

BETWEEN TWO FUNERALS
Holy Trinity 1491-1616

“Let Sense be Dumb”

This sermon is the second in a series of five sermons exploring themes arising from the Vicar’s sabbatical study project of 2006. He was able to study the history of Holy Trinity between the two great funerals of the Dean, Thomas Balsall, in 1491 and the poet, William Shakespeare, in 1616, with a special focus on the worship, spirituality, and daily church life of clergy and parishioners at Holy Trinity during those turbulent years.

10 September	“Rivalry”
24 September	“Let Sense be Dumb”
8 October	“The Name of Jesus”
19 November	“Under the Thumb”
10 December	“Who’s Sitting in my Chair?”

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Vicar of Stratford-upon-Avon

“Let Sense be Dumb”

Preached for Harvest Festival in Holy Trinity 2006

Harvest time is a sensual time of year. The smell of lush ripe fruit, the feeling of an early morning nip in the air, the sound of fallen leaves rustling on the grass, the taste of vegetables fresh from the garden, the sight of leaves turning red and gold against a sharp blue Autumnal sky.

Its lovely to have harvest fruits and flowers so beautifully displayed here in church for us all to enjoy. Harvest is a time to awaken our senses, a time to give thanks for all that we see, hear, smell, taste and touch, and today we reflect on the use of our five senses in worship.

However, if you can't read very well, or can't read at all, and yet go to almost any church in England, and you'll still be greeted with pages of printed liturgy and hymns. You could be forgiven for feeling that Christianity is just not for you. But the first disciples and most Christians down the ages haven't been great readers or intellectuals, and yet it has certainly been very much for them. So have we lost something somewhere? Does the history I unearthed during my sabbatical leave have anything to say to us today?

Well, if you'd come into church on a Sunday 500 years ago you would have found a real feast for the senses. Firstly touch: Entering through the porch you would reach to dip your hand into a large bowl of refreshing water touching it to your forehead and making the sign of the cross. The plinths for the Holy Water stoops are still there to this day. Your fingers would have reached for your prayer beads, the rosary, and entering the church your ears would hear one of the two organs playing, and the plainsong chanting of the priests in the choir or chancel, their part of the church beyond the great Rood Screen. In the nave where we are now, we entered the people's church, which in the week was used as a meeting place, a court, a space for dinners and dances as well as daily services.

As Owen Chadwick puts it, 'A natural place for meeting your friends, a supernatural place for meeting with God.'

Your eyes would take in the size of the biggest space for miles around, the nave unencumbered by the chairs and pews we know today. All these grey pillars would have been alive with multi-coloured designs, and the walls and windows decorated with pictures of the saints and scenes from the bible. Each of the ten altars in the church were dressed in their own altar hangings, lit by flickering candles and tapers, and great colourful banners hung around the church and were carried in processions. You would look up and see statues and pictures of saints, with candles before them. Higher than them all, in the great archway at the head of the nave, stood the great figure of Christ on the cross, with Mary and John to either side. On the front of the organ case today you can just make out a tiny Victorian copy of what would once have stood somewhere near that very spot. Plenty to touch, hear and see then, even before the service had begun. As the procession entered at the start of Balsall's funeral mass the whole congregation would be sprinkled

with Holy Water as they stood or knelt on the stone floor. Men and women separated by a low curtain running down the centre of the nave.

Your sense of smell would be well and truly engaged by now as clouds of incense were liberally dispensed throughout the service.

The Eucharistic Prayer was the liturgical highpoint when all senses were awoken together. Bells rang inside and out as the priest elevated the host, the body of Christ. People craned to see this holy sight, as God came amongst them in bread and wine, not easy as the celebrant was through the screen at the high Altar. Flickering tapers were raised and more incense swung at this Sacring, as all the people raised their hands high in adoration. Only the priest however was to taste the body and blood of Christ. The people only received the bread on Easter Day and at their deathbed. On this day, as at any main parish mass, their taste buds had to be satisfied with the kiss of peace, which meant coming forward to kiss the Pax Brede, a silver disc with Christ's image upon it, and by sharing the loaf at the end of the service, baked at home by a different parish family each week and blessed by the priest at the altar. It was the first food that anyone would have eaten that day.

Balsall was buried in the beautiful chancel that he himself had built. Just over a hundred years later Shakespeare was buried just two feet away. But how things had changed. Salvation was to come through hearing and digesting the word of God, which at least was now in English, as was the service. But the colours, the banners, the holy water, the saints, the sculptures, the organs, the candles, the vestments, the great crucifix, the incense had all gone. The walls were white, the pillars grey. Windows in the chancel lay broken, the beautiful carvings of scenes from the life of Christ on Balsall's tomb systematically smashed. The open nave was filling up with high-sided pews to block out all distractions and focus worshippers on pulpit and preacher. 'Let sense be dumb, let flesh retire' is a phrase from a more recent hymn, but expresses well that distrust of the body and its sensuality that seemed to be writ large in much of the destruction within churches at that time, our Taliban days. Salvation does come through God's word of course, but is that God's only way to reach us? The faith could seem only for those who could listen and concentrate, read and understand. The way to God for other types of people who come to God through touch and taste, sight smell and sound, had somehow got much harder and bleaker.

For all that needed reforming, and plenty did, surely something of the mystery and awe as well as the sheer sensuality of medieval worship was lost to the English in that turbulent time.

A lot has happened since then as the Church of England has claimed its inheritance as a church both Catholic and Reformed.

But what part do the senses play in your worship, both in church, and in your prayers at home? Hopefully we can see and hear, but touch, for example is often neglected. Some find it a great help to pray holding a cross, or using a prayer rope or rosary. We can open our hands in prayer, or even raise them in adoration, knowing its not just a modern fad, but part of our heritage, marking the holiest moment of worship for our ancestors here.

When we have a baptism, why not touch the holy water in the font as you go out and take it to *your* forehead as your forebears did, making the sign of the cross as indeed you can do at any service. Taste is often neglected as a way for God to touch our lives. Perhaps have one meal a week in silence, as monks and nuns do, savouring each mouthful, each flavour, and sharing that meal with the Lord. Sharpen your hearing, practise listening to those you meet, practise listening in church for God's special message for you that week, in scripture, in hymn or sermon, or just in conversation. It will be there, but only if we listen for it.

And so it goes on as we thank God at this Harvest Festival for creation around us, and thank God that he comes to us not just through our minds, but also through our bodies and senses too. 'Let sense not be dumb, nor flesh retire, for God came to us once and for all in the flesh in Jesus Christ, who humbled himself to share our humanity, with all its pain and awkwardness, that we might share his divinity.

As you sit just close your eyes for a moment, and with your hands in your lap gently allow them to open...

Hear the sounds around you...

feel the earth beneath your feet...

Look forward to greeting Christ in your neighbour, and receiving His touch at the altar.

Amen.