

The Three Choirs Festival

Worcester Cathedral

Isaiah 44.21-25 and Matthew 6.25-end.

We are in for a feast during these next few days, a feast of music – which is exactly, of course, what a festival should be. I am looking forward to this feast immensely: I have known of the Three Choirs Festival for years but this will be my first experience of it and it is a particular delight for me that it is happening here in Worcester during my first few months as bishop here.

I am privileged, too, to be able to speak to you for a few minutes as the Festival begins and what I want to do is to reflect on the implication of the words of Jesus we heard in our New Testament reading: ‘Consider the lilies of the field, they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these’. Jesus was inviting us to enjoy the beauty of the flowers of the field just as we are invited to enjoy the beauty of the music that is to be offered during the Festival – not that I would want you to think that I am under the impression that it just ‘happens’ – there has, I know, been a great deal of toiling if not spinning in rehearsing the music that we are to enjoy. The rehearsal has been such that there will certainly not be any need for the sort of spin that seems so beloved of this present generation of politicians to entice us to enjoy it. The point I want to make here, though, is that Jesus was wanting us to do something in addition to delight in the lilies of the field – he was wanting to encourage us to see God who created them, who ‘clothes’ them, as he put it, *through* their beauty. And that is exactly what I would like to invite you to do with the music you are to enjoy. Relish it, savour it, delight in it - but at the same time consider its significance.

There is a tendency among some in our society, encouraged by Richard Dawkins and his henchmen, to settle for reductionist view of reality. In this view reality is simply its components and nothing more. The schoolboy is asked ‘What is water?’ and answers H₂O. This answer is correct – I speak as someone who trained as a scientist and that much I do remember – but it is a thin answer symptomatic of an impoverished approach prevalent in the West. If we see water simply as thing, as matter, as self-enclosed, as the sum of its components, then the great question ‘What is life’ becomes unanswerable. If reality is presented as un-symbolic, as insignificant then, quite literally, life is pointless and it will therefore disappoint.

Water is H₂O but it is much more. Similarly we can talk about the ‘component’ notes of music and analyse them rationally with almost mathematical precision. But we know that the music is much more than its component notes and, in the end, music calls ‘not for description but for surrender. If we are to know it fully we must do more than study it. We must give ourselves up to it, and what we must give ourselves up to is not just a pattern of sounds arranged in certain mathematically sequences.

It is a realm of wonder, love and praise made accessible to us by the sounds we hear but infinitely more than the actual sum of these sounds themselves ... Or to say the same thing with a different use of words – heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard are sweeter. And the heard melodies become most meaningful when they open our ears to the unheard.

What if the beauty of music, like the beauty of the natural world, of its flowers and its music, were to be seen as a window to the divine, the music of the spheres? As Herbert put it,

A man that looks on glass,
On it may stay his eye;
Or if he pleaseth, through it pass,
And then the heaven espy.

The psalmist wrote that ‘The heavens declare the glory of God.’ Sadly, to our contemporaries, they generally do not. The disease of the Western world is an eye-disease, an astigmatism that has narrowed vision and an accompanying hearing impediment which mean that people see and hear things only as components - and so they are not satisfied. For the consequence of this surface understanding is superficiality and an interior emptiness. If the thing is the only reality, then how can you live? Only by acquisition which is such a laborious existence. Life is no longer being but having. Christ bids us be like little children because children see and hear everything as gift, see and hear with imaginative eyes and ears and, as they do so, find wonder in a world full of glory, experience a world grounded in grace, not in utility, on what they receive, not on what they earn. Our adult disease is reduced awareness, false consciousness, a failure to see things as they are. The language of sacrament, of seeing through the material to the eternal, remains a foreign language and that is, perhaps, why the Christian faith is withering in the West. The great scientist Albert Einstein has a warning for the reductionists, however. He wrote: ‘Whoever is devoid of wonder, whoever remains unmoved, whoever cannot contemplate or know the deep shudder of the soul in enchantment, might just as well be dead for he has already closed his eyes upon life’.

I hope you will enjoy greatly the music that is to be offered during this festival but I hope even more that, through it and through the rest of your experience, you will be able to discern the glory of God. Someone once asked William Blake whether, when he saw the sun setting, he saw a ball of fire about the size of a golden guinea in the sky. ‘O no,’ he replied, ‘Oh no. I see a multitude of the heavenly host crying ‘Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God Almighty.’

May you discern the presence and glory of the Living God in this Festival, Him who, as the prophecy of Isaiah we heard earlier reminds us, made all things. Having perceived Him, may you fall down and worship Him, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

+John Wigorn

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