

GOING TO CHURCH

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On a trip to England many years ago, walking and wandering the streets of London on a late Saturday night, I thought of Dr. Samuel Johnson's words, "When a man is tired of London, he is tired of life." In truth, I have never been tired of either! When I served as director of continuing education in the arts and humanities at the University of California, Los Angeles in the seventies and eighties, I established and was director of studies for summer study programs at Cambridge University and at the Royal Colleges of Art and Music in London. One of my favorite experiences during my time in Cambridge and London was going to church, my own and those of other believers. Occasionally I had opportunities to attend both Anglican and Latter-day Saint worship services on the same day. The following recounts my experience on one particular Sunday.

The night before, my sleep had been troubled from having seen a film at Piccadilly Circus titled, ironically, *Internal Affairs*, which turned out to be more violent and sexually explicit than I had expected. Awakened, I felt the need to cleanse myself, especially from the dark shadows that haunted my dreams. With the sense that my own internal affairs needed ordering, I decided to go to mass at Westminster Abbey and then to sacrament meeting at the Hyde Park Ward.

There are times in our lives when we are blessed by gracious or fortuitous convergences. This was such a Sunday for me, for when I arrived at Westminster Abbey, I discovered that that day, July 22, was Saint Mary Magdalene's Day. It seemed appropriate to me that here I was, an ordinary sinner seeking grace on a day honoring a sinner who had experienced the forgiving grace of Christ in such a complete and profound way ("then neither do I condemn thee. Go thy way and sin no more") and whose devotion to her forgiver had given her the honor of being the first witness of the Resurrection.

Those of us attending the service at the Abbey waited patiently for the tourists to leave and the procession of ministers to enter and then, following them, took our seats in the choir and nave. Looking up into that gloriously vaulted ceiling, I felt the burdens of my heart and mind begin to lift, and then felt them completely vanish as the choir and congregation sang the opening anthem, “Light’s Glittering Morn Bedecks the Sky” (set to the familiar hymn “All Creatures of Our God and King”) with its repeated “alleluia”s. Westminster Abbey is a church for singing “alleluia” with full heart and voice:

Light’s glittering morn bedecks the sky;

Heaven thunders forth its victor-cry:

Alleluia!

An angel robed in light hath said,

“The Lord is risen from the dead”:

Alleluia!

The setting for the mass was Mozart’s *Missa Brevis* in F (K 192), one of the most lyrically melodious of the small masses, and my personal favorite.

Even though the invocation was a set prayer (there was no reference to our having gotten there safely!), I listened carefully to the words and felt their import in my heart: “Almighty God, unto whom all hearts be open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid: cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of thy Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love thee, and worthily magnify thy holy name, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.”

As the priest intoned the Kyrie, I thought of how often in my life I had asked for mercy, had pleaded repeatedly for forgiveness for my contribution to the *peccata mundi*—the sins of the world. What a heavy phrase that is, “the sins of the world”—the agony of the world, the exquisite suffering of the world, the dark and violent acts of the world—an enormous and yet unimaginable weight borne somehow by one person.

After the Gloria there was a scripture reading from 2 Corinthians about the transformation that comes from the love of Christ. The choir sang a gradual motet (set also by Mozart) and then there was a reading

from the Gospel of John about Mary's seeing the risen Christ. The reading was preceded by the priest saying, "Glory be to thee, O Lord" and followed by the reader saying, "This is the gospel of Christ," and the priest singing, "Praise be to thee, O Christ."

The sermon was centered on Mary Magdalene and her relationship with Christ. The minister spoke of Mary's sinful life and of her wandering in a wilderness before she met Christ. He then said, "We all know the wilderness. Everyone one in this church today has wandered in the wilderness and we will all wander in the wilderness again." I thought of my own wildernesses, past and present, and how through them I had come to know God and myself better.

The minister then postulated that Christ could be so forgiving of Mary because he was himself acquainted with the wilderness. He said, "I could not believe in a God who had not been in the wilderness." It was, I thought, precisely because Christ had gone into the wilderness and come out of it triumphant over the temptations of both the flesh and the spirit that we have hope that he can reclaim us from our wilderness wanderings.

Following the sermon, the choir sang a thirteenth-century hymn about Mary weeping for her dead Lord at the tomb and then recovering from her grief and lamentation when she sees him standing before her. Bowing before him, she washes his feet with her tears. The last stanza of the hymn is as follows:

Glory be to God and honor,
 who, preferring sacrifice,
Far above the rich man's bounty
 sweetness found in Mary's sighs,
Who for all, his love foretasting,
 spreads the banquet of the skies.

As the priests prepared the bread and wine, the choir sang the Sanctus:

Holy, Holy, Holy,
Lord God of Hosts,
Heaven and earth

Are full of thy glory.
Glory be to thee,
O Lord most high.

Meditating upon these words, I considered whether I would rise with the others and go to the altar to partake of the sacramental emblems. I was still undecided as it came time for the row I was sitting in to rise, but at that moment, the choir began singing the *Agnus Dei* ("Lamb of God") and it seemed as if joining that procession of saints seeking renewal at the Lord's Table was not only a logical step in what I was feeling but a necessary step in the spiritual renewal I was seeking that day. As I rose and walked to the altar, Mozart's music made me feel at one with the Lord, enveloping and lifting me on the wings of his love.

Lamb of God, who takest away the sins of the world,
Have mercy on us.

As I knelt at the altar, one priest placed a wafer in my mouth and a few moments later another offered the chalice of wine. I meditated for a few moments upon these emblems of the Lord's sacrifice for me and then returned to my seat. As I did so, the choir sang the *Benedictus*:

Blessed is he that cometh
in the name of the Lord.
Hosanna in the highest.

The priest prayed that the Lord would accept our "sacrifice of praise" and sanctify the sacramental emblems to us. He then concluded, "Grant that we may so eat and drink of these holy things in the presence of thy divine majesty, that we may be filled with thy grace and heavenly blessing." After a moment's silence we all said the Lord's prayer, and it had fresh and wonderful meaning for me.

Following communion, the priest said a prayer of thanksgiving and pronounced a blessing on the congregation. The service ended with the choir and congregation singing:

Come down, O love divine,
Seek thou this soul of mine,

and visit it with thine own ardour glowing;
O Comforter, draw near,
within my heart appear,
and kindle it, thy holy flame bestowing.

Finally, the priest pronounced a benediction on the congregation:

Go in peace and serve the Lord.
In the name of Christ. Amen.

I walked out of the service with a new awareness of belonging to the larger community of Christians throughout the world, with a renewed hope in my ability to be a faithful disciple, and with a renewed devotion to the Lord and his gospel. Once I was outside the Abbey, I immediately took a taxi to South Kensington so that I could be on time for sacrament meeting at the Hyde Park chapel.

The Hyde Park building is a wonderful place to worship, not only because it has an excellent pipe organ that sustains the singing, but because it is home to one of the most international wards in the Church, its congregation filled with Saints from many nations, including a number of people of color. I met, for example, a brother from Trinidad who had joined the Church as a young man because as a child he had been taught the gospel by his Methodist minister father from “Josephus, St. Aquinas, John Wesley and,” he added with his eyes widening, “*Talmage*.” Somehow his father had gotten a hold of a copy of *Jesus the Christ*, from which he taught both his congregation and his family.

The service at Hyde Park was as plain and ordinary as the one at Westminster Abbey had been elaborate and elevated. The choice of hymns was undistinguished and the speakers—an older missionary couple—banal and uninspiring. The brother, who was the concluding speaker, emphasized the importance of missionary work and then told a story about being in a high priests group in a ward somewhere in Utah that met in an historical chapel set on a hill. The stake president wanted to tear the building down, sell the land, and build another chapel elsewhere. In the vote to sustain this action, this brother was the lone dissenter. He thought it was wrong to lose such an important

historical building and so wrote to the General Authorities about his concerns. As a result of his letter, he reported, a General Authority persuaded the stake president to reverse his decision.

It was refreshing, I thought, to hear such an example of individual will and strong conviction that would risk countering local authorities, but just as I was thinking this, the brother concluded, “But since then I have decided to follow my leaders no matter what they say and to sustain their decisions, even if I don’t agree with them.” I was flabbergasted. Did he feel so guilty about this one act of independence that he had to rectify it with a vow never to do something like that again?

As opposed to the service at Westminster Abbey, which was vertical, with the emphasis on praise and glorification of God and Christ, a looking up, a lifting up, the entire service at Hyde Park was horizontal and mundane, in terms of both its general spiritual tone and its singular direction. There was a good deal of talking to one another but very little sense of singing or expressing praises to God, an emphasis on the works of the Church but no mention of the grace of Christ.

After church I walked along the Thames trying to sort out my feelings about the two services. The one at Westminster Abbey certainly appealed to my imagination with its beauty and structure that helped me order my feelings in a deep, significant way. Robert Frost says that poetry is “a thought-felt thing,” and it was that combination of thinking and feeling that the service earlier that day inspired in me, making it at once profoundly poetic and spiritual.

I have often regretted that the Restoration could not have taken place in a “high church” or liturgical context rather than a “low church” or more evangelical one. That is, if Joseph Smith’s religious roots had been Anglican rather than Methodist and Presbyterian, it might have made a dramatic difference in our present form of worship.

I recognize that this would probably have been impossible. Given the fact that it was Anglicanism that the Puritans separated from when they came to the New World, it is probable that there was not even an Anglican church in all of Western New York during Joseph’s time. It is also unlikely that the seeds of the Restoration could have taken

root in soil other than that nurtured by the evangelical fires that swept through what historians refer to as “the burned-over district” where Joseph Smith lived. Just as a prairie is regenerated by the nutrients resulting from grass fires, so the conflagration of spiritual fervor that swept through Western New York in the early 1800s made it possible for Joseph Smith and his family to be receptive to God’s penultimate intervention in history. Nevertheless, it is tempting to contemplate what our services would be like if our original traditions had been more liturgical.

But I also realize that it is its very openness to the *possibilities* of invention, improvisation, and inspiration as well as imagination that makes our form of worship so inviting. That we seldom rise to the occasion presented by these possibilities might say more about our spirituality than the form and structure of our worship services. That is, when our sacrament meetings really work the way the Lord intended them to, they may have the power not only to lift us to heaven but also to unite us on earth in a way that may be more difficult in a highly liturgical service. It is that combination of vertical and horizontal—uniting the glorification of God with deep fellowship—that makes a Latter-day Saint service so promising.

There wasn’t as much of a sense of intimate community at Westminster Abbey as there was at Hyde Park—or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that there was a different sense of community *for me*. At Hyde Park I felt a close kinship with the Saints assembled there. Though I didn’t know any of them personally, I felt we were part of the same family. What bonded us together was that special witness of the Restoration that we Latter-day Saints call “testimony.” At Westminster, I felt connected to the broader Christian community—the body of Christ, his church, in the larger sense. Those of us who came to worship at this most famous of abbey churches were for the most part strangers and foreigners, although for that hour there was a definite connectedness among us as we became “fellow citizens with the saints and of the household of God.” At Hyde Park I was aware of my Mormonness in a deep, personal way. At Westminster I was in touch with my Christianity in a no less profound way.

In truth, I value both traditions, both experiences. I am a Latter-day Saint to the center of my bones. Mormonism is my Church, my people, my faith tradition. Members of my family were converts to the Church in four separate generations, each independent of the previous one, beginning with my great-great-grandparents who joined the Church in Fishguard, Wales, in the middle of the nineteenth century. My great-grandfather left the Church and joined the Reorganized Church. His son, my grandfather, though named Zoram, never joined the Church, but his wife, my grandmother Rees, was converted to the gospel by missionaries traveling through southwestern Colorado in the early part of the twentieth century. My two aunts were baptized at the same time, but my father was not. Later, after I was born and my parents were divorced, my father was converted to the Church through a miraculous priesthood healing. After the Second World War, he taught me the gospel, and I was baptized. I feel enormously blessed to be one of only three descendants of my great-grandparents who are active in the Church today.

Before they joined the LDS Church, my ancestors were Anglican. The sarcophagus of at least one of my ancestors rests at St. Davids Cathedral near Fishguard, Wales. Members of my family in Wales and England still belong to the Church of England. At least one, Hyrum Rees (named after the prophet's brother) was an Anglican minister. They were and are good Christian people. I also identify with their faith tradition and have been grateful for the opportunity to worship with members of that tradition in small parish churches, cathedrals, and abbeys in Great Britain and in the United States. When I go to Good Friday services or Midnight Mass, I go to an Anglican church. It is a part of my heritage that I honor.

I love the restored gospel of Christ. It is so much a part of me that I can't imagine myself not part of it. I love the Church as well. It is my spiritual home. But the village in which my home rests is the Christian church. I also belong to it and it to me. Beyond that village is the wider world of faithful people—Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, as well as many other religious traditions—who love God and try to serve him

and others. These are also my people, and I am one with them. As Coleman Barks's translation of the thirteenth-century mystic poet Rumi puts it:

We can't help being thirsty.
 Moving toward the voice of water
 Milk drinkers draw close to the mother.
 Muslims, Christians, Jews,
 Buddhists, Hindus, Shamans—
 everyone hears the intelligent sound
 and moves with thirst to meet it.
 Clean your ears.
 Don't listen for something you have heard before.
 Invisible camel bells, slight footfalls in sand,
 Almost in sight, the first word they call out
 Will be the last word of our last poem.

This poem is based on one of Rumi's sayings, "If you think there is an important difference between a Muslim and a Jew and a Christian and a Buddhist and a Hindu and a Shamanist then you are making a division between your heart and your ability to act in the world." I believe there are important differences between what I believe and what others believe, but I do not want there to be a division between what my heart knows and how I act in the world. So I believe that despite important differences, what is at the heart of every religion is not different—that the highest form of worship is to love God with all our hearts, minds, and souls and to love others as we would want to be loved. Wherever we find these practices, we find fellowship.

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