

ORDER FOR THE DEDICATION OF A CHURCH BELL

INTRODUCTION

Few would dispute that The Book of Common Order (1940) is generously subscribed with forms appropriate to the dedication of Church furnishings, whether it be an organ, window, pulpit or lectern, Communion vessels or other decorations, collectively but vaguely described as 'other Church furniture'. Where the service-book is curiously deficient lies, however, in the omission of a prescribed order for the dedication or rededication of a Church bell.

In December, 1985, the Kirk of Session of Straiton St Cuthbert's Parish Church, near Maybole, Ayrshire, resolved to proceed with the erection of a new chamber to accommodate the original bell of the 18th century Church, the previous structure having been dismantled in the early 1980s for reasons of safety. Historically speaking, this bronze artefact had summoned villagers to worship until superseded by a heavier apparatus in 1901, after which it was rung each Sunday morning at 9.00 a.m. to waken the parishioners, a practice discontinued as recently as 1971. Restoration work was completed in February 1987, with the crowning of the west gable by a sturdy compartment fashioned from Northumbrian sandstone, and consistent with the contours of its ill-fated predecessor.

Furthermore, it was agreed that the bell should be rededicated to the glory of God on Sunday, 22nd March, 1987, at a special diet of worship, with the senior elder appointed to honour this ancient instrument with its first volley of chimes in many years. As The Book of Common Order (1940) prescribes no liturgy for such ceremonies, much was therefore left to the imagination. The order reproduced hereafter closely corresponds to the form prepared for this historic occasion, and is set out in the hope that it provides a convenient framework for other ministers confronted with similar circumstances.

THE ACT OF DEDICATION

The Act of Dedication opens with the singing of Hymn 10 (CH3), Christ is made the sure foundation, during which those officiating (in this instance, two ministers, a reader, session clerk and senior elder) proceed from the chancel to the west door, outside which the bell-cord is suspended. Thereafter, the service continues as follows, the congregation remaining upstanding as appropriate sentences are announced.

SENTENCES

Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth.

Honour and majesty are before the Lord: strength and beauty are in His sanctuary.

Blessed be the name of the Lord, from this time forth and for evermore. From the rising of the sun to its setting, the name of the Lord is to be praised.

Praise ye the Lord. Praise Him with the sound of the trumpet; praise Him with the psaltery and harp; praise Him with sounding bells, praise Him with loud clashing bells.

Let everything that hath breath praise the Lord.

PREAMBLE

(Congregation seated)

In her book, Bells from Many a Steeple, published in 1961 - a diary of devotions for the dawning and the closing of day - Rita F Snowden offers this appraisal of Church bells:

Some are humble, some exalted:
Yet their ministry is one -
They ring to the glory of God.

Dear Friends:

Forasmuch as our heavenly Father has moved our hearts with the desire and determination to restore this sounding

bell, and to re-erect it in a manner befitting its dignity and function within this house of prayer, it is indeed our sacred duty that we rededicate it forthwith to the glory of God, and set it apart to the holy purpose for which it is intended.

PRAYER OF APPROACH

Let us Pray

Eternal God, most blessed and most holy, whom the highest heavens cannot contain, far less this house built with human hands, yet who art great and greatly to be praised: we give thee thanks for the beauty of this temple; for the furnishings with which it is adorned; for the stained glass windows which reveal to us the mysteries of light; for the melody of organ which directs us in the ministry of music; for lectern, table and pulpit which increase within us knowledge of thy truth; and for the symphony and song of bells which call us weekly to thy worship.

Be present with us now, good lord, as we hallow this instrument in thy name; that those who hear its chimes speedily answer its call, and seek their seat within this sacred place, wherein thine honour dwells; through Him who is the sure foundation, Jesus Christ our Saviour. Amen

DEDICATION

(The congregation stands hereafter until the conclusion of the service.)

In the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, King and Head of the Church, Shepherd of the sheep and Guardian of lost souls, we do most solemnly dedicate once again this ancient bell, and declare it to be set apart for ever from all common and irreverent uses, and consecrated only to the honour and praise of Almighty God:

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

BLESSING

The bell is appropriately blessed by being rung ceremoniously for a period of two minutes' observance.

GREAT PRAYER

Let us Pray

Almighty God, true light of faithful souls and perfect brightness of all thy saints: we praise thee for those who have ministered in this Church, for every craftsman's care inscribed upon its furnishings, and for all who, across the ages, have left us with a legacy of antiquity and grace. More especially, we bless thee for those, who of old didst fashion this bell, and raised it to a posture of prominence, that by so doing, we might seek first thy kingdom and thy righteousness.

Accept in mercy, heavenly Father, the restoration of this ancient bell; that with its sound understood in reverence, it may beautify this house of prayer, inspire those servants who worship here, and confirm the faith of all who confess that Christ is Lord. Let all for whom this instrument serves be filled with thy Spirit's power; that as they have ears to hear, they may be drawn, with souls awakened. from devotion to things temporal to the adoration of things eternal.

Finally, O God of grace, we pray thee that together with this bell, we may consecrate our lives to thy service; that when sign, symbol and sound are ended, and that which is perfect is revealed, we may leave behind the bustling noises of earth for the sounding of bells of heaven; through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom with thee, O Father, and the Holy Spirit, be ascribed all honour and glory, thanksgiving and praise, world without end. Amen.

Our Father...

The congregation now sings Hymn 424 (CH3), 'Thy hand, O God, has guided', after which the service closes with The Benediction.

W Gerald Jones
Minister of Kirkmichael with Straiton

(An Editorial Note about the Service)

The use of bells in Christian worship has a noble and ancient pedigree, the first mention of their considerable use being made by Gregory of Tours (c.585). Certainly, as we know from archaeological investigations made in Celtic sites, bells were used in Scotland before the sixth century.

From the 8th century onwards they came into widespread use, both within and without churches - within, small bells were used at the altar to emphasise the consecration and elevation of the Host, without, they were used to summon the faithful to worship and a single bell was rung at the death of a parishioner: so many strokes for a male, fewer for a female, followed by the age of the deceased, also rung on the bell.

The point I do wish to make and indeed by way of supplementing Mr Jones Order of Service, urge on members of the Society is this: around the 9th century and up to the Reformation and more recently revived as a result of The Oxford Movement is the tradition of blessing of a newly-cast or rehung bell (normally, though not always, by a bishop). In many cases the new bell was baptised with water and given a name - hence 'Columcille' in the tower of the Abbey Church of Iona - followed by anointing with chrism. It would be good, in the rare instances of installation of new bells, were ministers to re-institute the practise of the baptism and naming of bells.

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