

## A Sermon for the Annual Service of Thanksgiving at the National Musician's Church, London

May 18<sup>th</sup> 2022

Ecclesiasticus 44.1-15/Revelation 21.1-8

When I arrived in my present post, an enterprising member of the congregation organized a *Desert Island Discs* evening in the hope that my music choices would provide a psychological insight into the new Vicar. To my amazement hundreds came, and to my pleasure some of the music was performed live, as well as via recordings. Unlike at least one member of the congregation here tonight I have never - obviously - been asked to the real thing. So I enjoyed myself. I am sure you are on the edge of your seats to know what I chose. Parry's *I was glad* started us off (one of my happiest memories is seeing my wife enter Coventry Cathedral to that at our wedding). Bach's 'Goldberg' Variations. A Brahms Intermezzo. Britten's *Chorister's Burial*. A Haydn Quartet. 'Batter my Heart' from Adam's *Doctor Atomic*. And the Widor *Toccata*, which is what we had at the end of our wedding.

As I look back, I can't believe what favourites are not there. Where is Schumann's Piano Concerto? *Der Rosenkavalier*? Sibelius 2. 'Belshazzar'. *O ruddier than the cherry*. Vaughan Williams' 5. The *German Requiem*. *Music for a while*.

It could of course be thousands more. I hope that *Desert Island Discs* is a game you enjoy playing too. Except to say that, for me, early this year, the rules of the game had to change in a rather dramatic fashion.

Plunged into depression by a traumatic event, I found myself signed off work, and, to be frank, struggling to survive. Pleasure was unknown. Trapped by fear and darkness, the usual avenues where joy might be found were inaccessible, even if discoverable. I could not play the piano. I lacked the concentration to read.

A game of squash or a run was a step too far. And worst of all – by far worst of all – I could not listen to music.

At least, I could not listen to the music that I wanted to listen to. The *Desert Island Discs* were no good to me now. The *Chorister's burial* had too much fun with the Vicar, and 'Batter My Heart' – well, my heart was battered enough, thank you so much, even if it was the spectacular voice of Gerald Finley doing the battering. I had no song to sing. And, in my grief, in my falling, I could not bear to hear another's.

Until one day. One redeeming day. I had tried, despite my depression, to continue with my Saturday morning ritual of *Record Review*. I could cope with the gentleness of Andrew McGregor, and if I didn't like the music, there was always the off switch. But this extraordinary morning, music came out of the radio that I had never heard before, and which seemed to be taking my soul, feeding it through some kind of aural prism, and finding new colour, new life, and new hope. It was Bartok - his fifth quartet – and it did not change my life. Rather it gave my life a voice. It set my spirit to music. And Bartok's music has, to my surprise and delight, become essential.

We began with *Desert Island Discs*, and seem to have segued via *Record Review* to an edition of *In the Psychiatrist's Chair*. I'm sorry. This is meant to be a sermon, not a therapy session; except that I feel on safe ground in this company, sharing with you a story of the equalizing of my own temperament. And all thanks to a Hungarian who found out musical tunes.

My own struggles with mental health issues have led me to a fresh admiration for Christopher Smart, a man who was thought to be mad, because he wouldn't stop praying. It was in Bethnal Green asylum, between 1758 and 1763, that Christopher Smart wrote his celebrated, extraordinary, fascinating *Jubilate Agno*: Rejoice in the Lamb, which became famous when Britten set it to music.

Towards the end it contains a line which I have always loved, and yet, have always been puzzled by:

*For M is Musick and therefore he is God.*

Sometimes musicians, especially church musicians, might be fooled into thinking that this is, in some way, true.

But the poem goes on. Britten didn't have time to set the whole of Smart's alphabetic song of praise: and if he had, he might have set these words that come just a few lines later.

*For R is right and therefore he is God.  
For S is soul and therefore he is God.  
For T is truth and therefore he is God.  
For U is union and therefore he is God.*

And then

*For Christ being  $\mathbf{A}$  and  $\mathbf{\Omega}$  is all the intermediate letters  
without doubt.*

Right, and soul, and truth, and union - Christ himself? - this, I think, is the direction of our thankfulness today. And we heard earlier in our second lesson the apocalyptic declaration of Christ himself that he is Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end: the ultimate *diapason*. And his music resonates through all the earth, if only we can be attuned to it. Man at war with man often fails to hear the love-song of heaven, as present crises bear witness too well. But when it is heard, and where it is heard, a kingdom of justice and joy is tantalizingly within reach.

I wonder though if we also considered the danger contained in that second lesson. For while it is good to know that death will be no more, and our tears wiped away, it is because heaven and earth will be over. The heaven of which we sing, and for which we long, is done with. This is a new heaven, and a new earth, for all that preceded it is done with. So – if there are no more tears, no more sorrow, no more crying or pain: what of music? Will this new reality be in the realms of time, or beyond time, and if so, what of music? Will angel voices really be forever singing – or are these too, like craftsman's art and music's measure, to be former things, passed away?

I'm not sure I much like the idea of eternity without music, and I suspect that you may agree, so I'm not going to dance on the point of that theological needle any longer.

But as I give thanks this evening, with all of you, for the famous women and men we have come to praise, I find such dangerous thoughts helpful – because they point our thanksgiving in that right direction of which I spoke a few moments ago. In the direction of the One who, in his grace, gave the gift; gave the hearts, and minds, and hands, and voices, to enable us to – and I use this word advisedly – to *play*.

Many of my happiest musical moments were enjoyed at the Lichfield Festival, for many years directed by dear friend Paul Spicer, whose music and conducting we're enjoying this evening. I wonder if Paul will remember a remarkable performance given, not by a musician, but by a preacher? At the Festival Service in July 1990, the late Dr Gordon Wakefield said this

*You and I are instrumentalists in the orchestra of Christ playing the work of God. This is a way to understand prayer . . . prayer is also our part in the divine symphony of the universe. And we – even we, such blundering participants – shall deprive the whole if we are missing, or fail to tune our instrument at Christ's door.*

I shall go on playing my version *Desert Island Discs*, adding and subtracting from my chosen tracks as I continue my own blundering participation in the church and in the world. Perhaps you will too. And I hope it will not sound too pious if I invite you to go on praying the game? By which I mean :

- considering who and how and where you find yourself;
- what is the music you need to accompany you on your own journey;
- and how you will be thankful -

and to whom.

ADRIAN DAFFERN