

28<sup>th</sup> June 2022

## Theatres

**“But [we] must know, that in this theatre of [our] life  
it is reserved only for God and angels to be lookers on.”**

Francis Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning*

Many churches through the ages have been designed as theatres, with a “performance” area at the front, and an audience seated in stalls and galleries. It could be argued that the Anglo/Catholic tradition of having a “high altar” reinforced the “performance/audience” dichotomy, especially when the Mass was offered in Latin and not the vernacular.

The word “hocus-pocus” has been around since the early 17th century. The *Oxford English Dictionary* tells of a conjurer called Hocus-Pocus who used the phrase as part of a faux-Latin incantation during his act: *Hocus pocus, tontus talontus, vade celeriter jubeo*. It’s suggested that hocus-pocus is a corruption of the genuine Latin words *hoc est enim corpus meum*, “For this is my body,” during the consecration of the Mass. And some think hocus-pocus itself was then corrupted into the word hoax.

This isn’t a dig at Anglo/Catholic traditions, for look at the way Presbyterian churches are designed. The pulpit dominates. And, in the “Free Church” traditions, the pulpit is front and centre. This is the performance area, from which the “Word” is given out, dramatically and powerfully; the Truth intoned, in unquestioned fashion; the congregation are recipients, a static audience, observing and accepting the action unfolding in front of them – and without even the drama of the Eucharist.

If my thought-process about intimacy from yesterday informs the direction of Church life and structure, might this not raise questions about the design of our worship spaces, and, indeed, the style, content, length and purpose of our worship? Might existing “theatre-style” church not benefit from a redesign so that intimacy informs our worship more than performance? Might new churches not be designed on the same basis?

Francis Bacon suggests that “it is reserved only for God and angels to be lookers on”. So let’s give thought to this ... Proclamation, inspiration, adulation, performance, drama, passion all have their place. But might there not be more to worship and church buildings than that?

### **A prayer for today**

*I don’t want to be in the audience anymore. I need to be involved in God’s drama.*