

As I write this, we are within the Twelve Days of Christmas, our church is still beautifully decorated for Christmas, and the nativity scene has pride of place in the back of the Church. In the magnificent Baroque Neapolitan set we used this year, there are several angels, in extravagantly beautiful costumes. They have large feathery wings and unlike some heavily rouged and feminine-looking department store angels, they are active and masculine. But the most obvious thing about angels from the Gospel of Luke is missing. And what is the most obvious thing about the Christmas angels? They sing! Their song, *Gloria in excelsis Deo*, is the first Christian hymn and one which is still the most commonly sung in the Christian world. Now the angels are there because God has sent them, it is true, but we almost have the feeling in reading Luke that they have taken up this song because they cannot help it. They are watching the birth of God into the world as a human being, they know what it means, and they simply cannot help singing. St Augustine famously said that he who sings worships twice, and certainly we know that to be true. The normal form of Mass throughout the Universal Church is High Mass or what is known in the East as the Divine Liturgy. Low Mass is simply a concession to the fact that daily masses celebrated outside religious communities cannot normally be sung easily, if at all. All the traditional ceremonial surrounding Low Mass makes it plain that it is High Mass with the parts we cannot quite manage removed. High Mass is not Low Mass with extra bits, but the other way round, Low Mass is High Mass as much as we can manage without a singing community. The essence of worship is singing, and this comes from the heart of God's creation itself. The ancients thought there was such a thing as the music of the spheres, that the planets made music as they spun through space. After the so-called Enlightenment and until recently, this was thought ridiculous, but last year, an experiment by physicists divided the orbital periods of the planets in half again and again until they were literally audible. The resultant piece was "Carmen of the Spheres". The principle of octaves in music is that whenever a sound-wave is doubled or halved in frequency, it yields another pitch similar in 'flavour' to the original one. This can be applied (through very large octave shifts) to any periodic cycle, including the orbits of celestial bodies. So perhaps it wasn't such a silly concept after all.

There is music at the very heart of Creation, and the Bible makes it plain that music is at the very heart of worship, and therefore at the heart of God. There is no preaching in heaven, it isn't needed. There is no edifying reading in heaven, it isn't needed. There is no social work in heaven, it isn't needed. There is no pastoral care in heaven, it isn't needed. There isn't even any Bible reading in heaven, and certainly there is no German Higher Criticism in heaven, they aren't needed. The only thing that we know about Heaven for certain is that it is the presence of God and that he is worshipped by all there, and that that worship is cast in song. In the Bible, music is seen as a means of worship, a means of expressing joy, thanksgiving, penitence, prayer, teaching and spiritual communication. There is absolutely no question of its paramount importance in the life of the Christian either in this world or, especially, in the next. In the Prado, in Madrid, there is an immense and fantastic triptych by Hieronymous Bosch, which shows in its three parts the three parts of the Church, Heaven, Purgatory and Hell. Heaven is shown in customary terms: God the Father is suggested, the Son is shown, and the Holy Spirit is in the shape of a dove. Angels and Saints praise God, and the angels are shown playing lovely and shiny musical instruments, both brass and strings. In purgatory, there is no

music visible, only souls being purged and prepared for God. Their mind is on penitence and preparation. In the Hell panel, music returns, but this time it is Music Hell. Wild and crazed looking demons play terrible instruments, squeeze bladders with reeds attached, bang on loud looking drums, scream at the top of their lungs with ugly expressions, and everywhere souls of the damned are trying desperately to stop their ears, but cannot. For Bosch, beautiful music praises God and is the inevitable accompaniment to Heaven, but Hell consists of the absence of God and the constant terror of dissonant and horrible music.

If we reflect on the fact that angels, in their worship and in their underlining of the Divine to the world, are a kind of paradigm for Christians in the world, then the musical vocation of angels also comes into play. To-day, perhaps more than ever, one of the most important practical aspects of our vocation is to use music properly in worship. The best possible music we can have in our churches is an extremely important priority. Music often expresses what the spoken word cannot, and speaks for the soul when it cannot speak for itself. Conversely, ugly music is destructive, it contradicts God's presence in the world, and if we aren't careful, music can suggest Hell more often than Heaven. I've been very lucky in all three parishes I have been in to have a full professional music programme with very talented musicians and the great music of the Western Catholic tradition every week. But that isn't necessary or even possible for most churches. What is necessary, and I believe passionately that it is possible, is for us to see to it that the music we have is the best music we can possibly offer, and that it speaks of God within the traditions of the best culture we have achieved. Sad to say, most modern Christian music, "praise music", "Christian rock" and other excuses for church music simply will not do. Stupid lyrics and repetitive simple melodies do not elevate the soul. Great hymns teach by their poetry, and their musical settings serve the texts and lift the heart. It is the same with great choral music, whether it is the Church's own music – plainsong, Mozart or Victorian hymns. It is the priest's absolute responsibility and should be the care and enthusiasm of all parishioners to ensure that music offered is suitable, that it is edifying and uplifting and that it speaks of God rather than being enmeshed in our own modern popular culture. The musicians may have the technical expertise and artistic inspiration, but it is the priest and the people of God in a place who co-operate to make certain that their talents are harnessed to serve God and His Church. The angels taught us that on the first Christmas at Bethlehem.

Every year in this Church, we present a "Mediaeval Mass". During this Mass, electric lights are not used, there are no metrical hymns, no English, and no spoken words. What is offered to God is what would have been offered in the 14<sup>th</sup> or 15<sup>th</sup> centuries: one of the very early polyphonic Mass settings, the Latin Mass, and the Holy Sacrifice itself. The Church is normally quite full for this exercise, and we do everything we can to make it plain that this is not a re-enactment or a stunt, but a real Mass, and a real way to enter into a different kind of worship. It all works surprisingly well. But one of the things I take away from it every year is how important it is for those of us in the pews and in the sanctuary who are not musical professionals to raise our voices in song. Active participation in a Mass is not necessary, and the mediaeval Christian would have thought such an idea very odd indeed. It isn't necessary, *but it is wonderful!* And the way that

the Western Christian tradition has done this for the last several hundred years is with the voices of the faithful joining in with the organ. From the primitive mediaeval examples to the baroque organ which Bach would have known, to the fabulous French organs by Cavallé-Coll, and the English organs by Father Willis, to the more humble organ of the parish church, this instrument has become uniquely suited to worship. Why should this be so? For me, it is because it is a breathing instrument, almost like a human being. As we think of bells speaking out, and even give them names in their consecration ceremonies, so the organ is very like the Christian himself singing: it breathes and speaks. It is far easier for us to join in song with the organ than with brass or stringed instruments because it makes sound in much the same way as we do. We do not sing or make music by being struck or plucked or by vibrating. We make music by sending air through our lungs and through our vocal chords, in much the same way an organ does. One of the most poignant moments for me as our new organ was installed was the first moment I heard air rushing into it – it was alive!

I have been extremely fortunate in my ordained ministry since 1986 to serve in three famous and venerable churches of the Catholic Revival in the Episcopal Church. In each, a professional choir offered a full mass setting every week, along with organ voluntaries, good hymnody and regular organ and choral concerts. In each church also, the congregation valued music and its place in the Sacred Liturgy and in their spiritual lives. At the Church of St Mary the Virgin in Times Square, I was spoiled by the 1932 Aeolian-Skinner organ and the excellent playing of first McNeil Robinson and then Quentin Lane. At S. Clement's, Philadelphia, which I served first as curate (1988-1992) and then as Rector (1992-2001), we had a marvellous 1914 Austin organ, which was completely renovated in my time and made glorious again. There I was treated to the consummate musicianship of Peter Richard Conte, whom I was lucky enough to inherit when I took over, and was zealous to keep. When I came to this church ten years ago, we had a very obviously promising new talent in David Enlow, who had already studied at the Royal Conservatory in Toronto, at the Curtis Institute, and latterly at Juilliard. The only trouble was that we had a broken down and heavily damaged organ, which then gave out entirely less than a year after my arrival.

It would have been possible, I suppose, to content ourselves with an electronic organ, and indeed we had an excellent (in its way) Ahlborn-Galanti which got us through several years. Many people, having heard David play it so well, wondered aloud why we needed a very expensive pipe organ. To me, the argument was very plain. If we were going to have professional musicians here offering the best music possible, a real organ was absolutely necessary. There would otherwise have been no point in having an excellent organist or talented professional singers. If we are going to simulate an organ with digitally sampled recorded sounds through speakers, why not just do the same with singers? Indeed, why not just have all the music digitally played on CD's and played over the speakers? The whole repertory would then have been available to us, and nearly \$100,000 a year would be saved. We would simply then need a technician to cue up the recordings.

When we put it this way, we realise how ridiculous a suggestion it is. Such an approach means that no one is offering music to the glory of God, but simply playing back music that was recorded long ago by musicians for secular purposes in a secular setting. This slouchy, back-door approach would lead to further thoughts: why bother to prepare sermons weekly when I could play recorded ones by better preachers than I? And for the laity, why bother to attend church at all, when we could play back a DVD of a Mass offered earlier in some splendid Cathedral or Church?

No. The Christian community gathers weekly, all over the world, to plead the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass – in person. We do so with the best we can offer – and we offer, actively, what we ourselves can bring to worship. This means the best we can make our church look with paint and adornment and flowers; it means the best vestments we can have for God's liturgy; it means the best of traditional Catholic worship; it means the best singing and music we can offer; and it means a church musician playing a real instrument that lives and breathes and sings to God just as we do. I do not intend to disparage the electronic organ – if that is the best a worshipping community can do, then it is a godsend and should be the goal they aim for. I simply felt and believed that we could do better. The musical tradition of this parish is of long-standing. In the 1950s that meant a congregation which was astonishingly educated in the singing of congregational Plainsong and a very large choral society which offered sacred music regularly in sacred concerts. To-day our musical tradition is different, and a fully professional choir offers the best of the Western Catholic liturgical repertory (and occasionally pieces outside it such as, recently, Gretchaninoff and the *Missa Luba*), and the congregation join in the plainsong settings of the minor propers and boisterously sing great hymns of the Anglican and Roman Catholic traditions.

Music is only one part of our tradition here and our common life. But it is an important part, and we mean to have the best. The organ we have installed, the organist who plays it, visiting recitalists, our professional choir, and our people raising their own voices – all combine to worship God in this place. For what else are we here?