

St Peter's, Ealing

Advent 3 YrA

What did you go out to see?

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Moving the ministry of the sacrament within the parish mass to the High altar has been an interesting and informative experience. It has elicited various responses from a number of you. Some have struggled with it, not just as a change in the life of our community but how it made you feel as you attempted to worship, with the main sacramental focus of our life together being removed to the distant East end of the building. Some of you have relished the move, valuing the change because of its difference and the refreshing of your engagement with the sacramental worship of our community. Some have simply enjoyed using our beautiful alabaster altar, which seldom gets to be a feature in our worship life. Some have journeyed with this move in hopeful expectation.

The controversy has not been felt just in the pews. The Leadership Team have expressed different feelings about this move, even if it is for the season. We have developed or changed our view or been influenced by what we have experienced in the reality of leading worship from this very traditional position, known in the trade as Eastward Facing.

There have been so many thoughtful and thought provoking discussions about our worship that have been grace-filled and spiritually nourishing; a genuine and pleasant surprise with a quality of conversation and reflection taking place and being offered.

So why have we done this? There are a number of possible explanations. The main one being the marking of a new season. Dramatically, by using Eastward Facing, we all look with new eyes to the coming of the Lord. The priest 'leading' us almost literally as they stand at the head of our worship space, invoking God's blessing of grace for his people as the bread and wine are sanctified to sustain us in our Advent journey. Having celebrated in this way through Advent, at Midnight Mass the Mass will be celebrated for the last time this season in this position, with the bambino at the altar, which will then be processed through the church and settled in the manger of Christmas when we return to the nave altar to give praise to the Christ child who has arrived in the midst of us.

It seems though, in using our worship space in a very different way, we might be encouraged to be more open to receiving Jesus' question from today's

gospel passage; “What did you go out to see?” Jesus challenges those who have now gathered around him, almost certainly people who had gone to see or hear John the Baptist, who had now turned to this new preacher with new ideas and a new ministry. Jesus’ challenge is to grapple with the reality of the message that began with the post exilic prophets and for our purposes continued with John, ‘repent for the kingdom of God is at hand’. Jesus wants his listeners to stop and actively listen, to understand what it is they have experienced, was it a reed bending in the wind or a king in fine robes, no it was a prophet of God. There were itinerant preachers around at the time, all with apocalyptic or messianic messages. Jesus’ question is posed to a varied congregation who have come to hear him for several reasons and probably also went to hear John with a number of intentions too: was he the latest thing to be heard, were they searching for an answer to life? Jesus is saying, stop, listen, you have heard a great prophet who has brought you the truth of God. Do you not get it? They quite possibly had fallen into a routine. Jesus challenges them and us, what did you go out to see? He pushes them out of the comfort zones.

We could have simply used our seasonal variables to mark Advent. We would still have had the lovely spectacle of the lighting of the Advent candles by the children and the purple vestments and alternative confession along with the traditional seasons readings. But by being more creative in our use of the worship space that is available to us we are challenged to think about Jesus question in our own faith life. What do we come out to see? Or hear or experience?

This challenging is part of the Advent preparations. Advent is described as a time of watching and waiting. It is less penitential than preparational. Unlike Lent, in Advent we are encouraged to find a new footing for our journey of faith when we are reminded of the reality of the incarnation in our story of salvation. Harold began our Advent reflections by drawing our attention to the tensions between the many themes or images of Advent; the light and dark; the quiet and reflective whilst being excited and expectational. That tension continues in worship where something different pulls us both in joyful expectation and celebration whilst being faced with the unfamiliar and testing.

In our faith lives we can get comfortable even complacent from time to time. In Advent we are stretched to think about the tougher things of our faith, challenged to ask about the place of prophecy and proclamation as Jesus asks us; what did you go out to see?