, and you did not mourn.”³ It’s not the lack of ideas that’s the problem – it’s the superabundance of them, and the fact that most churches – and especially small churches – just can’t be all things to all men. You see evidence of this in the way that many churchgoers are often only vaguely aware of what other churchgoers actually get up to – let alone the priest-in-charge at the centre of it all.

I was talking to a couple of churchgoers last Sunday – on the subject of angels, as it happens: did I believe in them? – which is the sort of conversation we do have at Grosvenor Chapel, as well as discussion about dementia care, the Sunday Club, music, this, that and the other. I said I did believe in them, and I do – but I wasn’t quick enough off the mark to explain why I believe in them, which is partly because in the first few chapters of the Book of Revelation, Saint John writes to the *angels* of the seven founding churches in Asia Minor, as if they were the embodiment of the community they represented.⁴ Some of John’s church/angels are weak; some are strong; some are cheerful – happy clappy; some are spikey – formal. But even the weakest, spikiest and most irritatingly party-hearty church/angels shape the character of their adherents, making them what they are. Find your angel and you find your rationale for coming to church, whether to worship, to serve, to pray, to learn, to be comforted – or simply chill out.

It is particularly important that we in Grosvenor Chapel discover who our angel is because we cannot say – in terms of angels – that we’re just an “ordinary parish church”. The parish church in these parts is St George’s Hanover Square, and a lot of who *they* are is about what as a parish they must do – say their daily prayers; celebrate communion; marry, baptise and teach the people of the parish. There is no equivalent duty on us to do these things – meaning that if we do them, we do them out of love far more than duty. For instance, if couples marry here, it’s not because they have a right as residents to get married in this particular place but because they want to and we want them to and so they become part of our chapel community and help us define who and what we are. In relation to our parish church, St George’s Hanover Square, we are technically a “Chapel of Ease” – which means we are a sort of overflow church, first put up when the Grosvenor Estate was rapidly expanding in the 1730s. An overflow? Like temporary screens in Hyde Park when there’s a prom at the Royal Albert Hall?? Oh my blessed Lord! If only we had that sort of pressure on our seating space to contend with today!!

¹ The opening verse of the Gospel reading appointed for the day: Matthew 11.16 – 19, 25 – end.

² From the general Confession for Morning and Evening Prayer in the *Book of Common Prayer*.

³ Matthew 11.17.

⁴ Revelation chapters 2 and 3. English speakers owe the word *Laodicean* to Chapter 3, verses 15 and 16, in which the angel of the church of Laodicea is admonished for being “neither cold nor hot, . . . neither one nor the other, but just lukewarm” in its devotion.

Yet by God's grace we *are* looking to fill our space, to grow our chapel, according to plan. And it could actually be that, in the quest for our angel, we are a "Chapel of Ease" in a less technical and rather more obvious sense. Jesus' words in this Gospel conclude thus: "Come to me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls."⁵ Being a "Chapel of Ease" is not the same as spiritual pampering, nor does it exclude physical and mental work – as the references to *yoke* and *learning* make clear. Behind these words, however, there is that sense of delight that motivates our approach to God despite – and maybe sometimes even because of – any hardship or disillusionment with the secular world. The words of Psalm 122, set to music by Hubert Parry and movingly sung on such occasions as a coronation or a royal wedding, capture the theme *Laetatus sum*: "I was glad – glad when they said unto me/ Let us go into the house of the Lord."⁶ The offering we make of ourselves as we come into God's presence sings out as a musical offering, making music, liturgy, poetry and psalmody an integral part of our worship.

Psalm 122 is what is known as a "Song of Ascent": it was sung by pilgrims drawn from all the people of Israel and indeed of the world making their way up to the Temple in Jerusalem. We do not pretend that this place is as grand as the Temple of Solomon, upon seeing which the Queen of Sheba felt the spirit drain out of her.⁷ Nor are we unaware of the dangers of Temple worship, which Jesus himself protested against in the events leading to his own crucifixion.⁸ Yet we do think there is something here about people making that voluntary journey from both near and far – some coming here daily; others but once or twice in their lifetimes – to present the offering of themselves in the presence of God and each other and receive the divine blessing that enables us to bless ourselves and each other as we go forth on our way. For we do continue on our way: this is not a "See Naples and Die" kind of Temple, where we lie ourselves down to rest in empyrean bliss, but one from which we are strengthened as pilgrims to resume our life's travels- whether for the coming day, week, month, or period or period of years.

The word for this is *viaticum*: food for the journey in the form of that blessing that will carry you on.⁹ Don't go until you have received the due measure of that blessing. If there are aspects of the service that do not satisfy; if there are questions raising in your mind – then linger, or return to raise or discuss them, or listen as others endeavour to do. Remember how the boy Jesus lingered in the Temple after Mary and Joseph had returned from Jerusalem, and was found "sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions."¹⁰ I was very encouraged that during this year's Lent talks we had eminent teachers who seemed inspired by the spirit of this place not so much to lecture us as to reflect with us on life's pilgrim journey, weaving our own questions and doubts into the blessings we jointly received. But this shouldn't surprise us if we are familiar with our Grosvenor angel. It is an integral part of our worship of God: who we are and what we do.

The more we look around us and reflect, the more we realise how we become people of blessing ourselves – blessing each other as we are blessed by God. This explains why those getting married, baptised and confirmed are such an integral part of our chapel community. In marriage, it is the couple who bless and administer the sacrament one to the other, drawing upon themselves the lifetime's *viaticum* that enables them to travel that pilgrim road together to the end of their days. We take that aspect of our Temple ministry seriously here – as we do the preparation of both children and adults for baptism and confirmation – because it enriches us all as pilgrims through life.

⁵ Matthew 11.28f.

⁶ Psalm 122.1.

⁷ 1 Kings 10.5: "And when the queen of Sheba had seen all the wisdom of Solomon [and] the house that he had built,...there was no more spirit in her."

⁸ Matthew 21.12f: "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer; but you make it a den of robbers.'"

⁹ In Roman Catholic parlance, also used of the eucharist administered to a person at the point of death

¹⁰ Luke 2.46.

Having voluntarily approached us with a view to getting married, baptised or confirmed, those involved are put in touch with others who can similarly share with and strengthen them for the journey ahead. When they come to take their Temple vows, we bless them in prayer and witness and they bless us in turn through having had that shared experience amongst us. Like all of us here, they may then depart in peace, linger for a while, or stay. Like all of us here, the blessing which they receive, and the place in which they receive it, remains indelibly a part of their pilgrim existence, however near or far removed in space and time from the point of that brave setting off. Think of the Prophetess Anna: eighty-four years of age and a widow: “She did not depart from the temple, worshipping with fasting and prayer day and night.”¹¹ So well formed was she as a person of blessing that she recognised baby Jesus as the source of all blessing when Mary and Joseph first brought him to the Temple precinct: “And coming up at that very hour, she gave thanks to God and spoke of him to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.”¹²

And this very same logic continues. We are now looking to use our Temple premises to work both with refugees who have wound up in this part of London, and with people from local businesses who are willing to work alongside them. This is not so much about inviting *others* to use *our* space as recognising the delight and comfort of all pilgrims and travellers along life’s journey to find a blessing in the House of God. The sentiment is echoed in Psalm 84, another Song of Ascent: “Yea, the sparrow has found her an house, and the swallow a nest where she may lay her young: even thy altars, O Lord God of hosts, my King and my God.”¹³ The psalm addresses all pilgrims “who going through the vale of misery use it for a well”¹⁴, reminding us that it is as co-workers – fellow hewers and drawers of water – that we are blessed: “unto the God of gods appeareth every one of them in Sion.”¹⁵ Indeed, as our *Gardens of the Imagination* art project reminded us, rough travellers, vulnerable young people and those who work with them help open doors in our sanctuary and dispense a *viaticum* of grace and spirit even as they revive their own strength. Through their craft and artistry in negotiating situations of personal and social challenge, they become as much servants of the sanctuary as its priests, readers, musicians and door-keepers. “I had rather be a door-keeper in the house of my God”, declares the psalmist, “than to dwell in the tents of ungodliness”¹⁶, and we are thankful for all who open doors in our Temple – doors of the mind and doors of experience, as well as those lovely doors of gilt, wood and glass, recently gifted to us, through which you’ve been welcomed to the Chapel today.

It is perhaps wrong to be too visionary in our Mission Action Planning. We could, after all, reduce it to a series of itemised action points – of which three: (1) worship and shared reflection; (2) ministry and preparation for confirmation, baptism and marriage; and (3) refugee and Mayfair worker project, have featured largely in what I’ve just said. Yet I hope that in planning these things and indeed in all that we do we have a growing and comforting sense of who it is who is accompanying us upon our journey in and beyond these four walls. It is an angel with a song in her heart and a strong and generous spirit. It is an angel with skill to harmonise notes of joy or distress alike. It is an angel whose song fills the sanctuary and yet lingers years later down life’s twisting road in places far flung or removed. “If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning. If I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth”¹⁷ – or, more prosaically perhaps, “I wonder how those refugees we met are doing?”; “I wonder if that speaker got back to us after the Lent course?”; “I wonder if my godparents have been asked to sponsor anyone else?” And, of course, in everything: Prayer.

¹¹ Luke 2.37.

¹² Luke 2.38.

¹³ Psalm 84.3.

¹⁴ Psalm 84.6.

¹⁵ Psalm 84.7.

¹⁶ Psalm 84.11.

¹⁷ Psalm 137.5f.

Let's not forget our Jerusalem. Let's be careful what we're about. For as a writer associated with this Chapel reminds us, "We are children quickly tired: children who are up in the night and fall asleep as the rocket is fired... controlled by the rhythm of blood and the day and the night and the seasons".¹⁸ I almost laughed out loud again as I recalled in this what we began with: Jesus' image of tired and tetchy, quarrelling in the market-place. But there is resolution for the children in T.S. Eliot's poem, which was in fact written as a fundraising piece for London's Anglican churches – a sort of 1930s Mission Action Plan. In the final chorus from *The Rock*, the children are blessed with a vision, not as of a blinding flash of light that will sweep them straight up to heaven, but of a place made up of living stones from both near and far, from which they are illuminated with just enough light for waking or resting, motion or repose, as may be

Therefore we thank Thee for our little light, that is dappled with shadow.

We thank Thee who has moved us to building, to finding, to forming at the ends of our fingers and beams of our eyes.

And when we have built an altar to the Invisible Light, we may set thereon the little lights for which our bodily vision is made.

And we thank Thee that darkness reminds us of light.

*O Light Invisible, we give thanks for Thy great glory!*¹⁹

Amen

¹⁸ "Choruses from 'The Rock', 1934", X, *Complete Poems and Plays of T.S. Eliot* (Faber Edition), p. 167.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*