

TRINITY NEWS

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Liturgy 7 ... and bells

“Praise him with resounding cymbals; praise him with loud-clanging cymbals!” Psalm 150:9

Holy ‘noise’ has always had its place in worship as an expression of joy in the presence of the divine, and if the psalter is anything to go by, the Temple in Jerusalem must have been a pretty noisy (joyful) place in this regard. It should come as no surprise then that noise making, in the form of ringing of bells, should have a prominent place in the Christian tradition.

Bells come in two basic forms: church bells (the big bells) and altar bells (the small ones rung at the Eucharist). Here I’m looking at altar bells in the context of the liturgy. Why do we use them?

Obviously, even these little bells are capable of making a joyful noise, such as when they are rung at the beginning and at the end of the Eucharistic Prayer. But there is another purpose they serve – or perhaps used to serve – that is also biblical: calling the congregation’s attention at certain key points. We read, for example, in the book of Exodus (Exodus 28) that the priest’s robes were hemmed with bells so that he could be heard entering and leaving the Holy of Holies: I suspect today’s altar bells originally served a similar purpose.

In those long ages before the invention of the microphone, especially in larger churches and cathedrals, it was often difficult to hear the priest unless he was singing: and even in sung masses, large parts of the Eucharistic prayer were said and so largely inaudible. And so the bells became an important aide to follow what was going on. The three rings at the Sanctus (Holy, holy ...) announced the opening of the Eucharistic Prayer (i.e. time to kneel); the ringing at the Words of Institution and elevation (“This is my Body...”) called attention to what was considered the central act, and the bells at the end of the Prayer, alerted the faithful to just that. Another bell might signal the time to come up to receive the sacrament.

My own practice, as you have noticed, is to limit the bells to their “joyful noise” function and the opening and the closing of the Eucharistic Prayer – now that we can hear everything the priest says, I’d rather not break up the Prayer with additional ringing. Also, theologically it’s the whole Prayer that consecrates, not just the Words of Institution, so I feel the time to ring the bells is when it’s all done.