

Music In Worship

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Preacher: Harry Robinson

[0 : 00] more aware of your loving presence in our midst, and more aware of what the life of faith calls us to in our circumstance. We ask this in the Lord Jesus' name. Amen.

Can I ask you to turn now in the letter, sorry, the book of the prophet Jeremiah, the ninth chapter and the 23rd verse.

And this you will find in your church Bibles on page 673. May I read the verse for you?

These things I delight, says the Lord.

And it's a very powerful and pivotal verse in the whole of the Old Testament. And it's certainly a reminder to us as we come together this morning that those of you who are wise men are not to glory in your wisdom.

[1 : 43] And those of you who are mighty men are not to glory in your might. And those of you who are rich men are not to glory in your riches.

But if you want to glory, and I say that you should want to glory by being here, then you should glory in this, that you know and understand the Lord, that he is the Lord who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth.

For in these things I delight, says the Lord. Now not too long ago I wrote a letter in which I said that I felt that one of the things that shouldn't happen at a morning service is that people should be bored. And I was assured soon afterwards that though that might be my desire, we were far from achieving it. And it really is important, I think, when we come together, as we do this morning, to come together in the matter of knowing God in our midst.

I feel pertinent. I feel personally paranoid about the fact that it's considered to be a direct challenge to this church, that if we're going to have people here on Sunday morning, we have to compete with all the recreational facilities of a recreationally minded province, which has the blue sky, the Pacific Ocean, the Rocky Mountains, and all the other things readily in our doorstep, in which we might well see fit to glory.

[3 : 23] But I long for and desire that the experience of coming here to glory in the Lord is an experience which would far surpass anything else that this province can offer.

But how can we as a congregation be made aware of the presence of God in our midst? And this is the thing that we must do.

Now, my background and training is that the thing that people have to do above all is to confront God in the Word of God.

And that that is in the scriptures, in the psalms, in the collect, epistle, and gospel, in the sermon, that we should confront God in His Word. Now, the difficulty for me, and what's a brand new experience for me, is that that word is set to music.

And there is an extremely competent choir here that can put most of the words of our worship to music. And as you will see from the bulletin this morning, the setting for the communion service is one which is designed for you to passively participate in.

[4 : 40] That is, you're not to stand up and bellow at the top of your voice simply because you haven't been trained to sing the music that is the setting for the service this morning.

So I've asked Mr. Carter if he will take that microphone over there and let me ask him some questions about where music fits into the worship, where music enhances for us the whole business of worship so that we can understand what we are meant to be doing and how we are meant to be participating.

And you will know that Mr. Carter and I have, you know, we've contrived this. He didn't just find out about it this minute, as you can see. So, and we have long discussions because Mr. Carter is our choir master and organist, is an extremely competent musician.

And one of the real tests of his competence is whether or not he can teach me anything in my almost total incompetence. And he's been doing a good job so far. But I thought that if we let you in on the kinds of discussions we're having, then you would be aware of what we are trying to do in putting together a service in which the wise man, the mighty man, and the rich man might forget their wisdom, their might, and their riches, and they might learn their glory in the Lord.

So, Mr. Carter, these questions. Why do we have a service in which the congregation cannot take part in all the music?

[6 : 29] I think there's a historical... Is that coming through clearly? I think there's a historical background to this. In the very early time of the Church, the people took almost no part at all, and consequently a series of composers throughout the ages have contributed their skills to beautifying the words in such a way that a lot of people listening can say this, if I could do it, would be my contribution musically.

I don't think there's any question that music is part of our worship. It goes right back to the Psalms, they sing unto the Lord a new song. And so, consequently, this grew up with the people taking so little part.

Later on, I think, as the skills became more obvious to people themselves, they began also to take part. And so you get in the early prayer book the setting of the Eucharist being set to music by John Marbeck, which we also sing here.

But at the same time, along a different path entirely, went the composing of music by composers over the last 400 years or so, which has, I think, enriched the music, enriched the liturgy to such an extent that it would be rather a pity if in some way we lost it all.

And that is, I think, what we're trying to do here is at some point, rather, during the course of our weeks to still keep going the enrichment of this music, even at other times where we almost entirely say the service.

[8 : 01] Is that the right answer to that? It's the right answer because it comes from you, and I don't know that I or anyone else can argue with you about that.

This question, is there a danger of the choir becoming performers and the congregation becoming an audience? I think there's a great danger, yes. I think that anything that goes on in the church in which one or two people or one or more people are involved by themselves without other people can be said to become a performance.

You might say even that the person who reads the announcements could become a performer, or the person who walks up the centre taking the collection could become a performer from that point to that point. The sermon could be a performance.

And so very easily, so very easily, the choir can also be a performance. But I think it's a great danger which we just try to avoid. That is why my choice of music is such that if I may give an illustration of the setting of the Eucharist we're having this morning by Harris, this was written by Dr. Harris who was organist of St. George's Windsor, and it was written as a simple service for simple choirs to be able to sing either in cathedrals or in parish churches.

And the words, I think the music doesn't kinder the words. In other words, you're not drawn attention all the time to the beauty of music. I think at the other end of that stream you might take a mass by Mozart in which Mozart gets together with symphony orchestra and choir and soloists and you get something approaching what might be a performance.

[9 : 35] but who am I to say that when Mozart composed that he didn't have the glory of God in his mind to say that I will with what the skills at my disposal and musicians at my disposal perform a setting of this mass or sing a setting of this mass which will be the glory of God and I for one wouldn't like to question this but to me, to me listening to this, I'm more happy singing this over this morning than I would be singing the Mozart man.

Thank you. This question then, and I know that last year when we went to have a vestry meeting somebody told me that the symphony concert was on that night so we couldn't have one which suggested to me that a lot of people here go to the symphony.

How do we learn passive participation in a service of worship and is it different from going to a symphony and when I say passive participation what I mean is people are listening to the choir rather than taking part themselves.

I think there's a slight difference here. I think it's difficult perhaps for some people not to be doing something all the time as part of a service.

If you go to a symphony you certainly don't worship Brahms do you or Beethoven you're just going for pure enjoyment of the music and I would think that coming to church if you're listening to the words of the liturgy they could very well become a part of your worship even though you are not actively participating.

[11 : 18] I wonder whether any of you have ever at any point on holiday particularly going to a church that's open or a cathedral that's open in England or somewhere like that where you get a glorious building and you can just sit there for ten minutes maybe even longer and just do absolutely nothing and then at the very end of that nothingness you walk out of the church and you think well in some way I've communicated with something in some strange way which I can't understand.

I've experienced that whether you have or not but that's that's what I call passive participation in something. Something happens and I can't explain what happens and surely that could be the same in our ordinary service where maybe you hear a lovely sitting or a lovely anthem or something or other and in some way this communicates the words.

To me for example the passion when it's set to the music of Bach in St. Matthew or St. John to me paints those words in much more vivid way than anyone could do by saying them.

But on the other hand the people who are listening can't perform because it takes a lot of skill and a lot of rehearsal to get that thing going off the ground. I think Mr. Carter has emphasized in conversation with me this experience of quiet meditation while a choir is singing which is something that I think some people have acquired that skill and some people have not acquired that skill and you know it's something that we need probably to prepare our hearts for in coming to worship at any time that we have that time for quiet passive participation in worship that kind of be still and know that I am God.

The next question would you think that Duke Ellington might have come here to St. John's to lead a service of worship? Very much so yes.

[13 : 27] Are you going to stop there? No, no not one of my greatest thrills was to see in one of the local papers a review when Duke Ellington died on the on the entertainment page there was a review of his life and work and on the same page was also a review of a concert which I had given the previous night.

So Duke Ellington yes, I think that Duke Ellington was a great man a great musician a great jazz musician and I've been a devotee of him all my life and I think he was also a very fine Christian and in his jazz he was able to portray his feelings for the love of God which very few of us perhaps can portray ourselves.

I would think that if he came here with his band of course it's not possible now but if he came here with his band and we had a service with him provided that he had a service from beginning to end in other words the atmosphere was the same from beginning to end the answer would be yes but I wouldn't like him suddenly to appear halfway to the service and perform one of his anthems because I think that would be out of context.

So I think the answer to that is that there are different kinds of worship which you can have but something I think if it is interrupted in some way by something entirely different then I think there's something goes on which is a block would be a block to me.

But if it started off at the beginning in one way and went right the way through in that same context the answer I think would be yes. Well then can I just go on from there and ask this question that would you say that in the many years that you have been at St. John's we have established a fixed musical tradition and if so how would you identify it?

[15 : 20] I wouldn't like anything to be absolutely fixed I think we're going to see changes of all types. I think the music that we sing is indicative of the different types that we can have.

I would say that whatever we do ought to be the best that we can offer whether it be in the new liturgies or the old liturgies I would hate to see if we are going to change and do different things as we will certainly be doing I would hate to see that the old traditions are completely discarded therefore if you see our program you'll see that we have set out this with a view to preserving what we have done this morning what we've established but also at the same time I think at the end of this month we are going to produce a musical setting of a more contemporary liturgy and this I think should be our goal to try to preserve the good things that we have started but not to turn our eyes from some of the more contemporary ways which can also be perhaps done in the same kind of devoted way that we've done the other one last question and

Mr. Carter may be uniquely qualified to answer this question because he tells me that he played the organ at the consecration of Bishop Pike is that right I must just quantify that we are talking about Bishop Pike from Ireland are we no you're talking about Bishop Pike from California from North America I'm sorry there are two Bishop Pikes one from California and the other one from Ireland I'm talking about California I didn't know all right then you don't have the special qualifications Bishop Pike was a very interesting person who challenged a whole lot of the basic beliefs of the church not as a layman but as a bishop of the church and one of the statements he made was that I can sing the creed but I can't say it and the implication being that as part of an offering of worship he could participate in it but in the cold light of day he couldn't simply say the creed as a statement of his faith now do you think that music sometimes allows people for whom the words have no meaning to take part in the musical aspects of a service let me just talk about the word saying you mentioned the word saying in our prayer book it often says shall be said this by tradition has always been not said in the normal monotone of your speaking voice but on a distinctive note that is to say you pick a certain note that's equal to your pitch and therefore you get a note that's possibly suitable to everyone and you sing it on that note and this in the old prayer book was what was meant by the word saying in the old prayer book when it says the word singing it means that the words are sung to a complicated setting not necessarily complicated but a setting which we're singing this morning this would be singing the service and saying the service or saying a prayer would be on a particular note the reason for this is that in the very large buildings where the service was being said you know very well the way the voice drops at the end of sentences the syllables drop you lose half the words and I think what he meant by that was when you sing it you have to produce all the ends of the words on the same note and therefore you have to be more conscious of the words and you don't lose the ends of the ends of the syllables hopefully that's what he meant by that now I'm suggesting to you that that's not what he meant by that that what in fact he meant was that intellectually he couldn't handle the creed he didn't believe it but he could nevertheless sing it in a service of worship so he couldn't believe it in the sort of core reality of his daily life he didn't know that we need the words say did he and I think that that's the essential problem yes would you I think that this comes with the new liturgy too I must say that when I first heard the words and this wasn't this was the mission the abbey admission when the monks who the presenter said the lord be with you and the monks replied and also with you that hit me right between the eyes those words I felt like saying well the same to you mate you know it seems that somehow I suppose you get so instilled with the old traditions that you find it difficult I find it less objectionable singing and also with you than I do with saying it and that also applies to other of the more contemporary wordings which one finds so maybe that's what you mean by that is that right well I think you're still evading me Mr. nevertheless I will I think stop at this point by reason of that that we've taken up all the time there is and let me just conclude with just this note that what what I desire for our worship as a congregation is that we should confront with all our aesthetic instincts and all our rational qualities and intellectual capabilities the word of God written in other words that at the heart of a service of worship is an encounter with the living God through his word and that music must of necessity serve the highest interests of that encounter and that the choir and the organ and the whole architectural setting of the church and the arrangement of the flowers and the arrangement of people in relationship to one another that the whole setting should enhance that encounter and that that encounter has got to be one which takes place not just for the sophisticated and long standing members of the church but for the man who's just here this morning for the first time and encountering this worship for the first time that he must have an experience which is the fulfillment of that longing which is so beautifully expressed in

[22 : 33] Psalm 42 and let me read it for you and say that it's my desire that all that there is to St. John's Church and all that there is to a service of worship on Sunday morning should in some measure come to fulfill that purpose or that longing which is magnificently expressed in Psalm 42 when it says as a heart longs for flowing streams so longs my soul for thee O God my soul thirsts for God for the living God when shall I come and behold the face of God and it's my longing that in all that happens here on a Sunday morning that that longing find expression and in some measure find fulfillment in our services of worship