What's it all for?

That's a question that has been trotted out so often it now represents a comic caricature of existential angst...but for all that, it might be one worth asking from time to time.

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Perhaps it's especially important for those of us who work in a place like this, where the ways of the institution, the demands of the building and the expectations of our common life can provide enough impetus to keep us active without undue reflection pretty much seven days a week. But to press on like that is unwise, even dangerous...Cathedrals, - even when they are as beautiful and beloved as this one – are never ends in themselves. Everything we say and everything we do must, in some way, proclaim and further the work of God's Kingdom, and so here in Coventry we have three specific purposes against which to measure all our activity, whether amid the high celebrations of our patronal festival today, or in the down to earth business of a Monday morning.

Those purposes are Welcome, Worship and Reconciliation – which is reassuring since the Catechism would suggest that of those, worship is, in fact, the whole purpose of human existence. “Our chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever”. In other words, Worship is the only proper response of creation to Creator, the final answer to that question “What's it all for?”

And as we celebrate with St Michael and all the angels today, we are given an imaginative glimpse of how worship may be when we sing to God in heaven, something to look forward to while we travel on.

Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels surrounding the throne and the living creatures and the elders; they numbered myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, singing with full voice, 'Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honour and glory and blessing!'

The writer of Revelation has quite a strict sense of hierarchy - there are angels, living creatures and elders not to mention, in another chapter, those who have washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb –but the focus of all their energy is worship...the business of putting things in THEIR proper order...that is to say, re-ordering them so that God comes first. That's what worship is – giving God his worth...Neither more nor less.

And if God is given God's worth – then God will come first.

That's easy to write and you might think it was a given for all of us who profess the Christian faith – but my own experience is that it is overwhelmingly difficult to do. Though I long, with St Patrick, to ensure that God and God only is first in my heart, so many other things threaten to supersede Him...and I'm not alone. Through the centuries people repeatedly lapsed into idolatry, placing something else, something less at the centre of life.. Sometimes these idols are neutral –money perhaps – sometimes they really are good in themselves –things like family, Church, or social justice – but they are no substitute for God...so we need to keep on practising this business of putting things in the proper order...We need to keep on practising worship. That's what we do when we gather here – we practice worship so that we may more fully engage with it in the world outside...we play at heaven, if you like, aided by angels, archangels and the whole communion of saints.

So when we worship, our routes in are pretty much incidental. Whether you prefer Chris Tomlin or Thomas Tallis, Mozart or Matt Redmond doesn't matter a hoot...because, you see, worship isn't about you. It’s about God. If God is glorified, and the place where earth touches heaven is recognised and revealed – THAT is worship.
Sometimes it seems that we come together with a rather different agenda, that has more to do with satisfying our own tastes, or meeting our own needs....but true worship is not about how we feel, though we will find it fulfilling beyond all our expectations if our intention is to immerse ourselves in that constant stream of praise and thanksgiving that is the whole business of heaven.

I've never had close dealings with anyone from Tibet, but I've always been fascinated by the idea behind their beautiful prayer wheels...that prayer is a constant thread running through creation, in which we join from time to time. Some prayer wheels are placed in streams, or beneath waterfalls, so that they really do turn constantly, so that it is obvious to all that the prayer never stops. The worship of heaven is like that...continual, under-girding everything, - something into which we step whenever we fix our mind on God and God's glory alone.

That may sound such a high ideal that we don't know how to approach it...if that's so, the psalmist gives us a clue.

\[I \text{ give you thanks, O Lord, with my whole heart;} \]
\[\text{before the gods I sing your praise;} \]
\[\text{I bow down towards your holy temple} \]
\[\text{and give thanks to your name for your steadfast love and your faithfulness;} \]

In other words, we need to be whole hearted, as we celebrate both who God is, and what God has done. Stop for moment and think...Even on an ordinary Sunday in Coventry, that list is quite overwhelming, touching every aspect of ourselves and our life together. We live and breathe...We hear and are touched by gifts of music, of art, of friendship. We glimpse for a second the wonder of God’s self-giving love. How can we do other than give thanks?

We may be in a hard place – for life is often less than gentle with us.

When we, or those we love, are hurting, all those gifts may seem empty...but God carries on giving.

There is no-one else who should stand in God’s place...the lesser gods fade into obscurity before the steadfast love that holds the universe in being and will never, even for a moment, let us go.

So – if you don't feel like worshipping – worship anyway. Take lessons from the angels, who understand that worship is a way of being, not simply one activity to be chosen from among many. To engage your whole being in worship is to open yourself fully to its transforming power. Worship is, above all, an encounter with God, from which not one of us can expect to emerge unchanged...and that’s wonderful because we too are being changed from glory into glory, till at least we can find our place in that crowd who worship round the throne.

Because, you see, that IS what it’s all for.