

Friends of the Musicians' Chapel Service of Thanksgiving

The Rt Revd Stephen Conway, Bishop of Ely

1 May 2018, Church of the Holy Sepulchre, Holborn Viaduct

Ecclus 44; Rev 21

This evening, we honour those who 'found out musical tunes' and set out 'verses in writing'. Perhaps you heard that reading from Ecclesiasticus as it was set by Vaughan Williams. With the Psalmist, and set by Stanford, we praise God singing 'a new song', praising him with the congregation of the saints, praising his name in the dance, and with tabret and harp. And we are offered a vision of the new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven – possibly hearing Bainton's imagination of the great voice out of heaven, and then the change in tempo and texture, for the gentle, lyrical promise that God will wipe away all tears.

With music old and new, we praise God who makes all things new, and who is the beginning and the end, Alpha and Omega.

It was pointed out to me recently that there is a marked difference between the musical world of the Old Testament, and that of the New. The psalter is full of calls to praise with our voices, but also with tabret and harp, in the sound of the trumpet, in the cymbals and dances, upon strings, pipe and more cymbals – well-tuned and loud. Not so the New Testament, where musical instruments are remarkable by their absence. Writing to the Colossians, Paul encourages the singing of "psalms, hymns and spiritual songs to God". We hear of Jesus and the disciples singing the Passover hymn – the Hallel – before they go out to the Mount of Olives after the Last Supper. But most of the music we encounter in the New Testament is heavenly: trumpets sound in heaven, calling the

faithful, and the white-robed elders join in the celestial worship with harps, and golden bowls full of incense, as they sing their songs of praise. This is the vision of worship in the new Jerusalem which comes down out of heaven from God, where God dwells in the midst of his people.

In the meantime, the New Testament's enthusiasm for terrestrial instrumental music is, at best, muted: writing to the Corinthians, Paul says (as we know from many a wedding), that speaking in the tongues of mortals and angels but without love, is to be as a noisy gong or clanging cymbal. In the very next chapter, he goes on to say that speaking in tongues requires interpretation just as "with lifeless instruments that produce sound, such as the flute and harp. If they do not give distinct notes, how will anyone know what is being played?" Skill and understanding are needed to bring the instruments to life, to turn random sound into music, which expresses emotion or conveys a message – be it a lament, or a paean, a call to prayer, or to battle.

What this all points to, powerfully and profoundly, is the importance of music to lift our hearts and minds upwards, and to provide aural revelation – we hear the angels sing, the trumpet call, the great voice out of heaven. Music becomes the vehicle for transformation and the transcendent. The wonderful setting of the Hymn to St Cecilia that we heard as the anthem expresses that, in both the musical tune that Daniel Knagg has found out, and the verse he has set down in writing, in his translation to it.

Cecilia's praises are celebrated by all musicians; her merits are the means for communication with God; and what is sought is transformation – of the world's mourning into the glory of Paradise. This is the purpose of the music, and the promise of Revelation: that God will

wipe away all tears; that mourning and crying and pain will be no more; that God will dwell with us and be our God.

Down the centuries, Christian theologians have reflected on this potential for music to give voice to the depth of sorrow and height of joy, to express it more powerfully than the words alone. St Augustine is frequently quoted as saying that 'He who sings praise twice'. Less famously, in an Exposition on the Psalms in which he reflects on singing to the Lord a new song, singing with joyful melody, he says this:

“What is this joy I speak of, this singing exultantly? It is an inner melody that means our hearts are bursting with feeling that words cannot contain. And to whom does such joy belong if not to the God who is beyond language? When words will not come, and you cannot keep silent, what else can you do but let melody soar? What else can you do when the rejoicing heart runs out of words and the intensity of your joy will not be imprisoned by language? What else can you do but to sing out to God with ‘songs of joy’?”

Music provides the means to express what words alone cannot. And provides too the means to communicate with God, who is beyond the limits of our language. It echoes down the centuries to God who is beyond time and eternity. The idea of celestial music, the music of the spheres, fascinated the theologians of the Middle Ages, who wondered about that heavenly music. Music, beautifully ordered, was part of the perfection of God's ordered creation. Hildegard of Bingen, the extraordinary composer, visionary, writer and scholar who died in 1179, saw music as a means by which fallen humanity might be reunited with God. In her work *The Book of Life's Merits*, she described how 'God created human beings to be full of light so that they could see the radiance of pure ether and hear the song of the angels.' This, she

argued, was lost when 'darkness fell on the whole of creation' as a result of mankind's first disobedience. But all was not completely lost; people retain, she said, 'a glimmering of their knowledge of God' and 'should allow God to return to the centre of their lives'. To sing is thus to seek to recover our intended heavenly voice, to practise music is to remember what we have lost, and to put our minds and souls into harmony with God, as he intended them to be. Those who perform music beautifully offer to others expression of joy and solace, and space to hear – even if only very faintly as at a great distance – an echo of that heavenly music, a glimmer of that once-lost knowledge of God. And those who found out musical tunes and recited verses in writing, gave to unknown others – performers and hearers – the fruits of their practice and skill. What a gift to have, and use, and in turn give.

This evening we remember and give thanks for those whose names are in the Chapel's Book of Remembrance, and particularly those whose names have been newly recorded. We give thanks for their talents and skills, for the gifts they nurtured and shared with others. We give thanks for the gift of music, and all its power 'to transform the world's mourning into the glory of Paradise'. With ancient hymns of praise and tunes we learned long ago, we sing our new song to the Lord, joining our song with that of heaven. We give voice to the things we cannot otherwise express – our joy and our sorrow, our lament and our praise – and catch, somewhere in the midst of us coming down from God, a glimpse or a whisper of the divine, and the voice that says 'Behold, I make all things new.'