

## **SERMON FOR THE 'BIG SING' – February 15<sup>th</sup> 2009**

**For a Church that likes to sing – and which sings a very wide range of music in the course of an average year - today's 'Big Sing' at St Martin's, with music sung almost exclusively by the augmented Choir, might seem like an aberration. Indeed William Booth, founder of the Salvation Army, made it very clear what he thought: *Merely professional music is always a curse and should you ever find a Choir in connection with any hall or mission of mine, I give you my authority to take a stiff besom and sweep it out!***

**And there is no doubt that while there are some Anglicans who really do like being 'sung to', the majority really do enjoy taking their own part in the song of the people – hymns and chants designed for us all sing as best we can. Giving us something more on a Sunday morning than just another selection from our 100 favourite hymns has been one of my joys over the last fifteen years and of course it has been the principal task of the liturgical movement for the last fifty years as Calvin reminded me last week-end when I asked if he would step in and preside today!**

**Now that tension – between allowing Choirs plenty of air time, and congregational singing - has been around as long as the Church itself. What has never been in doubt is the value of music. General Booth again: *Music is to the soul what wind is to sailing ship, the energy that blows her onwards in the direction in which she is steered, every note and every harmony a divine gift.***

**What the good general was in favour of, however, was not just any music, but the kind of music that could be sung out in streets. He wrote: *Let's have a real tune, the kind of thing one can take hold of, which people will want to learn, which goes on humming in the mind. That is the sort of tune to help you; it will preach to you and bring you believers and converts.* Booth's music was 'Onward Christian soldiers' 'O Jesus I have promised' and even 'Jerusalem', where you can't hear the words without the music streaming into your mind at the same time: music with emotional oomph to it.**

**But is that the only way that music can work in our churches – through our minds responding directly to familiar words and music?**

**In Christian art, right across the board – from painting and architecture right through to the way we read the Bible, there has always been the encouragement for us to stop ‘doing’ for a while and to just ‘be’ – not to have all the answers, or even all of the questions, but to allow ourselves some space to simply ‘soar free’ of the immediate trials and tribulations of life and to break out of the straightforward and the obvious. FW Joyce, writing about music of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, talked about an art form which would help us to *shadow that heavenly calm which exists beyond the fever and fret of human life.***

**It is the reason why some of us like to go to concerts or plays or even a good film – not to remember every word, every note or every image – but to relax into a sea of sounds, words and pictures which allow us make new connections and think new thoughts. We allow the words, the music, the selection of shapes and colours to flow over us and in that space we are transported into a different place and, hopefully, come out refreshed.**

**And that has been the justification for choral music of the type we are hearing this morning. In this setting, with the candles the vestments, the other-wordly nature of worship itself, we are invited to go beyond the purely practical into wonder and into those universal truths which can only be done with symbols and experiences rather than facts and figures. This is about poetry not argument, about touching things in the soul rather than sharing instant, rational ideas. In this music too there is something of our past because the disciplines of choral music take us back to what our forebears were also trying to do in their churches, hundreds of years ago**

**But, and it is a big but, a lot of choral music in the Church is very second rate. Very few writers of choral music have been heard of outside our churches and it is interesting to note that John Stainer – who wrote the famous piece, Crucifixion – regretted writing it after it was finished. So for those of you who don’t always like what we choose, I have real sympathy!**

**Sadly a lot of church music just doesn't hold up anywhere else which is why we have to choose very carefully what we put into our services. But at its best, church music does for us what it says on the tin. As we will sing in our Offertory Hymn: *How often, making music, we have found a new dimension in the world of sound, as worship moved us to a more profound Alleluia!***

**And that, I think, what the first reading is pointing to when it begins, *Hear how wisdom calls and understanding lifts her voice.* In just nine words we have the key to worship: God calls and we are invited to respond.**

**And God calls in so many different ways. Sometimes in plain descriptions and sometimes in phrases and words which seem impenetrable at first, second or even third hearing. Look at the first line of the Gospel in this unfamiliar translation: *In the beginning the Word already was. The Word was in God's presence, and what God was, the Word was.***

**Reading the parallel from Proverbs helps a bit: *The Lord created me the first of all his works... when he set the heavens in place I was there. I was at his side each day, his darling and his delight, playing in his presence...* But this is not easy stuff and it's only in the far distance that we begin to get a feeling, sometimes not much more, of what is meant by the word Trinity – the independent 'Word' which is also absolutely and inextricably God.**

**But such abstractions are too much for us for most of the time and so we retreat back into another level. And in those times it is liturgical music that fills the gap. We can sing what fixed spoken words often can't achieve. As St Augustine said, those who sing, pray twice. Somehow, singing releases us from having to understand absolutely everything we are saying – which, as Christians, we know is beyond us. So often, it is only the regular repeating of familiar words in our liturgy, carried along by music, that these deeper, harder, ideas begin to make sense. Often it is only in music - and in the other symbols of our worship – that we begin to see what our faith means to us.**

**Surely, on this Valentine's Day week-end, we have all the evidence we need of the how words fails us. It is symbols – flowers, hearts, and indeed music - that convey our feelings of love so much more than the text of any mushy greetings card ever could.**

**So is it all just about emotion? I couldn't resist sharing with you a bit of something written by the famous composer Richard Wagner to a friend in Zurich in 1849 - which came out of a book of letters given to me as a school prize. I hope the women here will forgive me for repeating what Wagner wrote: *My music has always met with a warm response from the hearts of women, probably owing to the fact that women still find great difficulty in toughening their souls as completely as our politically minded male society has done. Women, indeed, are the music of life; they absorb everything more openly and unconditionally, in order to embellish it by means of their sympathy...***

**Putting aside Wagner's very weird outlook on men and women (the letter is 150 years old after all), what he is trying to say is actually quite simple: that music will only 'work' if we suspend our suspicions and allow the time we spend listening to really hear new thoughts. As we wrestle with the things of the heart, thoughts that are deeper than the deepest lake, God has given us the gift of music to transport us out of our tiny, nit-picky, trivial worlds so that we can begin to have the space to enter into his thoughts and feelings.**

***God calls, but he seeks our response. His wisdom seeks our understanding.***

**So today we give thanks for all the music of our Churches (and those who have come a distance to come and sing with us occasionally!); for all the hymns we like as well as the more complicated stuff we have sung today; for our Choir and all our faithful organists over the years - and for all who write decent music for us to include in our services.**

**And we thank God most of all that within music we have the space to *hear wisdom's call* and to find ways of responding with understanding. Let's thank God for all the good music we have in our Church.**