Trinity Climate Action Prayer Support – Aug, 2024

**On holiday with the Lord.**

Dear Supporter,

Here is an alternative view on Holidays and a change from the normal Eco Prayer Letter. I hope you are not too disappointed. However, have no fear, we will be back to (almost) normal next month.

Travelling abroad this summer? Planning to take time off church rather than venture inside where the worship is in a different language? Simon Jenkins writes about the unexpected things that happen when you take up the challenge of warming a foreign pew.

Where do you go to church when you’re on holiday? Several years ago, my evangelical auntie, asking what I would be doing on my impending beach holiday, told me tartly: ‘You may be going on holiday, but you can never have a holiday from the Lord.’

Despite that precious truth, most believers, as far as I can see, don’t go to church when they’re abroad, especially if they’re in a foreign-language country. There are good reasons for it, of course. Going to an unfamiliar church requires nerves of titanium even when you speak the same language.

This was the experience of George, who foolishly ventured into a Gospel Hall in Glasgow a few years ago. Quizzed at the door about his born-again credentials and the disappointing lack of a big black Bible under his arm, he was directed to an obscure corner at the back. Once consigned to the pews of the damned, he was excluded from the Lord’s Supper; but looking on the bright side, he was also excluded from the collection bag. This rather chilly visit to church dropped to freezing point, said George, when ‘the preacher stared in my direction in the far corner for the entire sermon’.

If that can happen in a church possibly around the corner from you, what horrors might await if you darkened the doors of a French Catholic, Greek Orthodox or Spanish Pentecostal church, all of them (especially the Pentecostals) speaking crazily in unknown tongues?

Despite the dangers, can I encourage readers to give church a go this summer holiday? I’m suggesting it because being in a service where you don’t know the language is just an intensely interesting thing. You’d think it would be boring, but that’s reckoning without fear. Fear keeps you alert, because at any moment you could find yourself standing when you should be sitting, or launching into a solo at the end of the hymn, when everyone else understood the instruction to omit verse five. That’s when the entire congregation turns to inspect you, the person who has done the wrong thing, just like in the movies.

This actually happened to me when I went to an Ethiopian Orthodox liturgy. It was in London, but the service was spoken in Ge’ez and Amharic. I made myself walk into church confidently, as though I’d been there a thousand times before. I steered myself smoothly into a pew, sat down and bowed my head for a moment of pretend prayer. When I looked up, I discovered that I was the only man sitting in the women’s section, with several women looking at me, and not in a good way.

The second fascinating thing about church in an unknown language is that you switch channel from the ear to the eye. The minister might as well be talking in Klingon, and so you begin to notice visual oddities that maybe the church regulars have never spotted. I visited the Thomaskirche in Leipzig a couple of years back, the church where JS Bach was once in charge of the music. As I sat in my pew, wondering why ‘German’ rhymes with ‘sermon’, I noticed something curious.

The pulpit was mounted on a pillar in the nave and was sideways on to the congregation. If the preacher stood squarely facing their notes, then they were facing the pillar across the nave. And on that pillar was a large old crucifix in tarnished gold which was mounted at a slightly lower height than the pulpit. This meant that the preacher was talking down to Jesus. Maybe the intention was to keep the cross of Christ ever before the preacher’s eyes, but I think the Thomaskirche ought to sort it out.

And there are other joys to discover in your holiday churchgoing. Such as the handsome young priest, newly installed at a Catholic church in Bordeaux, who concluded a wedding I went to a summer or two before Lockdown with the exhortation: ‘Faire l’amour!’ (‘Make love!’). This blessed instruction was received so enthusiastically by the French congregation, with cheering and applause, that there was a real danger of it being put into immediate effect.

Meanwhile, in Croatia, at a charismatic service featuring flag waving, a forest of raised arms and outbursts of tongues, the congregation spontaneously started to sing, over and over again, ‘Sweaty bog! Sweaty bog! Sweaty bog!’ My friends, who witnessed this unlikely moment, were practically weeping with laughter, but their tears were fortunately mistaken for joy, since Sveti Bog! in Croatian means ‘Holy God!’

Why miss out on these untold riches? This year, go on holiday with the Lord.

*Downloaded from the “Ship of Fools” Website*

Archie Whymark, Climate Action Champion