

Thoughts on the place of music in our worship.

Now that we have the pleasure/privilege of having an anthem by the choir at the time of Communion, it is worthwhile giving thought to the question of choral contributions to our worship, especially as we are so fortunate in having such a splendid choral tradition in our parish church. Timothy Radcliffe, the well-known Dominican, wrote of 'making beauty speak' in worship. 'We have to find an aesthetic which makes beauty speak today,' he wrote. 'Beauty is not the icing on the liturgical cake; it is the essence'. Music is one way by which our worship is enhanced.

This was emphasised by a sermon which I recently read. 'When the $\lambda\omicron\gamma\omicron\varsigma$ of God is communicated by the imperfect medium of human language, the essential mystery must remain unutterable and uninterpretable. Silence and music can help bridge the gap between humanity and divinity. Sacred music makes the $\lambda\omicron\gamma\omicron\varsigma$ accessible to the congregation and leads them onwards to "lift up their hearts".'

Early in the liturgy the Kyrie – 'Lord, have mercy' – reflects the fact that we are in need of divine mercy and are confident our prayers will be heard. When we recite these words there is little or no time for contemplation of the mystery. But a singing of the Kyrie brings the text into sharp relief and gives time and space to absorb its meaning. Contributions by the choir in singing such as the Gloria are not concert performances but are offered in the service of the liturgy. In other words the musical contribution to the liturgy is incarnational, giving us a better understanding of the call to bring something to the liturgy. It is a question of liturgical togetherness – choir and congregation together - the latter not just passive 'listeners'.

Over the years there has grown up a better understanding by congregations of the call to bring something to the liturgy by their outward and visible participation but this doing, saying, singing is not the totality of worship. The sitting in silence absorbing the offering of the choir can also be part of the worship.

A German liturgist, Philip Harmoncourt, wrote, 'The choir is not standing before a community which is listening like an audience that lets itself be sung to but the choir is itself part of the community and sings for it in the sense of legitimately representing it.' The choir should not be seen as merely there to support or lead the congregation. Of course in any parish church there must be that provision for all to raise their voices in praise but at the same time there is a place for that choral contribution which causes us to 'lift up our hearts'.

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