

Homily for Solemn Evensong and Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament

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In conjunction with the year-long monthly WilanWest Celebration of Healey Willan
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Since this is the first Evensong and Benediction for this year long series, I'm going to talk about origins and meanings tonight, hopefully leading to your greater appreciation, and informing your own devotion and worship. Let's start briefly with the ORIGIN OF EVENING PRAYER, and thus EVENSONG.

The Rev Lowther Clarke wrote in 1922,

"It is sometimes said that Matins and Evensong came from the monks. In a sense this is true, but the offices from which our modern services are derived were used by other priests than those in monasteries, and in a simpler form by pious layfolk in their private devotions. The great Churchman mainly responsible for our Morning and Evening Prayer was Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury in the reigns of Henry VIII., Edward VI., and Mary; under Mary, as every schoolboy knows, he was burned to death at Oxford. Now Cranmer found a system of prayers for different times of the day, called the Hours, observed most fully in the monasteries, but to a large extent outside them too, which, in spite of its beauty, was unsuitable for general use because (i) there were far more services than people could be expected to attend; (ii) not enough Scripture was read; (iii) the public services were in Latin-we have a relic of this in the titles of the psalms in our Prayer-Book; and (iv) they were too elaborate for simple people to follow."

When Cranmer had the first Book of Common Prayer published in 1549, with the King's commissioning and permission, of course, there it was -- the completed Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer. I'm really hoping that the reason that Archbishop Cranmer was burned to death had nothing to do with the regular recitation or singing of Evening Prayer. Or we'd all be toast tonight.

And of course, then, Even Song is a sung form of Evening Prayer, with choir in a church setting, or an officiant with parishioners who can sing the main parts.

Now then: what is the Benediction service, which is shorthand for Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament, and even that title refers only to a portion of what is Eucharistic Adoration.

April 29, 2018

Eucharistic Adoration is the devotional practice of adoring and praying in the presence of Jesus Christ in the Holy Eucharist. To clarify, Eucharistic Adoration and Benediction are two terms that are popularly used interchangeably but do in fact have slightly different meanings. Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament is a solemn liturgical service, involving exposition of the Blessed Sacrament, an opening prayer, Adoration, incensing, Benediction - a blessing made with the sacrament - and concluding with divine praises and a Psalm. However, Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, also called Eucharistic Adoration, can and does take place outside of the formal liturgical rite.

Why does it even exist!? Is the great cry of the Continental reformers, such as John Calvin, even Martin Luther!

I'll let the good Roman Catholic Pope John Paul II answer from his 2003 encyclical letter, [*Ecclesia Eucharistia*](#), he said

"The worship of the Eucharist outside of the Mass is of inestimable value for the life of the Church. This worship is strictly linked to the celebration of the Eucharistic Sacrifice. The presence of Christ under the sacred species reserved after Mass - a presence which lasts as long as the species of bread and of wine remain - derives from the celebration of the sacrifice and is directed towards communion, both sacramental and spiritual. It is the responsibility of Pastors to encourage, also by their personal witness, the practice of Eucharistic adoration, and exposition of the Blessed Sacrament in particular, as well as prayer of adoration before Christ present under the Eucharistic species.

In fact, whenever and wherever the Sacrament of the Body and Blood, or only the Body of Christ, is "reserved", one can spend their personal and private time in devotion and adoration of the presence of Christ. Before saying something more about the presence of Christ, there is a little terminology worth fleshing out.

The "reserved sacrament" would be found kept in a receptacle either on the altar or built into the sacristy wall, usually with a light nearby. The receptacle on an altar is known as a Tabernacle, recalling the tabernacle in the Israelites' Tent of the Lord's Presence or in the Temple where the ark of the covenant would be. The wall receptacle is known as an Aumbry. One should be able to tell, then, if the Sacrament is being reserved when there is a special light, either hanging from the wall, or hanging from the ceiling, or as a light or candle right next to it.

A wonderful little story of the power and presence of the Presence of Christ being reserved is told by Agnes Sanford, who was invited to go talk – or rather be

April 29, 2018

interviewed – by Bp Kilmer Myers of the diocese of California at the height of the charismatic renewal and Agnes’ powerful healing ministry was becoming more well known. To say the least, Bp Myers, was quite skeptical with displays of the power of the Holy Spirit, even though he kept up a ritual practice in the Eucharist. I think it is also safe to say that Mrs Sanford had become highly sensitive to the presence of the Lord in whatever context through her healing ministry. In any case, he invited her to the sacristy of Grace Cathedral as a bit of a private tour – that sacristy is quite something to behold – and they walked through the sanctuary, which is the part east of the altar rail. There was a sacrament light there which was burning signifying the Presence of Christ in the reserved sacrament. Bishop Myers genuflected passing through, and Agnes did not. When they got into the sacristy, Bp Myers asked her if it was not her practice to acknowledge the presence of Christ in the reserved sacrament, and Agnes said, Yes. He asked further why, then, hadn’t she revered by a bow or genuflection. She said, “He’s not there.” There was a couple of back and forths between them, and the bishop was intrigued enough to go back into the sanctuary. He opened the aumbry and discovered there was, in fact, as Agnes intimated, no reserved sacrament there, and thus, “he” wasn’t there. You could almost hear a less reverential person say, “The lights on, but no one’s home!”

While we’re at it, here are some other terms. The container for the burning incense is called a thurible; the ornate container in which will be placed a consecrated host, that is bread that becomes the Body of the Christ, is called a monstrance; the veil that the officiant wears, and which covers the hands holding the monstrance during the blessing is called a humeral veil. The word humeral is descriptive, it refers to the shoulders, and thus a humeral veil is a shoulder covering, or cape. For Benediction it is almost always white, and is used within the Anglo-catholic, catholic and orthodox traditions bringing enhanced honor to the carrying and blessing with the blessed sacrament.

Expositio

April 29, 2018