

St George's Anglican Church Malvern
Visit of the Friends of Anglican Music 15 June 2013

Sermon for Choral Evensong.

Saint Augustine famously said that those who sing pray twice. I know I won't get an argument about that today! Thank you to the members of FOAM for visiting us today with your lively music for Cranmer's beautiful evening prayer. Isn't it good that we still find Augustine's words true, sixteen centuries and much harmony, counterpoint, tempered tonality and changes in style, later?

Of course, we only pray twice when we intend to pray at all. Our music making glorifies God when it is our conscious act of worship. When we let the music catch us up in the praise of the God who gave us our first and every breath since, then the Spirit sings within us and our hearts are lifted to heaven.

Even when we sing or play alone, music is a profoundly human and relational activity. Whether we sit in the pews or the choir stalls, are at the organ console or wield a baton we are in a sacred conversation with one another and with God. To worship together we need not be best friends; we may even be strangers, but we come together as one voice and one holy people when we sing God's praises. Perhaps it is giving ourselves to this common purpose, this readiness to take our place in community, setting aside any other purpose of our own devising, that makes music special and indeed a holy work. The English word liturgy which we use to speak about worship translates a Greek word that means 'the work of the people of God'.

We don't have critical reviews of music in church, nor do we normally applaud as much as is deserved, for here music is not performed but *offered*. Musicians serve the people of God no less than the clergy. Paul does not mention music as a spiritual gift, but can anyone doubt that musical skills and creativity are anything other than a spiritual gift for the building up of the community?

The first musician in the bible was Jubal who played the lyre and the pipes (Gen, 4.21). Genesis, a book concerned with origins, calls him the ancestor of all who play instruments. Jubal's name derives from the Hebrew word for ram, suggesting he played the ram's horn or *shofar*. Once the equivalent of the bugle or drum, today the *shofar* calls Jewish people to prayer at New Year and on the Day of Atonement. Miriam danced and sang, leading the women after her, when God delivered the Hebrews from the Red Sea. Her song is thought to be the oldest fragment of scripture to have been written down.

The psalms were not just the hymn book of the Temple but also Jesus' prayer book. If you would pray as Jesus did sing and recite the psalms. When Jesus was born, angels sang for poor shepherds in fields on the Judean hills. On the night of his arrest Jesus and his friends sang a psalm before leaving the seclusion of the upper room for the exposure to danger that came with being out on the Mount of Olives. I like to hope that Jesus was strengthened and comforted by singing. Certainly when Christians gather, we are to be filled with the

Spirit as we sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among ourselves, as the apostle Paul urged. (Ephesians 5.18-20) Make melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, he wrote to the Colossians (Col. 3.16)

Nothing is so characteristic of Anglican worship as our psalm chants. Nothing is as wonderful as our eclectic collections of hymns: translations from early Latin texts, gems of the middle ages, enthusiastic and rousing Wesleyan hymns, thoughtful disturbing, contemporary words to familiar tunes or old favourites from school; we Anglicans judge hymns for their theology and music, not their provenance. We are an inclusive people able in our worship to embrace the many cultures we encounter and to span the centuries from the worship of the synagogue to this parish church today.

In truth most people glean a great deal of their theology from hymns. We remember far better what we sing than what we say. Musical notes are written on straight lines but here is nothing 'straightening' about the music we sing in church. It takes us into light and shade, tension and release, harmony and dissonance, sound and silence, activity and rest, beauty and the darkest of human experiences and being music enables us to embrace all of life whether we are singing our 'alleluias' to God in joy or in grief.

Since Jesus Christ is the Word, through whom all things have come into existence, for the followers of Christ nothing in our human experience, nothing in our world is excluded from his redemptive love. Every aspect of music – its power to move us, unite us, draw from us our creativity and express our deepest distress, our greatest joys and our boldest hopes – is part of the breathtaking vision of reality opened up to us by the gospel of God's healing, reconciling love.

I shall leave the last and most sublime word about music to John Donne (1572-1631), the priest and poet who could make words sing. In his poem *Hymn to God my God, in My Sickness*, John Donne anticipates his dying and coming into that place where he shall become one with the music of God as sung by the saints in heaven. In this life he 'tunes the instrument' and rehearses for what will one day be his permanent state.

Since I am coming to that holy room,
 where, with thy choir of saints for evermore,
I shall be made thy music; as I come
 I tune the instrument here at the door,
 and what I must do then, think here before.

Perhaps in our singing together in worship, just as much as in our service of others, we give best expression to the meaning of being 'practicing Anglicans'. Thank you Friends of Anglican Music for practicing with us today.

The Revd Canon Dr Colleen O'Reilly