

The Joy of Choral Evensong

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Which is the most Bible-based service available in the Church of England?

Which is the most durable form of Anglican worship?

Which is the best attended weekday service across the Church of England?

I don't have hard data, but my answer to all these questions would be 'Choral Evensong'. I'm certain about the first one. A service of Choral Evensong contains at least five passages of scripture – a psalm (or two), Old and New Testament readings, plus the two canticles which come from Luke's Gospel (Mary's song, the 'Magnificat', and Simeon's song, the 'Nunc Dimittis'). That's not to mention the sung responses, which employ a variety of sentences from the Bible. If you're a Biblical Christian (I'm not sure there's any other sort, really), Choral Evensong will fill your mouth and ears with the divine word.

I'm pretty certain about the second answer. Almost five hundred years ago, as the Church of England revised its worship in the light of the Reformation, Thomas Cranmer came up with Book of Common Prayer Evening Prayer. It was arguably his masterstroke. He took elements of 2 monastic evening services: Vespers (from which comes the Magnificat) and Compline (from which comes the Nunc Dimittis) and 'repackaged' them in a Bible-based service meant for a general congregation. It's been used ever since. And through the cathedral and choral tradition which has developed to offer Choral Evensong, this has emerged as the most durable of Prayer Book services.

While the Churching of Women and the Communion have (some would say thankfully) disappeared, Matins has withered and Prayer Book Communion has mutated several times, Cranmer's Evening Prayer has endured essentially unchanged for nearly half a millennium. I suspect its durability means it has something valuable to offer.

And that certainly seems to be the case in cathedrals, chapels and large churches (especially in summer) where large congregations are often drawn during the week to attend a Choral Evensong. People who might well not be in church on Sundays, or who maybe feel daunted by the Eucharist, or tourists who were just passing and chose to join in. Maybe people content to sit and enjoy a space of peace and reflection, praying and meditating through the music rather than directly joining in. I don't have the data to prove this, but suspect no other single form of Anglican worship reaches as many folk from Monday to Saturday as does Choral Evensong.

I love it because at its best it's a service which just flows smoothly from start to finish. Cranmer's elegant, well-worn cherished words work their way into your soul over time, and can lead to a wordless encounter with God, which is beauty and peace. Music from the choir, by turns bracing and peaceful, aids contemplation and unites the whole congregation in prayer. One is conscious of standing in a tradition which has helped people meet God for centuries in the past, and which I hope, pray and trust will outlast my short lifetime with its experiments and innovations.

Jo asks

So I wonder if I can tempt you to join us on the second, third and fourth Sundays of the month at 6:30pm to experience a Choral Evensong? See page 8 for more information on October's services.

With families, school and work the next day that 'slot' doesn't always work with the lifestyles of today. But if you come along you'll join in with an enduring, valued and Biblical part of the church's worship and outreach. And maybe find a moment of peace, prayer and inspiration to take into the demands and joys of the week to come.