

Dedication of the New Organ

Merton College, Oxford [370]

Psalm 30
I Chronicles 16.1-11 (omit 5a)
Revelation 5

May the words of my mouth....

O may we soon again renew that song
And keep in tune with Heaven, till God ere long
To his celestial consort us unite,
To live with him and sing in endless morn of light.

Introduction

I'd like to thank the Chaplain for his invitation to preach this evening, and the Warden and Fellows for their generous hospitality. It is a joy and a privilege to be able to return to Merton, and especially in this 750th anniversary year. This Chapel and its Choir played a significant part in my own Christian formation, and it was also in this building that my wife Heather and I met, and then later married – this is a very special place!

And as one who used to play the previous organ (albeit rather badly), it's wonderful to see and hear this marvellous new instrument in place and, in a few moment's time, to pray as it is dedicated by the Bishop of Oxford to the greater glory of God and for his service within this Chapel and College.

More of the organ anon - I'd like to begin by looking at the wider context of what goes on in worship here week after week.

Choral Foundation

Six years ago, Merton took the bold step of setting up a new choral foundation. And this at a time when critics outside the Church point to a supposedly terminal decline in church attendance and active Christian faith, and when critics within the Church look on at the Anglican choral tradition and deem it an irrelevance and even a hindrance to Christian mission in the world today. A bold step indeed, but one which has already borne much fruit. It has raised the profile of the Choir, the Chapel and the College, it has promoted choral excellence, and – most importantly – it has placed the sung worship of almighty God at the heart of this place, and through that has created a lively context for Christian formation.

The significance of singing

Singing has always been important for God's people. Within the Christian tradition as well as Scriptural songs, such as the Psalms, *Magnificat* and *Nunc Dimittis*, we have St Paul's words to the Ephesians and Colossians telling us that we should '... sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs to God', and much of St John's account of his vision of the life of heaven in the Book of Revelation has to do with singing – this is very much what lies behind John Milton's words in the anthem we've just heard. The Biblical writers use

musical references and metaphors (and singing in particular) to mark out the really significant moments in the story of God's relationship with his people.

The writer of the Book of Job, for instance, tells us that, at the creation of the world, 'the morning stars sang for joy' [Job 38.7]. As the Israelites escaped through the Red Sea out of slavery in Egypt, Moses and Miriam sang a song to the Lord [Exodus 15.1-18]. Mary sang the *Magnificat* on discovering that she was to be the mother of God's Son. When Jesus was born, it was the song of the Angels [Luke 2.14] which told the shepherds of his birth. And St Paul writes that the general resurrection will be heralded by the sounding of the trumpet [1 Cor 15.53].

The act of singing in worship is deeply formative. It's well known that what we sing (or hear sung) lodges more deeply within us than the words we say or hear. After this service, we are far more likely to remember the words of our hymns and the choir anthems than we are this sermon(!). Because singing is such a holistic activity, in that it involves body, mind and spirit, what we sing becomes a part of us. And over time, all that we sing can help form us into the people God is calling us to become.

But there is a further dimension to singing in worship. In his poem *At a solemn musick*, Milton reminds us of the link between the worship we offer here and now, and the worship that is and shall be offered in heaven. Having first talked of the worship of heaven, he goes on to write:

That we *on Earth* with undiscording voice,

May rightly answer that melodious noise;

Whenever we worship, we do so as part of the ceaseless round of worship offered by the whole company of heaven. And it's as though through our singing here on earth, we are tuning in to that heavenly worship: we 'log on to the heavenly broadband' as one friend of mine once put it. And therein lies its value for us.

As we worship, and lift the concerns of earth to heaven, so heaven is brought down to earth, and we catch a glimpse of God's glory. The vision of that glory is accessible not only to those who profess faith, but to anyone who is prepared to be caught up in the beauty of what is going on and open to the possibility of being drawn into God's heart of love.

The significance of music

Music is significant for Christian faith and worship because it affects us deeply as human beings but also, I believe, because it is one of the ways that God engages with us.

During the past 20 years there has been a considerable growth in interdisciplinary study of music and theology. From the one side are suggestions from theologically-minded musicians about how music might communicate elements of truth about God. And on the other are musically-minded theologians who are exploring the possibility that music might offer an interpretative frame of reference for theology.

There has for a long time been interest in how the work of certain composers might express elements of the Christian faith: Bach's cantata and passions settings are an obvious example. But, in looking at things the other way round, what music has to offer to theology is that it is first and foremost a temporal art form. Music measures time, and exists in and through time and, as such, it resonates strongly with the Christian faith which is a temporal faith. At the heart of our faith lies the truth of the incarnation: that God, in Jesus, chooses to inhabit the world of flesh and blood, and share our humanity, our time and space – that then redeemed by Christ and brought to fullness of life, we might share his divinity.

Music is a divine gift which, through its temporality, we may, to parody Milton's words, at least keep 'in *time* with Heaven' until we come to the fulfilment of God's purposes 'liv[ing] with [God] and sing[ing] in endless morn of light.'

Throughout history, theologians have argued over the extent to which music can 'make God known.' Some have claimed that, in worship, it should be a mere conduit for words. But others have suggested that music itself may be the bearer of meaning: Luther's famous statement that music lies on a par with preaching because through both, God is communicated and appropriated through hearing, has proved influential. The Anglican tradition has on the whole endorsed this – affirming music's place in a good created order, and whose purpose is to 'voice creation's praise.'

The organ – the Holy Spirit

We are now a week into Easteride: the 50-day season in which we can reflect on the consequence of Jesus' resurrection and, as did the Apostles, seek the outpouring of God's Spirit. The Christian liturgical calendar has followed the pattern given us by St Luke in his Gospel and in the Acts of the Apostles, with three distinct events over a period of time – resurrection at Easter, ascension 40 days later and the giving of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. But if we turn to St John's Gospel – and to the passage which was read at the Eucharist this morning, there the Holy Spirit is given to the apostles in the Upper Room at Easter. John's point is that it is the Spirit who makes present the reality of resurrection life – the life into which God calls us - and that we can't talk about the one without the other. It is the Holy Spirit who makes the risen Christ known to us, and who works in us the gradual change 'from glory to glory' as we become the people we were created to be.

When human voices join in worship, there is a coming together of spirits: the human spirit and God's Spirit; and through the music that is produced, the mystery of God is somehow made manifest. As human beings sing, columns of air are set in vibration – within the body and within the building and those who listen are drawn in. If music does indeed serve to 'make God known' then a physical pneumatic event becomes something of a theological pneumatic event.

The same thing happens when the organ is played. A length of wood, or tin alloy or spotted metal becomes a

living musical entity when air moves through it. And so when we hear a diapason chorus, a pedal reed, or the ethereal timbre of swell strings, the sound affects us because the air is moved and we become involved in something which is pneumatic.

In the 1990s, when I was Precentor at Ely Cathedral, the organ there was rebuilt. For almost 2 years its place was taken by a temporary electronic instrument. It was equal in volume and capacity to the size of the building and the demands of the liturgy, but there was a deadness about the sound compared with that of the organ it had replaced. The electronic instrument didn't move the air in the same way. And nor, it must be said, did it move its hearers!

This isn't the place to engage in debate about acoustic and electronic instruments, but there is a real sense in which because pipe organs move the air, they are at the very least a potent reminder of the place of the Spirit – the pneumatic - in music. Many of those who have written for the organ over the years seem to have grasped this and, whether or not their writing is intentionally religious, there is little doubt that their music offers us a vision in sound of something beyond ourselves.

But there is something else, too, about the organ, and that is that it is a complex animal. Each pipe is part of a rank of pipes, and ranks are voiced to sound together as a chorus. This was demonstrated so beautifully yesterday in John Scott's opening recital. We heard the distinctive sound of the solo stops, the smaller choruses, and the full choruses as the evening progressed.

As such, the organ offers us a model of the way in which the Holy Spirit works in us not merely as individuals, but as members of a community of faith: as the people of God. Human beings are not monochrome: you could say that some of us are diapasons, some are flutes and others are reeds. Some are upper work, while others are 16 foot pedal stops. But within the body of Christ, the differences – as they combine – make for an almost infinite variety of pattern and colour, rather in the same way that this instrument can sound authentically German one minute and French the next.

God creates and forms us as individuals but with the intention that, together, we are formed as a polychrome people, fashioned by the Holy Spirit into the likeness of Christ, and charged to carry that likeness into the world. The organ, then, is a reminder both through the sound it produces, and allegorically, of the working of the Holy Spirit.

Consequence

So where does this leave us? On the one hand, today is simply about giving thanks – about rejoicing in this splendid new instrument which is now before us, and giving thanks to God. Thanks for those whose generosity has made it possible for the College to install it, thanks for those who have advised and have built and voiced it, and thanks for those who have the skill to play it. But any dedication really serves as a marker along the way, and is much more about pointing to a future than recording a completed

event. Today's dedication is a marker in a developing musical tradition here at Merton. The past six years have been magnificent, but there is an important future still to unfold.

In those places which have had the courage to set up and to continue to maintain choral foundations in the face of financial uncertainty, and opposition from within the Church and without, we are seeing signs of spiritual awakening and growth. It's clear, if we read the statistics, that a growing number of people is finding that in the sort of choral worship to be found in our cathedrals and college chapels, offers the opportunity for a deep engagement with God: and not always involving words.

Some of us are involved in this sort of worship on a daily or weekly basis. Others of us are regular worshippers here or elsewhere. And others will be here for any of a number of other reasons. But we can join together today in supporting our musicians in prayer. Theirs is a ministry which needs to be sustained if it is to develop and if it is to be used by God in his purposes to bring us all

To live with him and sing in endless morn of light.

Let us pray.

God of glory,
around whose eternal throne all the heavenly
powers offer you ceaseless songs of praise:
grant that we may overhear these songs,
and with our own lips and lives interpret them to all

in whose presence we play and sing:
that your Church may behold the beauty of its King,
and see with mortal eyes the land that is afar off,
where all your promises are celebrated,
and where all your love in every sight and sound
is the theme of eternal rejoicing;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Evensong, Merton College, Oxford, 5.45, Sunday 27 April 2014