

We live, so we *are told*, in an increasingly polarised world. Liberal and fascist, leave and remain, orthodox and revisionist, woke and reactionary: the world is divided, rendered asunder; Solomon has wielded his sword and we are split in two. You cannot have a foot in both camps, you must come down on one side or the other, no time for nuance, no space for dithering, either you're in or out, with or without, us or them. As usual, nobody has told the poor Church of England who continues to imagine she can perch demurely balanced on the fence. But even Auntie Canterbury is tottering and tearing her skirts. Politics is tribal, others are othered then demonised then shipped to Rwanda, positions are drawn and once you've chosen a side the only way to go is further, to the extreme and beyond... This is what the world is like were we to believe those who make a living telling us what it's like. It's not true of course, but it suits the demagogues and clickbait pushers, the press and the podcasters; divide and rule; and for a while and for some it works. After all, we all want to belong, being the lone voice crying in the wilderness is not a happy place, nobody wants to be the one to say the emperor has no clothes and a very tiny... Twitter following We all want to belong and once we've been bounced into taking a position, no matter how hasty or poorly thought through it's almost impossible to get us to change our mind or admit we once didn't know quite what to think or, heaven help us, accept we might just possibly be wrong. Once we've taken the leap we're as stubborn as a cat who's fallen out with the food it used to love. I would never eat that stuff. I've only ever eaten Fortnum's premium brand. How dare you insult me: I'd rather starve. I'm off next door now to wolf down some of their Lidl budget special.

But. but. It's not really true that the world is polarised. Yes there are extremists everywhere and if you only give us two options we'll have to come down on one side or the other, but if you give us 'don't know', 'don't care' 'don't understand' or 'can I just go home please' suddenly the world is a lot less one-against-the-other. Even sticky brown Marmite, an advertising campaign so successful that it has entered the language a synonym for polarisation, even Marmite isn't really that, well, marmite. Yes, somebody somewhere was given a grant to research yeast extract and... some people really love it, some people really hate it; but most people, take it or leave it, don't mind either way. Even the big church divider- incense- is something that a minority love, a minority hate, and the majority will take or leave. Which doesn't mean I'm not apprehensive about where this sermon is going, because today I am going to stick my head in the lion's jaw of congregational controversy and, in the interests of increasing our understanding I'm going to try to explain why we use incense in church

Let me stress- and I want to emphasise this strongly, please listen to the next 30 seconds then you can go back to sleep, there is nothing wrong with being one of those people that doesn't like incense. That's a *perfectly legitimate* position to hold. I like it; you don't have to. From what I understand the main objections to the sweet smelling smoke are that it is too much like a religion that people have had a previous unhappy experience of; or it just seems to be a bit silly, or it might make you cough. These are altogether reasonable positions to hold: after all if you can't have issues with particular religious practices then you can't sit feeling uncomfortable in evangelical worship- which I certainly have or be rude about Baptists, which I would never dream of pretending I haven't been. So I'm not trying to persuade anyone to change their mind, or that any position is the wrong one or the right one. No agenda. We're just going to explore why incense is used in church.

So, first stop is to realise that Christian worship didn't just spring out of nowhere. The Apostles didn't start with nothing. Christianity began as a branch of Judaism and incense was a major part of Jewish Temple worship. Remember when priest Zechariah is told by the angel that he's going to be the father of John the Baptist? He was at the altar because it was his turn to offer incense in the Temple. Incense was also part of pagan religious practice in the Roman Empire, so once Christianity spread to the Gentiles, the newcomers brought some of their former religious practices with them and changed them into Christian ones. Incense, it seems, like posture and music and sacrifice are universal ways humans approach the divine. Perhaps like Bank of Hell money used at Chinese funerals, this is connected to the notion that burning something turns it into something non-material, something better able to reach God: and of course, smoke rises up, it flows in the direction of heaven. When the pagan Magi come to visit the king of the Jews at his birth they bring frankincense as a gift because the King of the Jews is not simply a secular power but a religious one. Yes, frankincense has some minor medical uses- respiratory disorders of all things- and yes it is used in perfumery; but the magi were not bringing the Christ child the ancient equivalent of a Fisherman's Friend and an Old Spice gift set: frankincense was for the act of worship and giving it to Jesus was also an act of worship.

Second, in Christian worship we are aiming to use all our senses. Worship and praying are not just about speaking words and listening to words: consciously coming into the presence of God involves colour and music and silence and posture-

standing, kneeling, sitting, hand movements, sometimes, unfortunately dancing- and special buildings filled with things that engage the senses. The sense of smell is one of these, and one of the most powerful- it tends to move straight from our nose to our emotions without overly bothering the more rational parts of our brains on the way. None of this is, ultimately, necessary for worship; but it enhances it, enriches it and deepens our experiences of it. Equally, none of the wordy stuff is essential to worship: a communion with music, movement and colour will succeed in a home caring for those with dementia where words will not. We bring our whole selves to worship God, not just those bits of the brain concerned with language.

Finally, incense in worship is Biblical, and heavenly. What we know about the goings on in Heaven comes principally from the book of Revelation which describes at length the view from up there and the worship of the heavenly hosts. What it tells us of the celestial liturgy is that it has music (many a song and quite a few trumpet blasts) it includes posture (lots of bowing and falling on faces) and as we heard today it involves incense. Angels bear messages from God to humanity: they also bear our messages back and in heaven those messages appear in the form of incense:

*the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell before the Lamb, each holding a harp and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints.*

a bit later in his vision John sees

*the seven angels who stand before God, and seven trumpets were given to them. Another angel with a golden censer came and stood at the altar; he was given a great quantity of incense to offer with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar that is before the throne.*

Hence many of the angels that decorate this church are depicted swinging incense— all round the arch above the altar and on the main stained glass window, which shows Jesus in glory in heaven, surrounded by the saints and angels. The angel on the right almost certainly depicts the one in Revelation with the golden censer. So, church incense is a mirroring of the worship of heaven and symbolic of it.

However obscure and flighty this sounds, it isn't. Symbolism is everywhere. We understand symbolism instinctively, without really thinking. Symbols comprise much of what we communicate. With symbolism a bit of metal or a random day once a year becomes a wedding ring or a birthday; we light candles on cakes and in memory of loved ones not so we can see better, but as symbols. There's even a good

argument that language itself is just the exchange of symbols: a word after all is not the thing it describes but something that symbolises it. The combined letters R E D are not a colour and D O G is not a creature that barks and chews bones. Reading the Bible is just as much the realm of symbols as swinging a censer.

As you might expect, symbols operate slightly differently in church as elsewhere. Burning incense not only symbolises our prayer: using all our senses in worship it is our prayer. The symbol is what it symbolises.

There we are. Time I think to bring to a close our foray into the more aromatic side of worship. That then, is Incense: Explained! Hopefully there may be something to learn in the preceding few minutes, if only that sermons are better with more jokes and less teaching. Summary: Our ancestors brought it with them when they found the faith. It's helping us pray with all our senses. It's what they do in heaven. It's symbolic of prayer and it is prayer.

One final remark. All said, I might have just wasted the last 10 minutes of your life. Yes, it *can* be helpful to understand why something happens in worship; that way you might spend less time thinking 'why on earth are they doing that?' If you have a busy mind, knowing the whys and wherefores means you can calm the chatter of your curiosity and be more receptive to the depths of worship. On the other hand, it's easy to overthink things and come to the conclusion that the more you know, the closer you are to God. But none of us *need* to know the ins and outs.

In worship we are actively bringing ourselves into the presence of God. What we do in worship can help guide us there, but it's a means not an end. What matters is our destination, not the route we take there.

And. We can come before God, we can experience his presence; we cannot understand him. We are approaching the immortal, searching for what our minds can never comprehend, trying to understand what can never be explained in words, reaching for the divine mystery that we cannot know, except in our souls.