

Why Music Matters

Trinity 6 – 3rd July 2016

A RIDDLE

Here is a riddle for you:

Which hymn is a series of questions to which the answer is, 'No. No. No. No.' and 'Go get it yourself?'

I'll tell you later ...

I've done something today that I almost never do – I've changed the set readings – because I want to talk about the importance of music in our Christian life.

MUSIC IN THE BIBLE

You might have noticed that all of our readings this morning mentioned music.

The scriptures are full of it.

The most obvious being the Psalms – a word which means 'song' – and there are 150 of them.

For the ancient Israelites, music was the most appropriate way of praising God.

In Psalm 66 which the Choir sang, it is commanded as an imperative:

'O be joyful in in God, all ye lands: sings praises unto the honour of his name.'

Traditionally ascribed to King David, many of them are much older, and go back long before written record, and have been handed down from one generation to the next. By singing the Psalms we are linked back to the first stirrings of a spiritual sense in men and women even before history as we know it had begun.

The Psalms also link us back to Christ.

This is the music that Jesus knew, the very songs that he sang.

In the Gospel today it said:

'When they had sung the hymn they went out to the Mount of Olives'

The hymn referred to here is the Hallel – Psalms 113-118 traditionally sung at the end of the Passover meal.

If music was a distinctive feature of Jewish worship, it was taken up and taken further by the first Christians.

In our reading from Ephesians, St Paul tells us that music is nothing less than a manifestation of the Holy Spirit:

'Be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God the Father at all times.'

Music is a sign of being filled with the Spirit, but it is also a medium through which it can flow. By singing, by making music, we open ourselves up to the work of God's Spirit in our lives.

Throughout all the change so religious history, music is one of the few things that has endured. Naturally, it has changed a great deal over time: from exotic Byzantine chants to the glories of a polyphonic Latin Mass. From the fripperies of Baroque Anthems, to jubilant Anglican hymnody. But whereas the visual arts have often been viewed with extreme suspicion, there has almost always been a place for music in every Christian tradition.

This is because, music has the power to connect us with something bigger than ourselves, it seems to carry and express the transcendent better than almost anything else.

And this ability is recognised and admired by the secular world which often appropriates religious music for itself – I do wonder what Thomas Tallis would have thought of his great choral piece 'Spem in alium' being used as the soundtrack to the film of Fifty Shades of Grey!

MUSIC AT ST MICHAEL'S

So what does music mean for us here in this place?

When I ask people why they come to St Michael's, very often they say to me, 'I come for the music'.

I would even venture to say that we have the best music of any church in Barnes – please don't tell St Mary's I said that!

Music is important for all churches, but it is perhaps particularly important for us. It is central to our identity as a church. We are, after all, dedicated to the Holy Angels. And Angels, like those painted on our High Altar are often shown with musical instrument as a reminder that the chief and indeed only activity of heaven is the rapturous praise of God.

So our singing and music-making here on earth (no matter how imperfect) is a foretaste and a preparation for the eternal (and perfect) praise of heaven. We prepare here and now for what we shall do eternally – dipping into that everlasting song of praise which the saints and angels always keep up before the throne of God.

Music is also a fundamental feature of how we reach out to people. It is why many people are drawn to this church to share in worship, and why they stay. In a secular age, people will still come in large numbers to hear a Bach Passion, tourists of all beliefs flock to Cathedrals for Choral Evensong – and Radio 3's Choral Evensong is not only the longest running of any radio programme, but also one of its most popular. When Saint Augustine of Canterbury came from Rome and landed in Kent in 597 to convert the Anglo-Saxons, he came ashore with his monks and the historian Bede records that they did so singing together Psalms and hymns of praise. All this testifies to the ability of music to touch the soul, to warm our hearts and open minds that are normally closed to faith or do not understand it.

Music is also a fundamental feature of our spirituality.

Another Augustine, Saint Augustine of Hippo, famously said that '*he who sings prays twice*'. It magnifies our praises, giving them added emphasis and energy.

It is not just something for the heart and soul however, but also for the mind, for music teaches us the Christian faith. In Anglicanism we have a principle – '*lex orandi, lex credendi*' – what we pray is what we believe. The Church of England does not have a single catechism that teaches us every aspect of the Christian faith, instead our faith is embodied in the things we say and sing.

Singing is therefore inherently theological and doctrinal. For Bishop Rowan Williams, music provides us with a metaphor for the incarnation. He uses the example of the famous recording of the cellist, Jacqueline du Pre playing the Bach Cello Suites. In that recording, she is united with the music, yet it does not subsume her, she is also most fully herself. This he says, is the closest we can come on earth to understanding the co-existence of human and divine nature in the person of Jesus Christ.

Singing also says something about the Church. It is a unified activity, in which many voices join together to produce something beautiful for God. As such it is a sign of the Church itself in all its diversity – yet remaining one Church with one Faith.

ORGAN PROJECT

All this sets the scene for some work we are about to undertake on the organ, which begins this week.

Today is the last day we shall hear it for some time, as we undertake some long overdue and desperately needed work to clean, tune and overhaul this instrument that is so important to our worship here.

I believe however, that to maintain the status quo is not enough – we must take the opportunity to improve and enhance this instrument so that what we offer to God is even better than what went before.

So at the same time, we are installing some extra stops and pipes so that this wonderful instrument not only continues to sound, but enriches our worship even more than it does at the moment.

I also believe that, while general maintenance should come out of existing funds and giving, *improvements* should come out of fundraising and additional giving. So from next week onwards you will receive more information and the opportunity to contribute to this work as you are able; whether by buying a pipe or sponsoring a hymn.

And we do hope to have the organ playing once again by our Patronal Festival at the end of September. Music is not an optional extra to our faith, especially here at St Michael's, and it deserves all the support we can give to it.

Oh yes, and the answer to the riddle?

It is of course – *Jerusalem*.

Fr Stephen Stavrou