

Evensong

Trinity 17

4 October 2020

It is a great joy to have Evensong back. Like a long lost friend, the singing of the chants, in versicle, response and psalm, the creative marriage of words and music in the singing of the canticles, the engagement with the scriptures, even the stumbling attempts to express something of that in a sermon, is a restoration of an ancient rhythm that we all *need*; it is part of who we are, not only as worshippers, but also as human beings. This collective sharing of ritual and contemplation is what makes us identifiably who we are. It reaches back into the origins of human creativity, and therefore welcoming it back is an entirely natural and reassuring thing to do.

But in reaching back into the past, we need to be emphatic about what evensong *isn't*. It isn't an exercise in liturgical nostalgia, or just a habit. We don't do this because we've always done it, we do it because it means something. At the heart of every evening office, well the office that Thomas Cranmer bequeathed to the Church of England, are two of the three gospel canticles that are recited daily in the Church's worship. The Magnificat, the song of Mary, and the Nunc Dimittis, the song of Simeon. What strikes you about these two ancient hymns is not their familiarity, their reassuring nature, although that is an important characteristic of evensong generally, but their essentially *radical* nature. For at the heart of evensong is not the comfort blanket that keeps the slings and arrows from entering our safe haven, but a call to express what it means to be called by God in Jesus, which is nothing less than a radical re-orientation of what it means to be human.

The Magnificat, for instance, is a joyous outpouring of the response of Mary to God's call, a call that is not, it has to be remembered, without risk. Being called to bear God's son might well be the cause of celebratory carols at Christmas, but at the time it risked all sorts of dire consequences. It is also a call to Christian action, He hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He hath raised the humble and meek. That is certainly so. And, in uttering these words, or having them sung to us, we are caught up in their implications. God wants the humble to raised; the proud will be scattered, as indeed we will if we show similar tendencies. To have the Magnificat sung or said daily is a reminder, *in worship*, that we have obligations as a church, as the body of Christ to become more Christ-like in the world, to evoke God's kingdom in the way in which we live our lives.

And Simeon's song? Well, in a very real sense it is acceptance, acceptance of who we are and what we are doing. And, for the most, this is fine; God loves us for who we are. But it also goes a bit deeper than that for it gives utterance to an

undeniable dependability we have on God himself, and *his* intention, sometimes, to show us something radically new in the heart of the familiar. Here is Simeon, the great servant of the temple, having his regular and familiar routine utterly shattered by the sight of Mary and child. Mine eyes have seen thy salvation! Not in the tried and trusted, but in the radically new. It's as if the Canon Chancellor had a vision of the radically new during the second reading, or the dean himself having second thoughts as an angular rendition of the Mag and Nunc comes to an end. I believe in God, we say together after the Nunc dimittis, but what the song of Simeon prompts me to say is that I believe in *God*, and not my projection of who I think God is. A God of surprises, a disturbing God, a God who, when he does surprise us, can lift our spirits and make us joyously proclaim, ‘so that’s what it’s all about! My eyes *have* seen your salvation?’ God certainly wasn’t what Simeon expected him to be in the temple on that day, and neither should we.

So, familiarity, assurance, comfort, even consolation. All these things are characteristics of the evensong we know and love. But the inner core has a complementary message: of radical re-casting of what it is to be a child of God, a willingness to take leave of the comfortable and secure, and embark on God’s journey, for God’s sake. And show an acceptance and a joy in adopting the challenge. It is indeed good to have evensong back. For all these reasons.