

A SERMON IN KING'S COLLEGE CHAPEL

Serious Listening

The final Sunday of the Chapel year is always laden with emotion as we realise that the intense and bright, and yet all too short, careers of our senior choir members comes to its natural and appointed end. Time like an ever-rolling stream deals with all her sons in the same way. There is a time to come for an interview or audition; there is time to be a probationer or in your first year as an undergraduate; there is a time to rehearse, and a time to sing services; a time for concerts, and a time for touring; a time for recording, and a time for broadcasting; and then, all too soon, a time to graduate or to attend the school-leavers service, and then, at last, a time for the final barbeque or dinner.

On Friday I was speaking with a Buddhist Abbot whose monastery in Hangzhou some of the Choral Scholars visited last year. The conversation moved to the question of the illusory nature of what is permanent and the true nature of change and flux and transition. The idea is that, 'change is the only constant'. This is something that the architecture of this Chapel seems to do its best to dissuade us of, and yet it is a point with which those of us who are familiar with the liturgical life of this Chapel know well.

Just two days ago we celebrated a new special service in this place - the schools' leavers service and prize giving. Many of the people who had been sceptical about this innovation were positive afterwards. This was interesting to me, given that it was substantially a service of words, a good number of which were not heard by many of the people present. There was music of course too, and meaningful movement as well, as children came to receive prizes and as the leavers gathered to be blessed, and then

processed together towards the west door and ultimately through it. But what made the occasion special was the realisation that something serious and deep, something of the soul, was going on.

Stopping on a cycle ride, the poet Philip Larkin went into a country church. He stooped to take off his cycle clips as an ad hoc mark of respect and realised that

'A serious house on serious earth it is,
In whose blent air all our compulsions meet,
Are recognized, and robed as destinies.'

When describing why it was that I had invited one of Cambridge's most public and trenchant critics, David Lammy, to preach the University Sermon this year, I wrote that the Chapel was a place of 'serious listening'.

Serious listening. This is something you cannot say about our Chapel during visiting time. Visiting time is a time for looking and learning about the history and the architecture and the windows. Concerts, on the other hand, *are* times of serious listening, and, much as I enjoy listening to recorded music through good headphones, there is something especially wonderful about listening together as members of an audience, responding together when an orchestra and choir are led by a conductor to bring a score to life in such a way as to make us glad just to be there, and ultimately able to add something to the whole with our applause.

Concerts are great, but the Chapel wasn't build for concerts. It was built for worship, for pre-reformation worship to be precise, when the focus wasn't on the spoken word but on the faithful recitation of the liturgy

which was already moving away from a monastic paradigm towards forms of expression that were to become more artistic and ever more ambitious in their intellectual, spiritual and emotional reach. This place has not merely reflected, but often had a leading role in the ceaseless evolution of choral church music, especially over the last century. Indeed, if you read Timothy Day's wonderful book 'I Saw Eternity the Other Night' you may become convinced that what has happened precisely here has made the style of English choral singing what it is today. Day concludes his book with a summary of the factors that lie behind this superlative achievement.

The singing style emerged because of Wordsworth and the Oxford Movement; because of changing attitudes towards education and boyhood; because of a need for men and boys to display their particularly English kind of masculinity; because the sound had to be a Protestant one and not a Catholic one, and an Anglican one and not a Nonconformist one; because of particular men's temperaments and personalities and powers of leadership; because of developments in technology; because of convictions about moral and social values and ways of living; because of the vast acoustics of one of Europe's great buildings.' (p295)

Our gospel reading today gave us two simple stories about people finding things that are lost. In Luke's 15th chapter they serve as preludes to one of the greatest stories in the Bible - the Prodigal Son. The point is not quite that God seeks us and rejoices when we are found, but that God is *always* seeking us and finding us, and rejoicing in who we are, and so forgiving us for all that we have done wrong or badly, and offering us not only a new home and new clothes, but also a great party whenever we return to the divine embrace for which we were created.

The psalm the Choir shall sing this afternoon (139) engages the same theme. 'O Lord, thou hast searched me out and known me.' It is, perhaps, the greatest psalm in the book: intimate, tender, beautiful and timeless. It ends very much as it begins, a subtlety which is a little lost in the Prayer Book translation. The penultimate verse should really begin, 'Search me, O God, and know my heart ...' . So taken in contracted form the psalm means, 'O God thou hast searched me - search me again, deeper this time'. Here is the essence of prayer: that we should ask God to do what God is already doing, and thereby join ourselves to God's purposes, rather than seeking to sign God up for our particular cause.

Let me conclude by commending to you the virtue and grace of serious listening. Listening that is attentive at many levels, that is open-minded and accepting, that is critical only after it has sought properly to understand, that is appreciative even when disappointed, and is prepared to be delighted by what is surprising and new as well as what is familiar and traditional. It is by listening carefully to words and music, and to the depths that they can both hide and reveal, that we may discover that God has searched us and found us and brought us here - to that which now we are - in order to bless us and, through us, to bless others. May we never fail to give thanks to God for this seeking and finding, this transforming, healing forgiving and loving that we receive by grace alone. And may we never fail to mature in seriousness as listeners, and as those who pray that nothing more or less than the will of God be done, on earth as it is in heaven; the heaven with which, from time to time, we might just be perfectly in tune.

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1 Peter 5.5-11; Luke 15.1-10*