

Spellbound by What They Heard

Evensong Sunday 12th July – Canon Neil Patterson

2 Samuel 7.18-end, Luke 19.41-20.8

‘May it please you to bless the house of your servant.’

I was not supposed to be preaching this evening, but unfortunately our scheduled guest preacher could not make it and so this is the second of three weeks of me in a row, sorry! So I’m going to start again with a bit of language, if briefer than last week, since you seemed to appreciate the last effort, or at least some of you commented on it on the way out.

There is a Hebrew word for temple, **היכל**, (hekal) and we do find it in the Old Testament, translated as just that, though it is also sometimes used of a royal palace, so perhaps it really means ‘grand public building.’ But far more often the building in Jerusalem that was the centre of the worship for the Jewish people is called simply, ‘the house of the Lord’ and the word for house, **בית**, (beth) is just the same as the house of a person. And it is that which makes possible the further wordplay in our first reading.

The prayer of King David makes more sense when you realise it follows the more famous scene, where David notices that whilst he has been able to build himself a nice house, the ark of God is still in a tent, and so he resolves to build a house for it. And the Lord sends the prophet Nathan with the message (I paraphrase), “Thanks but no thanks – not your job, man, that’ll be for your son – but because of your loyalty, I will secure your house for ever.” And by that Nathan means the royal house of David, his dynasty as rulers of Israel. For from that house came Jesus himself, according to the (different) genealogies that start the gospels of Matthew and Luke. Truly, it is established for ever, in the one whose kingdom shall have no end.

Christians too have always used the language of a house of prayer, as in our second reading, to speak of our church buildings. And so it seems especially appropriate, at this final and valedictory Evensong of the choir year, when the vaults are still echoing to the glory of Parry’s great anthem to redemption in music, to say something about this particular house of God, and what we do in it. It may feel to be secure, and established for ever, but we know it is more complex than that. We pray that we not need, like the Temple in Jesus’ time, to be scourged of our corruptions. But the living tradition of worship changes and grows in each generation.

Quite a while ago Tim Popple and I found ourselves, I can't quite remember why, looking at some printed music lists from the Cathedral in I think the 1930s. We might be tempted, as always, to think those must have been the good old days. But, at least to me, the repertoire seemed much more limited. Besides anything else, much of what you sing now had not been written! And there was so much Stanford. Now, Stanford is good, as it was tonight. But old George Villiers three nights every week is like a roast beef dinner three nights every week. A little tedious, and (the dinner, not the music) almost certainly gout-inducing, as some of us can testify.

We have to be ready to admit that times change, and there will be a future generation to whom so many little aspects of what we do will seem like quaint relics of the early 21st century – whether the conducting mannerisms of Mr Lee, or the typography of Tim Popple, or of course, the preaching style of Canon Neil. But we trust and pray, the worship and choral music which have been the flame at the heart of this house of God since it was dedicated as a Cathedral nearly five centuries ago will go on. And we should not be afraid if we cannot quite answer the question as to why, any more than the chief priests and scribes and elders could not answer Jesus's question.

For music, if it music at all worth making and hearing, says things that words alone cannot. It can of course be heard differently by different people. For some our anthem this evening will just have washed beautifully over, lifting the heart to God and confirming that amid all the sorrows of this world there is still a search to be had for the high beauty the Creator set within it. Having sung it myself, I inevitably listen for the second tenor part, and also for Milton's splendid words, wondering what the old Puritan would have made of his words being so lushly set. Serious musicophiles like our Head Verger will have been listening for subtler details still, and then Mr Lee will no doubt have detected instantly which treble is just starting to come in late, and directed a piercing corrective glance. But whether or not you were ever late, those choristers finishing tonight will go out from here with an understanding and appreciation to last you all your days. We will have all had genuinely different experiences of the same thing, and that is the glory and wonder of it.

We might well apply Jesus' question of John's baptism to this house of God and what we do in it – is it of divine or human origin? On one level, of course, human. We know that the wondrous vault above was raised by human labour, at the direction of Abbot Knowle in the 14th century. One can read easily enough how Archbishop Cranmer devised the service of Evening Prayer from medieval originals and contemporary advice, and returning to the anthem, the life of the poet John Milton is no secret, and someone somewhere will be doing a university music module or thesis to explore and explain the compositional techniques of Parry. And those of us who work here know that the beautiful voices of our

choristers depend on the patient mornings of practice that we hear echoing from the Song School as we make our way to Morning Prayer.

And yet, and yet. In and through it all, we draw near to the God who made us and redeemed us in Christ. Some Christians are fortunate, we know, to find God everywhere and know that Jesus is at hand, without any elaboration. And sometimes I can happily endorse it, like the candidate in Hereford who one day in the shower was stunned to hear God say, 'Wayne, I want you to be a vicar!' and, with my support among others, he now is. But for those of us more prone to doubt ourselves, it is through the wonderful beauty created here that we find our confidence renewed. And it is not always in the obvious places, uplifting as it is to hear 'endless morn of light.' It is there too in the friendly glance across the choir, or the whimsical habits of the vergers, or the astonishment of visitors who have never heard anything like this, only increased when they hear we do this, more or less, every day.

Because, dear valedicting choristers, and all you musicians, and all you here, in our praises offered here we are of course one, with the bright Seraphim in burning row, and the Cherubic host in thousand quires, and King David whose psalms we sing still, and all the saints and martyrs with victorious palms who received the Son of God with love and followed him to victory over death. May his praises resound in melodious noise under these vaults until he return to unite us all, living and departed, in the music of heaven.