

“Who’s Sitting in my Chair?”

Children are often great keepers of tradition. At home we have an Advent candle that we burn a section of each day. We usually light it at breakfast or tea time when everyone is there, turn out the lights, and have a moment in that golden light before singing ‘Jesus bids us shine’. In the busyness of life its often our youngest child, Anna, who makes sure it happens. We older ones often forget...our minds full of other important things to do... But when you think about it, what could be more important in Advent, as we celebrate the light of Christ coming into the darkness of our world? What could be more important than that daily moment of stillness gathered together around a candle flame? Gathered together with the light of Christ in our midst. Jesus said, ‘I thank you Father, that you have hidden these things from the learned and clever and revealed them to mere children.’ Its easy for us to push God out of his rightful place at the heart of things. Its easy to displace Jesus from the heart of preparations for Christmas. Today’s sermon, the last of this Autumn sermon series is called, ‘Who’s sitting in my chair?’ Its all about our tendency to push God or Jesus out of his rightful place, his ‘Chair’ if you like, and replace him with something else. Just like in our home where our busyness could so easily displace the Light of Christ if it wasn’t for the vigilance of our youngest child.

Over these five sermons we’ve been drawing on the history of Holy Trinity between the funerals of two key figures, Thomas Balsall, Dean and Rector, who built the chancel and was buried there in 1491. And William Shakespeare, buried close by him in 1616 following years of unprecedented religious strife. We’ve looked at the themes of Rivalry, between the College here, and the Guild Chapel; at the use of our senses in worship before and after the Reformation; at the centrality of Jesus and especially the Name of Jesus in late medieval worship, and at the huge power shift in Stratford when all the church’s wealth passed to the Town Council or Corporation in 1553, and clergy often struggled to come out from under their thumb.

So ‘Who’s sitting in my chair?’ When has God been pushed out by something else? I’ll pick just two examples from that period of history that are still most visible today.

Firstly, the Clopton Chapel, or the Lady Chapel as it was known in Balsall's time. If you're were sitting in that North Aisle of the Church in his day you would have been facing an altar specially dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary, the mother of Jesus. We know there was a large statue of Mary there, and that candles burnt there day and night, a real focus for devotion for the people of the town. At the Reformation all this was swept away. Devotion involving saints and images became suspect and eventually all of them were taken away and destroyed as idolatrous. It seems strange to us today, but in the name of God every image of Jesus and of his saints were thrown out of this church, or left mutilated and defaced. I suppose a church left stripped and bare would have its own power of course, but that's not what happened. The Lady Altar is still there to this day. But you can hardly see it. On its surface are huge statues of the Chief Armourer to James I and his wife, who are now buried beneath it. On the front of the altar you can see cannonballs, pikes and muskets, the tools of his trade. The statue of Mary, the Mother of Jesus, a feminine symbol of holiness, humility and hospitality, was thrown out as idolatrous. But ironically in her place have come even bigger graven images, this time distinctly masculine symbols of wealth, power and military strength.

'Who's sitting in my Chair?' says the Lord....

And what about the High Altar itself? That 'Holy of Holies' was the place in the old church where the Blessed Sacrament, the consecrated bread and wine, was always reserved. It would have been a prime focus of devotion with a lamp lit there day and night to signify the presence of Christ.

By Shakespeare's time and for many years after the Reformation the Sacrament was not allowed to be reserved in English churches.

And as for the High Altar: What has become the prime focus of devotion, at least during the week?

Shakespeare's tomb, of course! 'Who's sitting in my chair?' It's quite a question!

Shakespeare has every right to rest in peace, and I'm very happy to welcome all our visitors to his tomb. They come to find Shakespeare but we hope they leave having found something of God.

The Reserved Sacrament was eventually reintroduced here, but this time to St Peter's Chapel, which is something, though it can't be seen by most people and the lamp beside it can't be seen from most of the church. However we've recently found the site of an old Aumbry in the chancel. I would love to see it restored, the sacrament reserved there once more with a perpetual light beside it. If you woke in the night you would know the light was quietly shining here. A symbol of Christ's presence in our midst at all times.

We haven't mentioned more recent things. Charging people to visit parts of the church some see as displacing God's generosity and free welcome to all. But at the moment we could not possibly pay our way as a church without it. Wouldn't it be great if we could?

And more personally, how do we displace God in our own lives? In our home life or work life? Is anything pushing God out in your life?

Lets be quiet in God's presence...perhaps close your eyes.....hear the Lord say to you, in your life, 'Who or what is sitting in my chair, sitting where I should be right now?'

As my youngest child brings me back each day to the Light of Christ, may the Child of Bethlehem lead us all back to his heavenly throne. Amen.

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