

The story of the liturgical cat is probably already well known to you but worth repeating in the context of today's readings. A priest had a pet cat that often wandered into his services and became something of a nuisance, a distraction from the worship, the focus on God, not to mention from his sermons. So before the service began he had the cat tied to a chair to prevent further trouble. A few years later the priest died and the people faithfully kept tying up the cat as was their custom – it was a great help to the new priest, but then the cat eventually died too and the people had to find another cat to tie to the chair before the service could continue. I sometimes wonder when I come to wash my hands with anti- bacterial soap at the beginning of each Mass whether we haven't got the beginnings of a liturgical cat here too- something to be done long into the future when it's original purpose is long forgotten. I've heard this story from both Christians and Buddhists so it's a dynamic that's been around for a long time and has universal significance – we are all quite capable of forgetting our original purpose – to love God and to love one another. The Law in this respect is a sign of failure, needed because, like Adam and Eve, we are no longer fit to live in an unregulated garden, to live and love that is without being told what to do – it doesn't come naturally, or just as well, supernaturally anymore – it's a sign of our distance from God and from one another. We are talking then, about the distance now between the sacred and the profane because of our fallen nature and the struggle to return to a transparency where there is no distinction, where what we now see as common and profane, or worldly, is as sacred as the vessels of the altar, or all the other 'trappings' of religious worship which keep us at a distance from God and one another. This of course is a wonderful opportunity to berate the Church for all it's failings with regard to worship but that is to miss the underlying point- the need to tie up within ourselves all those evil intentions which make the distance between ourselves and God and one another all the greater. It's a story then about having a pure heart, transparent to God, to one another and indeed to the whole of creation – seeing it all as not common but profound and the proof that this is happening is in our regard for the needs of others before our own. There's no way round this other-centred worship than changing words into deeds:

*“Pure unspoilt religion, in the eyes of God our Father is this:*

*coming to the help of orphans and widows when they need it,*

*and keeping oneself uncontaminated by the world.”*

That is the world as distinct from God's saving action in it- all those selfish attitudes which seek ones own good before the good of another. I can hear all sorts of qualifications coming on now – that need to defend oneself before God and one another, of keeping the cat tied to the chair, of being still in control.

Br John Mayhead

Monastery of Christ Our Saviour