

TRINITY NEWS

WEEK 34.
August 20, 2023
Proper 15

Revisiting the Notes on Liturgy #5

... AND BELLS

*O PRAISE God in his holiness: praise him in the firmament of his power.
Praise him in his noble acts: praise him according to his excellent greatness.
Praise him in the sound of the trumpet: praise him upon the lute and harp.
(Psalm 150:1-3)*

*H*oly ‘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, middle 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

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was singing: and even in sung masses, large parts of the Eucharistic prayer were said and so largely inaudible. And so 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.

Though the practical purpose of the bells may no longer be operative, nevertheless, like so much else in the liturgy, their ceremonial use today keeps us rooted in our past – and in this day and age where so much is changing so fast, this sense of ‘anchored-ness’ and stability is one of the important treasures we have to offer the world.

Praise him in the cymbals and dances: praise him upon the strings and pipe.

Praise him upon the well-tuned cymbals: praise him upon the loud cymbals.

Let every thing that hath breath: praise the Lord!

Psalm 150: 4-6



SAINTS OF THE WEEK:

Bernard, Abbot of Clairvaux, 20 August. Bernard was born at Fontaines, near Dijon, in France in the year 1090. He entered the Benedictine abbey at Cîteaux in 1112, taking with him many of his young companions, some of whom were his own brothers. He was a leader of the reform within Benedictinism at this time and in 1115 was sent to establish a new monastery at a place he named Clairvaux, or valley of light. Though times were hard, he built up the community with his remarkable qualities of leadership. Bernard preached widely and powerfully and proved himself a theologian of renown. Literally hundreds of houses were founded on the Cîteaux or Cistercian system and Bernard's influence on his own generation and beyond was immense. He died on this day in 1153.

Bartholomew the Apostle, 24 August. It has long been assumed that Bartholomew is the same as Nathanael though it is not a certainty. The gospels speak of Philip bringing Nathanael to Jesus and calling him an Israelite worthy of the name. He is also present beside the Sea of Galilee at the resurrection. Although he seems initially a somewhat cynical man, he recognises Jesus for who he is and proclaims him as Son of God and King of Israel.