

What's Going On In Church?

More articles by Rachael can be found here: thegenerousgivingproject.wordpress.com

A lot happens in church that goes completely over my head. When I started attending a couple of years ago I was amazed at how strange it all was. Interesting rituals were taking place that everybody but me seemed to understand. I became a Christian in Afghanistan and for my first 9 months, I worshipped in tents in Army outposts in Helmand Province. Sometimes church was cancelled because the chaplain's convoy got attacked or diverted. Sometimes I missed a service because I was out on patrol. At least out there I didn't need to know anything about being an Anglican. I'm not sure I even knew that the word Anglican meant Church of England. I thought it was a window fitting company.

Does anyone else feel like me? Do you know your chasubles from your chancel? Do you know your charismatics from your cloisters? New Christians have a lot to learn. It's a completely new vocabulary that often leaves us nodding along and smiling whilst inside wondering "Why does the colour of the vicar's scarf keep changing?" Just when I thought I'd got it, I realised that Anglo-Catholics have an entirely different vocabulary to Evangelicals and was back to square one. So I bought a Matt Redman CD, dug out my church dictionary, and began dropping in the word "fellowship" to sentences whenever I felt the urge.

But what if it's not just new Christians who don't always know what's going on in church? Might there be people in our parishes who've been church members for decades but couldn't explain why we stand for the Gospel reading, why we share "the Peace" or why the font is at the entrance of the church? Probably. And does anyone really understand what the offering is all about? This is a question I've been pondering myself.

Until quite recently, I had no idea that the money I put on the collection plate had anything to do with faith. I thought it was a bit like paying subs. It never occurred to me that I was taking part in an act of worship. Maybe that's because in all the churches I've worshipped in, and that's a *lot* as I travelled a lot in the army, this part of the service was...a bit...rushed? Awkward? Forgotten about?

I didn't know that what I was actually doing when I fished around for the loose change in my handbag, was presenting to God a gift that said both 'Thank you' and 'I love you'.

Then I realised that every week I'd been hearing a prayer which was key to this part of the service, but I'd never noticed:

"Yours, Lord, is the greatness, the power, the glory, the splendour, and the majesty; for everything in heaven and on earth is yours. All things come from you, and of your own do we give you."

Maybe I wasn't concentrating, or I'd put it in the "don't understand" pile (with all the other new things that I was learning). But those words "**All things come from you and of your own do we give you.**" It *was* a spiritual act. It *was* about faith. The offertory was an act of worship and I'd missed it.

Then, to my great confusion, I learned that not everyone calls it the offertory. Some call it the offering and some say collection. These differences reflect the different traditions and ways Christians worship. This variety is wonderful, but it can be confusing! For example some say the offertory is the moment in the service when we are simply presenting our gifts of money, which *represents us* (the offering of ourselves) to be used for the Kingdom of God. There's a direct link between what I give, and the continuing work of the Church. This works for me, as I think everybody should have the chance to hear about God's love and who Jesus is. It makes sense, especially when I think of why we pay Parish Share.

And some believe that when the offering is brought up with the elements (bread and wine), it represents the idea of us sacrificing what we have, as during Holy Communion (the Eucharist) we remember that Jesus sacrificed everything for us.

No doubt, even within these two ends of the spectrum there will be Christians who hold different views. As I can tell, some see the offering as an *offering of themselves*, and others see it as our response to Jesus' *sacrifice*. And no doubt many think it's a bit of both, and perhaps many more (like me until recently) haven't ever really considered its representation at all. So what does it mean to you? Is our offering an acknowledgement of all that God has **generously** and freely given us? Are we offering ourselves on the plate for God's work? Is our money offering more about the sacrifice we've made, as we lead on to the Eucharist and remember everything Jesus **sacrificed** for us? Or is it something else? What *does* this act of worship mean to us?

As for me, what changed my mind about the offering, was the sacrifice bit. That's what converted my giving habits. When I paused and reminded myself that Jesus literally gave up his life for me, (I often have to do this), I felt ashamed when I thought of my own offering. That's a strong word but it's exactly how I felt. A slightly older and much wiser Christian friend assured me that God isn't into the shame game. He just loves me and always desires the best for me.

That's comforting, but nonetheless, my attitude changed and I started thinking differently about my offering. It was not generous, was not a sacrifice, was not a representation of how grateful I am, or how I love Jesus. What I'd been giving before was an amount that could easily get lost in my untidy handbag. Since deciding to give generously I actually feel that I'm taking part in an act of worship, rather than paying subs. Now what I give is part of my relationship with God. It's saying 'Thank you' and 'I love you'.