

8th June 2024

Atmosphere

**"Keep the atmosphere as pure as possible,
and fragrant with gentleness and charity."**

Rev John Hall, *attrib: as in "John Hall, Pastor and Preacher" by Thomas H Hall (1901)*

At a recent family funeral, I got to thinking about advice I always gave to ministry students during their placements with me when I was a parish minister. "People will seldom remember what you said when you were conducting a funeral. But they'll remember the attitude you adopted and the atmosphere you created, and they will be the better for that."

That was the case at the funeral of my ninety-eight-year-old aunt. The atmosphere mattered above all else. I *do* remember some of what was said, and I appreciated that very much. By while my memory of specifics will fade, my recognition of the atmosphere will not. The church was a beautiful, welcoming and tranquil place. The music was appropriate and all-embracing. The numbers attending were good, and the singing was excellent. And the atmosphere? What the minister created was "as pure as possible", to use a phrase from John Hall, pastor of Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York towards the end of the 19th century. But more than that, it was filled with gentleness and charity – perhaps even fragrant – befitting the life of a lovely, Christian lady.

That atmosphere mattered. It was healing and accepting. It allowed us to recognize our grief, while at the same time permitting us to find thankfulness and pleasure in our memories. It didn't avoid the reality of death, but offered hope, both in time and in eternity.

And how did people respond to that atmosphere? They said it had been good to be there, that the service "did her proud". The family were uplifted, and not bored. The service had touched their hearts rather than being over their heads. They felt they have been "given to" and not "preached at". They had experienced, in no small measure, an atmosphere of "gentleness and charity", and were the better for it.

So ... if that can happen, and be beneficial, at a funeral, what about all of worship, in our meetings, through our relationships, with our acts of service, and even at Golden Weddings? As pure as possible? Fragrant with gentleness and charity? Oh for such an atmosphere in *a//* that we do ...

A prayer for today

An atmosphere that's holy and loving? And I can be at the centre of that? Wow!