18th Sunday after Trinity 2021,  
8.30am BCP Holy Communion & 11am Choral Eucharist

8.30AM

It’s all a matter of seeing things straight and (as ever with the practical wisdom of our Christian life) keeping the ‘main thing’ the main thing. The two commandments that come at the beginning of our Book of Common Prayer Holy Communion every week are the Gospel given for today. Jesus puts these commandments at the heart of our lives: Loving God with everything we are, and loving every other person as we love ourselves (which of course means we do need to love ourselves too – don’t forget that) Love God, love others, love self: Love and be loved. Keep the main thing the main thing...

So, here we are deprived for a while of our lovely Parish Church. So much that we assume will just ‘always be there’, isn’t, for while. Our church building and lots of the stuff that helps us feel near to God is gone for a while. I think this is an invitation to keep the main thing the main thing, too.

So what makes space scared? What makes our worship the real thing? Using a space like this for church throws up lots of questions and might rustle some feathers. Our feelings are important – clearly this building makes us feel differently from the Parish Church. That’s important to recognize, but our feelings aren’t the be all and end all. There is actual theological substance here too. We have entered the realms of Sacramental theology. Stick with me.
A Sacrament is an outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible grace. In Holy Communion, the outward sign is bread and wine, the reality is the life of Jesus: His Body and Blood. Oil is the outward sign of anointing, the inward grace is the healing, helping ministry of the Holy Spirit. In marriage, it is two people, that God is using to bring about more love in the world. Marriage is a school of love. Water is the outward sign of the Holy Baptism, the reality is invisible but utterly life changing, and so on.

God choses to us these things (‘people’ and ‘stuff’), physical matter, to love us. That is the way He choose to work. Chiefly of course, He used physical matter in the human flesh and blood of Jesus to save us, and ever since He has continued using physical stuff/things to bring about His loving purposes: people, music, words, the natural world, and of course the Sacramental elements of bread, wine, water, oil. God is using them. That’s what makes them holy, that’s what makes our worship, worship – not where it is happening particularly, but that we are accepting God’s invitation to enter His Divine action – to join in with what God is doing in us, to us, through us.

So, what about sacred space? The church building, however beautiful, is only beautiful because God is more so. It is a kind of worship too – it’s our attempt to reflect a glimpse of something that will always be beyond our ability to perceive or speak or represent in paint and plaster. But however beautiful, the church is simply a house for the altar. I know people love pews – but the pews do not make a church, the pews are there to help people come before the altar.

I often teach children by asking: when you come into church what’s the first thing you should do? I wander what you think? Well, I think the first thing to do is look for the lamp, the
burning candle or lamp that says that Jesus is here in Holy Communion, kept for the sick and for prayer in a tabernacle or aumbry in the wall. In St Marylebone Parish Church that is to the left up by the high altar, of course. First thing, look for the lamp – if it’s there, lit, so is Jesus in Holy Communion, so greet Jesus’ presence there in your heart, and with a genuflection or a bow.

Secondly, turn your eyes to the altar. The altar is the place of the Holy Communion between us and each other and God. The church is the house of the altar. The altar is not a prop or a thing we sometimes use, it is the heart of the church, the place of Christ’s sacrifice. God isn’t fussy. Priests and people use army jeep bonnets in warzones, upturned canoes on river banks, picnic tables on church camps, 6th form centre tables in St Marylebone even... God isn’t picky, but our church buildings and holy altars reflect the reality of God’s presence at the centre of our lives – they exist spectacularly and for one reason, and that speaks volumes.

But even then, the sacred space, however consecrated and beautiful is nothing without the people of God. Things ecclesial relate to the church because Ecclesia is the Greek word for Church. Ecclesia (Church) doesn’t mean ‘building’, or ‘bloke in big hat’, or ‘a collection of people on rotas’ (it may surprise you to hear) – it means the ones ‘picked out and put together’. The people, picked out and gathered. We may be lacking gold leaf and rococo, but we have each other, we have God’s Holy Spirit with us, we have the words of the Bible to read, mark, learn and inwardly digest, we have priest and bread and wine. We have all the ‘stuff’ and people’ that God uses to gather, feed, and send us out. Draw near with faith.
Today, Christ’s teaching is on marriage. Thousands of lovely couples have joined the Barrett Brownings in being married in the splendour of the Parish Church. And here we are in, errr, slightly less splendid surroundings. This hall, like marriage, is no fairytale. But despite all the fairytale trappings that commonly go with weddings nowadays, all that is needed for marriage is two people and God. All that is needed for Holy Communion is Scripture and people and priest and bread and wine and God. Those things, we have. Jesus’ teaching on marriage today, as has been said before, is very important. It is very important especially for the women of those times (and of many places in the world today) who were frequently dismissed by cruel husbands, or when children weren’t forthcoming, were dumped. If a wife was dismissed she became, in effect, a non-person. She had no property, protection or personhood in society, she was open to abuse, enslavement, or some other horrific fate. By binding marriage thus, Jesus ensured protection for many. Likewise, His words about the importance of children today – He is demanding the honouring of children in a society in which children had no legal or social protections.

Jesus’ teaching reminds us that people and stuff matter to God. And here we find the link between what I’m trying to say about today’s words on marriage, and about us being here in Blandford Hall for Church. We have entered the realms of Sacramental theology. Stick with me.
A Sacrament is an outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible grace. In marriage, it is two people, that God is using to bring about more love in the world. Marriage is a school of love. In Holy Communion, the outward sign is bread and wine, the reality is the life of Jesus: His Body and Blood. Oil is the outward sign of anointing, the inward grace is the healing, helping ministry of the Holy Spirit. Water is the outward sign of the Holy Baptism, the reality is invisible but utterly life changing, and so on.

God chose to use these things (‘people’ and ‘stuff’), physical matter, to love us. That is the way He choose to work. Chiefly of course, He used physical matter in the human flesh and blood of Jesus to save us, and ever since He has continued using physical stuff/things to bring about His loving purposes: people, music, words, the natural world, and of course the Sacramental elements of bread, wine, water, oil. Marriage matters, Jesus tells us today. Of course it does, because God is using it. As someone who isn’t married I have huge admiration and respect for those of us who are married – it is not easy, and married people need our prayers and deserve our thanks for giving the rest of us the gift of marriage.

So that’s marriage, what about now when we look around us and our church building and lots of the stuff that helps us feel near to God is gone for a while? I think this is a good moment to think together about sacred space, how we use it and what it means.

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of something that will always be beyond our ability to perceive or speak or represent in paint and plaster.
But however beautiful, the church is simply a house for the **altar**. I know people love pews – but the pews do not make a church, the pews are there to help people come before the **altar**.

I often teach children by asking: when you come into church what’s the first thing you should do? I wander what you think? Well, I think the *first* thing to do is look for the lamp, the burning candle or lamp that says that Jesus is here in Holy Communion, kept for the sick and for prayer in a tabernacle or aumbry in the wall. In St Marylebone Parish Church that is to the left up by the high altar, of course. First thing, look for the lamp – if it’s there, lit, so is Jesus in Holy Communion, so greet Jesus’ presence there in your heart, and with a genuflection or a bow.

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But even then, the sacred space, however consecrated and beautiful is nothing without the *people* of God. Things ecclesial relate to the church because Ecclesia is the Greek word for Church. Ecclesia (*Church*) doesn’t mean ‘building’, or ‘bloke in big hat’, or ‘a collection of people on rotas’ (it may surprise you to hear) – it means the ones ‘picked out and put together’. The people, picked out and gathered. We may be lacking gold leaf and rococo, but we have each other, we have God’s Holy Spirit with us, we have the words of the Bible to read, mark, learn and inwardly digest, we have glorious music to open our hearts to God, we have priest and bread and wine. We have all the ‘stuff and people’ that God uses to gather, feed, and send us out. Draw near with faith.