

Editorial - a Five- Star Experience of Church

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On one of my summer holiday Sundays this year, I went to church. Actually that is quite unusual for me, for more often than not the places where we go for holiday are not in easy reach of a church where the language is known to us. However, since we were enjoying a 'holiday at home', we decided to have a break from own church and visit a church elsewhere.

The first thing which struck me was the welcome we received - not from the official welcomers at the door, but rather from the ordinary members of the congregation. While my wife was looking for the Ladies, I was immediately approached by an assistant church-warden, who began to tell me something of the history of the church. We made our way to the 'sanctuary' itself and found a seat. Thereupon a jolly middle-aged woman sat next to us and struck up a conversation. Somebody behind us leaned forward and asked if this was our first visit to the church. All this, before the service even began! Were these people just being themselves, or had they been encouraged by the Rector (for it was an Anglican church) to be welcoming? I have no idea. However, as the service proceeded it became clear that a 'welcoming' attitude was very much part of the church ethos. The minister leading the worship emphasised how delighted they were to have visitors that morning (as also did the Rector).

How all this contrasted with a previous holiday Sunday, when no welcome of any kind was expressed; when nobody said hello to me; when even the preacher shaking hands at the door failed to notice that I was a visitor among the thirty-strong congregation!

The second thing which struck me was that I was given a full order of service. Again, this contrasted with my previous holiday Sunday. On that occasion the prayer book was used, and as a Nonconformist worshipping in an Anglican church, I found I was unsure as to which page I should be turning. A printed order of service can make all the difference in the world. Having said that, I found it interesting that, in this particular Anglican church, the liturgy was limited to the general confession and the Lord's Prayer, plus a congregational response when the offering was received. I think there is a lot to be said for printed orders of service - it makes church so much more user-friendly. I confess that in my own church we do not have printed orders of service every Sunday, but we do produce them for services (e.g. baptismal services) when we know that there will be a large number of visitors present.

The third thing which struck me was that although I knew all the hymns, some of the songs on the sheet were new to me. However, the church was prepared for this

contingency, for there were four singers, all 'miked up', ready to lead the singing, not just of the songs, but of the hymns too. Indeed, there was also a conductor present - not for the quartet, but for the congregation as a whole. Not surprisingly, the singing was tremendous. We were well and truly 'led' in worship. Goodness, how that contrasts with some churches I have visited.

The fourth thing which struck me was the importance given to the Bible. There was a 'pew' Bible in every seat, and what's more, every 'pew' Bible was well-thumbed - an indication that people actually use the Bibles. Indeed, the person reading the Scriptures that Sunday morning asked us to open our Bibles and helped us find our place by telling us the page number. The preacher, too, began his sermon by asking us to turn to our Bibles, and thereupon he went on to preach from the passage in question. The sermon, incidentally, was quite a 'tour de force', since the former Rector due to preach at that service had broken his hip earlier that morning, so the present Rector had to step in, and what's more, preached from the same passage appointed for the day. It was no brief 'homily' with one 'blessed thought' as I had experienced on my previous holiday Sunday church visit, but a proper 25-minute exposition of the Scriptures. Like the synagogues of old, this church was a 'house of instruction'.

The fifth thing I noticed is that nobody 'dressed up' for church - not even the clergy. True, the Rector did wear a suit and tie, but cassocks and dog-collars were all absent. Forgive my Baptist bias, but this Anglican church, which did everything so very well, gave an air of normality. I accept that for some Anglicans the pomp and circumstance of copes and mitres adds something to worship, but for me at least the sight of a man wearing a cassock gives church a very odd feel, and how odder church must then feel for any non-churchgoer giving church a try.

So all in all, I find myself awarding this particular church 'five stars'. OK, it was one of the evangelical 'cathedrals' (All Souls, Langham Place). And yet, it is something to receive a 'five star' welcome in a congregation in excess of a thousand. I was impressed.