Worship, like prayer, is an essentially pointless activity. That sounds a dreadfully cynical thing to say, especially from a pulpit. It sounds cynical, but actually it’s very far from that. Worship is pointless rather in the same way that art or music is pointless, and even more so in the way that play is pointless. Worship, prayer and play are all activities that take time – sometimes rather a lot of it – but which have no practical value. In utilitarian terms they are indeed a waste of time.

The Dominican friar, Herbert McCabe, expressed this incomparably in a famous essay on prayer. Some of you have heard it from me before, but it bears repetition and I’ll quote its final paragraph in full. Like most things Herbert McCabe said, it was serious, but delivered with a smile and a lightness of touch:

For [a] real absolute waste of time you have to go to prayer. I reckon that more than eighty per cent of our reluctance to pray consists precisely in our dim recognition of this and our neurotic fear of wasting time, of spending part of our life in something that in the end gets you nowhere, something that is not merely non-productive, non-money-making, but is even non-creative, it doesn’t even have the justification of art and poetry.

It is an absolute waste of time, [absolute in the strict sense that] it is a sharing in the waste of time which is the interior life of the Godhead… the life of love which is the Trinity, the procession of Son from Father, and of the Spirit from this exchange.

God is not first of all our creator or any kind of maker, [God] is love, and [God’s] life is not like the life of a worker or artist but of lovers wasting time with each other uselessly.
It is into this useless activity that we enter in prayer. *This, in the end, is what makes sense of it.* (Herbert McCabe, *God Matters* (London: Mowbray, 1987), p.225.)

Worship, then, is pointless, but not senseless. Pointless though it is, worship makes sense because it brings us into communion with the One who is, the uncreated One, the One who is no thing, the One in whose image we are made, and in whom there is life.

Our worship this morning began with an invitation: ‘O come let us sing unto the Lord’, we sang in the Venite. We should relish the delightfully redundant single letter word with which that psalm begins. ‘O’ adds nothing: if we had sung ‘Come, let us sing unto the Lord’, the sense would have been just the same; and yet that initial ‘O’ conveys so much. Grammatically it is not exactly a vocative. The repeated ‘O’s of another Matins canticle, the Benedicite, address the marvellous diversity of creation and enjoin it to give voice to God in praise: ‘O all ye works of the Lord, bless ye the Lord: praise him and magnify him for ever’. But the initial ‘O’ of the Venite is different: it strikes me as the sort of skip that a happy child puts into its step; it serves no purpose, but it speaks volumes. Happy children skip; even happy Sub Deans skip sometimes; and I hope you do too!

‘O come let us sing unto the Lord’, we say to ourselves at the opening of the Venite, and then in its penultimate verse we sing: ‘O come, let us worship, and fall down: and kneel before the Lord our Maker’. There is that needless ‘O’ once again, the skip in the step that precedes our kneeling in worship. Undemonstrative Matins-goers that we are, these skips and prostrations are largely inward and spiritual rather than outward and visible, but they are, I trust, no less real for that!

And those words of invitation, sung to ourselves in the Venite, are words that resound in this morning’s OT reading too: ‘Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord’, says the prophet. Isaiah is addressing the people of Judah and Jerusalem of his own day, but with them he is addressing us too. His words are a vision of the future when ‘the mountain of the Lord’s house shall be established as the highest of the mountains’; a time when worship shall not be for the people of the house of Jacob alone but when, with them, all of us together will say the closing words of the reading: ‘O come let us walk in the light of the Lord!’.

But the words of invitation are spoken to us as well as by us:
‘Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.’ (Matthew 11:28).
‘Come, follow me’, with its more unavoidable corollary, ‘come, take up the cross’ (Mark 8:34).
‘Let anyone who is thirsty come to me’, (John 7:37)
And, perhaps most compelling of all, those three marvellous words of Jesus in the first chapter of John: ‘Come and see’ (John 1:39)

Let us hear those words for what they are: words of welcome and invitation; difficult words; words of challenge, but also words of reassurance and hope and joy. Words that we and our fractured world need to hear, especially on this Remembrance Sunday.

I began by claiming that worship is pointless, but that it nonetheless makes perfect sense. That is true, but in another way worship is something everyone does all the time. Worship is not a purely religious phenomenon; worship is not an option, it’s something we all do an awful lot of the time. The only question is ‘what are we worshipping?’; because if we are not worshipping God you can be pretty sure that we are worshipping something else. In other words, we are, in biblical terms, practising idolatry. ‘Whatever it is that weighs most heavily in the balance of your affections, that for you is God’, said Origen of Alexandria in the third century. And there is a great deal in the environment with which we western consumers have surrounded ourselves that shows where our affections tend. As James Smith has written: ‘Malls, stadiums, and universities are actually liturgical structures that influence and shape our thoughts and affections’. That doesn’t make them inherently wrong or evil, but unless we recognise the claims these man-made constructions make on us, unless we spot the ways in which they shift and skew the balance of our affections, the way they can lay claim to our worship, we will find that, like all idols, they are in control of us, not we over them.

In choosing to direct our worship to God this morning, we are indeed doing something that is pointless; but we are also engaging in the one activity that makes most sense of all, because it reconnects us with the one from whom all things come, and to whom all things tend. The idolatrous worship of things, rather than God, is generally pretty easy to identify because it will have some plausible justification: it will earn us more money, garner us respect, make us feel better. Most of the time worshipping God does none of those things, but it does make us alive with the life of the living One, the one who came ‘that we might have life and have it in abundance’ (John 10:10). The busy usefulness that is idolatry alienates us: it insulates and estranges us from one another and from God. The
pointless worship of God, on the other hand, frees us to re-connect with self and neighbour alike, through our communion with the One who made us for himself.

‘O come, let us sing unto the Lord’; for:

Thine, O LORD is the greatness, and the power, and the glory, and the victory, and the majesty. All things come from thee, O Lord, and of thine own do we give thee.

In nomine…