A sermon for the Cathedral Eucharist at Wells Cathedral, preached on Sunday 10 May by the Right Reverend David Stancliffe, former Bishop of Salisbury.

Prayer and Music

The first in a series of sermons for the Year of Prayer at Wells Cathedral.

In the *Preface to his Psalms, Sonnets and Songs* of 1588, William Byrd gives some hints as to why singing together is so important.

Reasons briefly set down by th'auctor, to perswade everyone to learn to sing.

First it is a knowledge easily taught, and quickly learned where there

is a good master and an apt Scoller.

2 The exercise of singing is delightfull to Nature and good to preserve

the health of Man.

3 It doth strengthen all the parts of the brest, and doth open the pipes.

4 It is a singular good remedie for a stutting and stammering in the speech.

5 It is the best means to procure a perfect pronunciation and to make a good Orator.

6 It is the oneley way to know where Nature hath bestowed the benefit of a

good voice: which gift is so rare, as there is not one among a thousand

that hath it: and in many, that excellent gift is lost, because they want Art

to express Nature.

7 There is not any Musicke of Instruments whatsoever, comparable to

that which is made of the voices of Men, where the voices are good,

and the same well sorted and ordered.

8 The better the voyce is, the meeter it is to honour and serve God therewith: and the voyce of man is chiefely to be imployed to that ende.

Omnis spiritus laudet Dominum.

Since singing is so good a thing

I wish all men would learn to sing.

Byrd's knowledge of what singing together does for people is built on the physicality of the experience. As you sing, you breathe deeply; you stretch your shoulders, open your lungs and begin to feel the benefits of more oxygen. He goes on to reflect on what it does for your stammering and enunciation and then moves to the relationship between art and nature. Lying behind these reflections is the unstated but assumed conviction that singing together reflects the order and harmony of the Creator's universe, that those who sing together enter in a particular and very physical way into reflecting the harmony of the divine nature, of the Holy Trinity; for Byrd, the culmination and goal of music-making is the praise of the Creator.

Such thinking is also central to Johann Sebastian Bach's life's work. It was not only at the end of explicitly liturgical or 'spiritual' works that he wrote '*Fine: Deo Soli Gloria*: 'to God alone be the glory', the Lutheran catch-phrase that's engraved round my episcopal ring. For Bach, all music was of divine origin, and to make music was to participate in the divine activity of shaping, ordering and redeeming the world from chaos, brutality and barbarism. Music was an art-form through which God's grace could be mediated, learnt and practised, and music-making was therefore not so much a gentlemanly pastime as a serious tool in shaping the human person for eternity: to take your part – whether as singer or player – in creating a large polyphonic web of finely interlaced though uniquely different lines was to share a foretaste of heaven, where the many, apparently diverse and even discordant, strands of life on earth are being resolved into harmony by being drawn up into the περιχωρησις (perichoresis) – the divine dance – the everchanging interpenetration – of the persons of the Holy Trinity.

But as a prelude to this divine harmony comes the inevitable tension involved in artistic creation in this world. For George Herbert, the central image in his poem *Easter*, set by Vaughan Williams as one of his Five Mystical Songs that we'll hear later, is of twisted gut stretched over resonant wood. Herbert compares this lute to Christ's body, stretched on the wood of the cross. This tension is necessary for there to be music: slack strings and a collapsing soundboard don't cut the mustard. And to this central Christological claim, Herbert adds a Trinitarian twist: without the third person of the Holy Trinity, the Spirit, there can be no harmony, only the bare fifths and unisons of stern monody or organum.

Rise heart; thy Lord is risen. Sing his praise
Without delayes,
Who takes thee by the hand, that thou likewise
With him mayest rise;
That as his death calcined thee to dust,
His life may make thee gold, and much more just.

Awake, my lute, and struggle for thy part
With all thy art.
The crosse taught all wood to resound his name,
Who bore the same.
His stretched sinews taught all strings, what key
Is best to celebrate this most high day.

Consort both heart and lute, and twist a song
Pleasant and long:
Or since all musick is but three parts vied
And multiplied;
O let thy blessed Spirit bear a part,
And make up our defects with his sweet art.

Those who sing together will tell you that this is indeed what happens to them. On a very physical level, you share a column of air with your neighbour; then, as your vocal cords begin to resonate in your voice-box, the sound is formed, shaped and projected. As you listen to the lines of the other parts around you, you tune your pitch and the shape of your phrases to theirs. When you sing from a score – as most of us do these days – we tend to read vertically, as if your melodic line was harmonised and you were checking it against a figured bass. But when you sing from part-books, as was the norm in vocal as well as instrumental music-making in the Mediaeval, Renaissance and Baroque periods, you have only a single line in front of you and are much more conscious of the way that your individual line is shaped; cherishing the shape of your own line, you have to listen hard to discern the shifting harmonies as they emerge from

the polyphony around you. This is partly why those who sing together – especially those who sing one-to-a-part or in small groups – learn to listen to each other so intently. It is also why singers become so passionate about what it does for them, and why choirs become so formative of people's ability to relate together, the foundation for which is not chatter, but listening.

Non vos relinquam orphanos: I will not leave you comfortless is the text from today's gospel, set in the Graduale as the antiphon for the Magnificat on the first Vespers of Pentecost, that is our Communion Proper this morning. And as Jesus prepares the disciples for his departure, he explains to them that this parting is necessary for the release of the Holy Spirit universally – that explosion of God's all-embracing presence everywhere and eternally that we will celebrate at Pentecost.

Why? Because as long as God's presence among us is localised and contained in one person at one time and in one place, the power of God's love cannot be enjoyed universally. So the promise that we will not be left like orphans, anticipates Jesus parting from his disciples in the Ascension, followed by the feast of Pentecost when we will celebrate again the gospel being heard by each person in their own native tongue.

Once, says the old story, the Babel of many conflicting voices signalled the destruction of the original simple, unity. But at Pentecost, the many voices are found to be not so much a sign of the destruction of unity, but a challenge to uniformity, to the enforced totalitarian unison that is so different to the pre-echoes of the divine harmony we experience as a foretaste of heaven when we sing together.

In an age when variety and difference are often felt as a threat, we must not let go of what singing – as well as the Gospel – has to teach us: imposed conformity is not only dulling, but dangerous whether in political or ecclesiastical systems of control.

That is why singing together is not just an optional extra, the icing on the cake: it is central to the church's prayer. In the celebration of the liturgy, where we rehearse daily being drawn into Christ's body and so shaped into his likeness as living stones, we are practising becoming what we are: persons made in the image and likeness of God, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the origin and goal of our life; to whom be honour and glory, now and to the ages of ages. Amen.

The Right Reverend David Stancliffe
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