

## A Sermon for the Annual Service of Thanksgiving at the National Musician's Church, London, Wednesday 17<sup>th</sup> May 2023

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Edward Taylor was a puritan divine who sailed for New England in 1668. Although unpublished in his lifetime, Taylor wrote a lot of poetry, much of it inspired by the Song of Solomon. But he also wrote a meditation on Philippians 2, part of which was set to music by Gerald Finzi in 1951 for the Ascensiontide anthem we've just heard:

*Methinks I see heavens sparkling courtiers fly  
In flakes of glory down him to attend:  
And heare heart cramping notes of Melody,  
Surround his Chariot as it did ascend  
Mixing their Musick, making every string  
More to inravisb as they this tune sing...*

It's interesting to note that over two-thirds of Taylor's poetry uses the imagery of musical instruments. As a good puritan, he would have known all too well that instrumental music was never a feature of the puritan worshiphouse – a capella psalmody (metrical and otherwise) was sung during worship, with instruments retained solely for secular pastimes or occasionally for devotion in the home. His phrase 'mixing their musick' offers a tantalising suggestion, then, that in the worship of heaven musical styles were mixed, and that each style contributes towards the improvement of the other. If there is expertise in heaven, surely it is immeasurably symphonic; if there is chamber music (please God!) surely it proceeds from an open circle; if there is Gregorian chant, surely there is also a counterpoint.

As today we give thanks for former musicians, and former lovers of music, we celebrate a community which stretches far beyond the reaches of our hearing and our sight. We all know from our own experience of being human, just how music is able to voice that which words alone cannot quite convey – joy, sorrow, grief, desire, hope, pain. If you can't say it, then sing it or play it. There are countless examples of music as protest, and also, more devastatingly, of music as torture. Music articulates our limits but it also stretches them, it schools us in new emotions,

new connections, new possibilities. That is perhaps why any quest for musical purity always seems to tumble unavoidably into new kinds of creativity: the old story of Palestrina being commissioned to write his *Missa Papae Marcelli* in 1562 as an example of how a new pure form could articulate audible text resulted in one of the masterpieces of renaissance polyphony; the 1909 attempt of the Russian Holy Synod to purify liturgical music from wider European musical borrowings, resulted in Rachmaninoff's *Vespers* of 1915, which follows the traditional melodies, but creates a work of dazzling beauty. Even the early minimalism of Arvo Part opens new doors, influences younger composers, plummets new depths. The list is potentially endless. Music is somehow generative of music, going beyond itself. In theological terms, it is sacramental, having, in the words of the French nun and violinist Elizabeth Paule Labat, 'the hallmark of boundlessness.' So, as we commemorate musician friends and colleagues who have died, we remember something of that boundlessness; something which composers and poets get more intuitively than novelists or preachers, because it is a language which aspires to creativity and harmony which can't quite be contained. That's one way of describing what Christian thinkers have called Heaven.

If Heaven is about anything, it is about participation in the life of God, a drawing together of all the creativity and colour of creation, so that it exists fully as itself and yet beyond itself. Christ's Ascension, which we celebrate tomorrow, is a mystery through which we know this more completely, as Christ himself becomes knowable in every place and at every time. Limits are expanded. Christ leaves the earth so that the Holy Spirit might come, through whom we encounter the rich and healing vibrance of Christ's love on earth. There is always a danger that Heaven might be seen as a flattening out of diversity: and some of our art doesn't help us here. Instead Heaven is harmony; music and performance teach us about that, and open a door through which to contemplate the ultimate.

In the second Book of the Chronicles, from which we heard tonight's first reading, we have an account of worship proceeding from Solomon's Temple which has just been dedicated. It's an astonishing array of musicians and instruments: psalteries, trumpets, harps, singers, which makes even the Coronation look a bit drab! We are told that ultimately the singers and the trumpets were 'as one' even with the cymbals in drawing together the worship of the Temple. This is a kind of reconciled diversity, and it leads into that most important of repeated lines in Hebrew worship, 'The Lord is good, for his mercy endureth for ever.' This is the responsorial cry used when recounting the mighty works of God, especially the liberation of the children of Israel

from slavery in Egypt. The Twelve Tribes finding one voice with which they offer praise, not just for themselves, but for their ancestors and for their children.

In thinking of recently departed musicians, my mind is immediately drawn to the late, great James Bowman, who was a dear friend to so many. One of the comforts in the wake of James's death has been the inevitable outpouring of hilarious and wonderful stories. One well-known singer recounts discussing how he discussed his own performance of Peter Maxwell Davies's opera *Taverner*. James Bowman had been in the original production and had created the role of the Priest. James's principal memory of this occasion was that it was very tricky and slightly underrehearsed. On the first night, when the curtain came down, he turned to a colleague and said, 'Is that the end?' I've still got two pages to go!' With James there were always two more pages to go. His musicianship, his kindness, his friendship, his irrepressible sense of fun and the absurd, his keen sense of collaboration, marked him out as a kind of symphonic person. All of us will have memories of musicians like this, and they are to be treasured in the knowledge that we are still united, the living and the dead, together as one family in Christ.

In the Acts of the Apostles, two individuals clothed in white say to the Ascension onlookers, 'Don't stand there gazing up into heaven' – certainly, this Jesus will return, but in the meantime, look around you and notice what is going on. Listen to what is going on around you, and realise that we share the life of Heaven, imperfectly, even now. Music is sacramental of this. There will come a time when even sacraments will cease, and all our senses will be enraptured by a power and a beauty which we are yet to fully comprehend. Our departed friends already know this, and cheer us on. James Bowman was right: there are always two more pages to go.