

### **Three Choirs Festival, Hereford, 2009**

*A Sermon preached by the Dean of Chichester The Very Reverend Nicholas Frayling at the Opening Service on Saturday 8 August.*

A distinguished musician with long experience of the Three Choirs Festival, and mindful of its charitable origins, said to me a couple of weeks ago, ‘Ah, so you’re giving the Sermon on the amount!’ Well, notwithstanding the collection at this service, I am not about to launch into an appeal, except in the sense that every preacher hopes to appeal to the deepest instincts of their hearers, and where better to do so than in this place, and in the context of this festival?

Much of the music will be performed and heard within this cathedral which, like the heavens themselves, may tell the glory of God and display his wondrous handiwork. More to the point, it is a place where people have brought their joys and their sorrows for more than 1000 years.

We have read and heard and sung about the disclosure of God’s wisdom and glory in creation, and each of us will have been moved to ponder on some aspect of it: on the cycle of the seasons, perhaps, the wonder of the rising sun and its setting at the end of the day; or forests, soil, water, air, tides, the moon, the variety of species and their origin; the seas, the mountains, the stars...or perhaps, for those more scientifically inclined, the phenomena of black holes, and darkness so deep that it can swallow whole galaxies.

So it is entirely appropriate that we should come together in worship of the God who creates the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land, and that this festival of music and liturgy should open with such a theme. And yet, for those of us who have received the gift of faith, thoughts of Jesus Christ come naturally, as we are filled with a sense of gratitude for God’s gift of created beauty; for Jesus is the light of the world – the light that illumines the created paths to God, and dispels the shadows of this world’s darkness that, for so many, mask the grandeur of God’s creation, and render faith itself an unattainable aspiration.

‘In all the lands resounds the word,  
Never unperceived, ever understood.’

Well, even if that was true when Haydn set the words with such passion and panache, which is debatable, it is certainly not true today. In a sermon at the opening of the Three Choirs Festival 28 years ago, Dean Tom Baker said,

‘Most people today do not know what to do about religion. Many of the most perceptive can’t do with it, but cannot do without it...They experience the need for a spiritual dimension. But the church does not give it to them.’

Tom Baker believed that music would help,

‘for of all the arts, music is most qualified to mediate the things of God.’

John Habgood develops the same theme:

‘For many people nowadays music *is* a kind of religion. The ritual of the concert hall, the sense of occasion and togetherness, the emotional release, the hints of transcendence, the awareness of meaning that lies too deep for words – all these add up to a kind of religious experience which has the added advantage for many that it doesn’t involve explicit meaning, needs, affirmations or obligations. Religion doesn’t have to be all the time conscious, and wordy, and morally demanding. But it does have to be sometimes, or it loses its roots in reality.’

And that brings us back to the serious theological themes implicit in every part of this service. William Temple – as so often – offers a way in for us, leading us from creation in the direction of the New Creation in Jesus Christ:

‘Only if God is revealed in the rising of the sun in the sky can he be revealed in the rising of a son of man from the dead. Only if nothing is profane can anything be sacred.’

The connection was made explicit by Paul in his Letter to the Colossians:

‘All things have been created through him and for him...He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.’

That is the heart of the matter, the mystery at the centre of the Christian religion: a mystery expounded, illuminated or even explicitly rejected by the extraordinary galaxy of composers whose anniversaries, of one kind or another, we are celebrating this year, many of whose compositions feature in this festival: Purcell, Handel, Haydn, Mendelssohn, Delius, Elgar, Holst...

Each of them enables us to open ears and heart to the resonances of God, by means of uplifting harmonies and shifting rhythms, consciously or unconsciously influenced by the seasons, by a Scottish cave, the sunrise, the planets, the wind in the lofty pines or the majestic solitude of the Malvern Hills.

‘Only in the rising of the sun in the sky,’ Temple reminds us, ‘can he be revealed in the rising of a son of man from the dead.’

The truth is, the Son of Man – Jesus Christ – came to lay before humankind the power of God, but a very particular kind of power – a power that is at the service of the poorest and the least: a power made perfect in human weakness.

‘The kingdom of this world is become  
The Kingdom of our God and of his Christ...’

That is the dream: ‘Thy Kingdom come, on earth as in heaven’; but Jesus is not the king of an earthly kingdom. In him is revealed the royalty of service, the imperative of humility and sacrificial love.

Yesterday, when I arrived, I met a man in the Cathedral Close. We fell into conversation. He was reading a Three Choirs Programme, and I said I thought it was going to be a wonderful festival.

He replied, ‘My son is on the front line in Afghanistan. We haven’t slept for weeks.’ He held up the programme and said, ‘What’s all this got to say to *us*, that’s what I’d like to know.’

It is a very fair question, whether asked in a hostile way (as it certainly can be) or, as in this case, from genuine curiosity, and perhaps longing. It brings us back to the issue Tom Baker introduced a little earlier, about the gulf between the worship of the church and so many people who are truly concerned about life’s meaning, the perplexing issues of the day, and need a faith to live by.

For some, a festival like this, whether in concert or liturgy, may help to make the gulf a little narrower, but it will not happen automatically: there is work to be done, and for many of us that is the task of a lifetime.

Some time ago, I was sent a film – an old home-movie – of a service in the church in the Old Kent Road in Peckham, where I began my ministry. It was a tough training ground then, and would me more so today.

There was Joan, who never missed her daily communion for 60 years apart from illness; Lily, who once came frozen to an early morning Eucharist at the age of 80 because she’d given her coat to an emaciated girl in a doorway on the way to church; Len, the choirmaster who seldom spoke to the organist, which was a great disadvantage, musically and pastorally.

And there was a shot of the lectern Bible, given in memory of Carlo, who was killed on his moped at the age of 17 by a drunken driver – one of my first funerals, and the saddest; Paul, the postman, who got cancer at the age of 27. We all prayed and willed him to survive surgery, which he did, and went on to become a wonderful father; and John the Baptist, a huge, eccentric man from a local psychiatric unit, who interrupted a sermon by the Archdeacon of Lewisham by calling out, ‘I demand circumcision!’ ‘Surely, you mean baptism?’ said the Archdeacon weakly. ‘No,’ said John, ‘I want the real thing!’

What did that very ordinary collection of people have in common? They shared the gift of faith, and week by week they sought meaning in the Scriptures and strength in the Eucharist and in their common life in that little inner-city church. They offered their prayers for a better world, tremulously singing their hymns, and grappling in their own way with the mystery of being God’s people and living the life of the baptised.

They welcomed newcomers, most of whom were of different colours and cultures, and gave to one young priest, who thought he had all the answers, a glimpse of the Kingdom, a vision of the world as it might be. All but two of them are dead now, but they come into my prayers time after time, not to reproach me for my inadequacy (though they remind me of that, too) but to encourage me over and again in new beginnings. They, and many more, in the years of my ministry, have taught me what the Incarnation really means.

More than that, they have shown the importance of *persistence* in the life of faith: persistence in prayer and worship; persistence in sticking with the hard questions of faith and daily living, even – or perhaps especially – when there seem to be no answers.

John Habgood reminded us of the danger that religion can lose its roots in reality. That is a besetting danger for the church, a danger of which many seem quite unaware in the contemporary obsession to be *right* about everything: right in biblical soundness or right in liberal flexibility. Either way, the consequence is the thinly disguised despising of those who disagree with us - the obsessive need to surround ourselves with the like-minded: *exclusive*, and *therefore excluding* of those who ask the hard questions, those who are not content with quick and easy answers and facile judgments, those who try to delve more deeply and uncomfortably into the mystery of our being and what it means to be human.

‘Christ is the image of the invisible God,’ writes Paul, and ‘God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether in earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.’

There we have it. It is not an answer, exactly, to my companion in the cloisters, but it does help us begin to bridge the gulf between mystery and present reality, and between the Church of God and the people outside.

If you prefer your theology in poetic form, as the Precentor of this cathedral clearly does, you might try Christopher Smart, one of the poets he did not discover in compiling this service:

‘God all bounteous, all creative  
Whom no ills from good dissuade,  
Is incarnate, and a native  
Of the very world he made.’

The Incarnation of God’s own Son shows us a life that empowers, a truth that frees, and a way to the Creator of all that is.

And so we pray that God will bless and use this festival for his good purpose, in liturgy and in concert. Perhaps, for some of us at least, the music will illuminate our understanding of God, who is far beyond all thought and imagination, yet closer than the air we breathe - the air we breathe now, in the present; for it is only in the present that we can receive the presence of Jesus, who opens up the way to God,

‘In all his works most wonderful,  
Most sure in all his ways.’