

Lent Sermon Series 2014

4th Sunday in Lent, 30th March

Mothering Sunday

St Mary's Kidlington, 8.00am

Revd Mervyn Puleston on *The Prayer of the Church*

St Mary's has stood here for many centuries, and for at least 300 years, not only was it a parish church, but a religious community as well, a daughter house of the great Abbey of Osney that was until 1536 when Henry VIII commissioner dissolved it. The monks left, and it became what it is still today our parish church. During all those years the monks would come to the stalls, where you are sitting today, and recite the seven daily offices, based on the words from psalm 119, "seven times a day will I praise you",

- Matins (during the night, at midnight with some); also called Vigils or Nocturns or, in monastic usage, the Night Office
- Lauds or Dawn Prayer (at Dawn, or 3 a.m.)
- Prime or Early Morning Prayer (First Hour = approximately 6 a.m.)
- Terce or Mid-Morning Prayer (Third Hour = approximately 9 a.m.)
- Sext or Midday Prayer (Sixth Hour = approximately 12 noon)
- None or Mid-Afternoon Prayer (Ninth Hour = approximately 3 p.m.)
- Vespers or Evening Prayer ("at the lighting of the lamps", generally at 6 p.m.)
- Compline or Night Prayer (before retiring, generally at 9 p.m.)

Behind the church you can still see in outline where they lived, and beyond are the ridged furrows of the old strip system where the villagers would have toiled with their work in the fields, and knew when the bell for the offices rung from the church tower, that the monks were doing their work too, their opus dei. They would also know that the monks would care for the sick, provide shelter for the traveller, and some basic education for bright boys who might become monks or priests, and that when they heard the bell they would know that the clergy were about their work praying for them.

In that medieval world there were three orders, the knights and barons who fought for the king, when they weren't fighting each other, the clergy and monks who did their work of prayer, and the ordinary people did their work in the fields or workshops. Even after the Reformation, the daily office of Matins and Evensong were said or sung in the cathedrals and parish churches of our land.

The prayer of the church is the continual offering of praise to God, its general name is the liturgy, and the word liturgy comes from the word laos and ergos, the work of the people of God. The prayer of the church is based on the idea of a formal liturgy being offered by the whole of the gathered people of God. In the Book of Common Prayer you will find what are known as rubrics, and they are instructions as to how worship should be conducted. One of them reads as follows: "The minister of the church shall say the offices of morning and evening prayer in the parish church where he ministers, and that he shall cause a bell to be tolled that the people may come to hear God's word, and to pray with him."

If you read some of the words from the introduction to morning or evening prayer, you will find it tells us just what it is that the congregation is there to do. "We assemble and meet together to render thanks for all the benefits we have received at his hands, to set forth his most worthy praise, to hear his most holy Word, and to ask for those things that are requisite and necessary, as well for the body as the soul." Hearing his word also often included a sermon which should by rights expound on the words of Scripture.

A great number of the texts we use in our services come from Scripture, the Magnificat and Benedictus, or from very ancient texts, like the Te Deum, or the Gloria. The psalms, which were ancient Hebrew hymns, as well as the actual readings from scripture, the Old and New Testament, which we use in this service and in the morning and evening prayer and in the Communion Service, and hymns and anthems from more modern times. You will find that at morning and evening prayer the whole of the Old Testament is read once a year, and the whole of the New Testament twice a year.

It is not just words we use in worship, we include music, the beauty of the building, in some place incense, colour and light in the various vestments. The word worship means Worthship, the giving of the best to God.

*In thy house, great God, we offer of thine own to thee;
and for thine acceptance proffer all unworthily
hearts and minds and hands and voices
in our choicest psalmody.*

The whole idea of the liturgy is that it should rise above our own individual likes or dislikes, and subjective ideas, in a common act of worship that brings us together as the family of God in fellowship and love, bringing to him not just our individual needs but the needs of the whole world, and to know what God is telling us in his Word. And we are not just here to hear it, but to go out and do it. That we are the Body of Christ, Corpus Christie. Gathered in one place, a sacred building built to the glory of God, to give that God worship and praise.

*As o'er each continent and island
the dawn leads on another day,
the voice of prayer is never silent,
nor dies the strain of praise away.*