

The Sanctuary Bells

A soul stirring event took place in Nelson on Monday the 20th of September.

The bells of Nelson Cathedral rang out over the City to announce the arrival of the Godwits. Their marathon flight from Alaska, to various places in New Zealand was over they had arrived. Just for good measure, as I heard it, the bell ringers rang the changes.

Not only was I deeply moved by this event, I found myself being transported back in time, to a series of events that took place more than sixty years ago,

I was living in the Feilden Taylor Hostel; a hall of residence owned and run by the Wellington City Mission. Attached to the mission, was St. Martin's Chapel. There as a new convert to Anglicanism, I sat at the feet of two Clerics, soaking up their teaching. Little by little, I was drawn into a mystical spirituality that would change my life forever.

Central to their teaching, was the idea that if you could fully describe a spiritual event in finite terms, then it would not be God that you were describing. They also taught me their approach to traditional behaviour in the Church. I learned the difference between tradition and doctrine.

In their teaching, tradition was a powerful tool for spirituality, provided, (as a general rule) that it was not encased in some form of doctrine, either of the Church praxis, or in the minds of parishioners

The ringing of the Cathedral bells to announce the arrival of the Godwits is one of those soul stirring events that announces an event to the city. The outcome was so compelling, that radio New Zealand echoed the bells by going on air to explain the bells, and share the excitement.

Now I go back more than sixty years.

In the process of learning about the things we do in our worship, I asked my teachers about the Sanctuary Bells. (Sanctuary Bells were very much a part of the Chapel worship at St Martin's) Without missing a beat, my teacher launched into the following story.

He explained;

There are numerous explanations for the Sanctuary Bells. Whilst they can be seen as a means of focussing attention on the significant points of the mass, (The entry of the Priest into the Sanctuary, The Gradual, The Gospel, The Pateum, The blessing of the gifts of the people, the epiclesis, the Fraction etc) There is another tradition that is well worth learning about.

If you can imagine that the church lies at the very heart of village life, then the village would hear the call to worship with the ringing of the tower bells, ten minutes before the start of the service. At the appointed time, the priest enters the Church. As he kneels before the altar to say the Collect for purity, the sanctuary bell is rung. This is a signal for the bell ringers in the tower to ring the main bells and thus announce to the village, (in particular those who by sickness are not able to attend in person) that the service has begun. Those stuck at home are able to follow the service with their own prayer book. At various points of significance, the sanctuary and the tower bells will ring out. The final two bells, (the prologue and the dismissal) announce that the service in the church is over and the Priest(s) are now moving out into the village, taking the sacrament to the sick.

Then came a stern warning from my teacher. Never, he said, ever allow this tradition to become a doctrine of some sort. Understanding it provides the Church with a very powerful pastoral model. It is the case of a particular tradition enabling a particular form of pastoral ministry. It is a tradition, which when taught to the congregation, keeps them aware of and prayerful for the sick and suffering. It is a tradition designed to be a compelling pastoral tool.

Clearly, as a city parish, St Peter's finds itself in a very different environment to that of the English Villages of yesteryear, but the model turns our mind and challenges us to search for new ways of being the church in community.

Ross F Downes 22 September 2021