

St Katharine Cree Church

86 Leadenhall Street, EC3A 3BP

Part of the joint benefice with St Olave, Hart Street, EC3R 7NB

Standing at the foot of the Cross....

A sequence of choral music and readings for Holy Week 2017

In this evening's Sequence, we stand alongside Mary, Jesus's mother, as she watches her cherished and unique son dying - very slowly, publicly and in cruel agony. We enter the Allied lines on the Western Front at the height of the Great War, in order to watch the walking wounded straggle back from an heroic, if pointless, encounter with the foe. We enter the trenches to retrieve a severely wounded and almost certainly dying Tommy. We lament the sad, universal truth that innocent men and women die every day, unable to prevent iniquity, unprotesting of the injustice - and nobody gives a damn. We join with the Psalmist in begging God not to abandon us, but hear us as we promise to be penitent, accept chastisement, find joy in salvation and seek a space in which to reflect on our human condition even as the end of our earthly journey draws near. [see page 4 for the order of the Sequence]

The music

Along with her role in the virgin birth and early parenting of Jesus, Mary's appearance at the Crucifixion has spawned an industry of devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mother: in legend, in ritual, in art, literature and music. And the key driver of the torrent of choral versions of that one verse in John's Gospel - chapter 19, verse 26 - in which Mother Mary is pictured standing at or near the foot of the cross was the appearance sometime in the 13th Century of a lengthy Latin hymn, *Stabat mater dolorosa*, generally attributed to a Franciscan friar, **Jacopone da Todi**. The opening stanza - one of twenty tri-line verses - translates more or less as *The sorrowful mother was standing...* That one verse in John simply records the presence of Mary, omitting any reference to her state of mind or probable physical distress. Not so the author of *Stabat mater*. He goes for the full mediaeval equivalent of a three hanky Hollywood maternal weep fest in his description of Mary as she waits for the end, expressing the fervent hope that he, too, can join in the sorrow at Christ's torments, indeed can personally suffer in sympathy, be saved by the proximity to the Crucified and avoid the flames of hell in the day of judgement through the intercessions of the Holy Mother, the *Virgin of virgins*. **

Liechtenstein-born German composer, **Josef Gabriel Rheinberger** (1839-1901), is best known today for his organ music, although his output of other types of composition is in fact far greater, with much sacred choral music, including at least two distinctly different settings of the *Stabat mater*. Compared with most other settings - for instance, by Vivaldi, Pergolesi, Rossini, Dvorak, Verdi, Poulenc and Arvo Part, among the several hundred other known versions - Rheinberger's four movement cantata for four voices and no solos is a model of concision; only in the last movement does the composer allow himself the indulgence of multiple repeats of the same three lines, the music curiously declamatory given that the author of the text is asking politely for admission to *paradise* when he dies. Elsewhere, the setting unfolds in a linear fashion, for the most part homophonic and chorale-like. Lasting *in toto* for something under fifteen minutes, it is nevertheless wonderfully tuneful in a sub-operatic sort of

way, easy on the ear and voice: provoking the question as to why it is not better known or more often performed. Perhaps it is *too* tuneful, insufficiently ‘religious’; or simply too short and therefore not grand enough to attract the attention of choral societies, concert promoters and conductors anxious to programme really *significant* works!

The other ‘Latin’ item is an exquisite miniature motet by the late Renaissance Castilian composer and priest **Tomas Luis de Victoria** (c1548-1611). Along with Palestrina and Orlando di Lasso, Victoria was a key composer of sacred music for the Counter Reformation, a genre to which he devoted himself almost exclusively. Moving to Rome early in his career, he quickly established a reputation as an organist and choirmaster (*Maestro di Capella*), sought after as teacher and composer; a reputation that Victoria consolidated on his return to Spain in 1587. His output is considerable: principally motets and masses, including what some regard as his masterpiece, a Requiem Mass for one of his most influential patrons, the Dowager Empress Maria (sister of Philip II, famously the sometime husband of England’s Queen Mary) who died in 1603.

Ecce moritur quomodo iustus ** ‘Behold how the just man dies...’ is the twenty fourth of twenty seven reponsories to be sung in Holy Week: the sixth for Holy Saturday. The text is based on verses in *Isaiah* chapters 57 and 53, which Christian tradition has always interpreted as a central Messianic prophesy, clearly prefiguring the torture and death of Christ at Calvary. Unsurprisingly, the text has been set to music many times: by Palestrina, Jacob Handl, Marc-Antoine Charpentier, Liszt and Poulenc amongst others. Victoria’s treatment is quite spare and devoid of showy counterpoint: simple polyphony at the service of the text, which is itself a masterpiece of bald understatement. The edition we are using this evening is in *da capo* form, the *Responsorium* (which concludes with the line, ‘*His memory shall be in peace*’) being repeated after the *Versus*, which compares the ‘*just man*’ to a lamb, ‘*dumb before his shearer...*’ [** Translations of the complete Jacopone da Todi hymn and of *Ecce quomodo moritur iustus* are **attached**]

Two psalm settings bookend this evening’s Sequence. Verses from *Psalms 51* provide the text for **Samuel Sebastian Wesley’s** six voice (SSATTB) anthem, *Cast me not away from thy presence*; while verses from *Psalms 39* are the source of the inspiration for **Maurice Greene’s** SATB anthem, *Lord, let me know mine end*.

Wesley (1810-1876) was destined (doomed, some might say) to be a composer of church music. His father was Samuel Wesley; Grandfather, Charles Wesley; Great Uncle, John Wesley. The ultimate Church of England musician, S S Wesley sang in the Chapel Royal choir as a boy; and thereafter moved rapidly onto the cathedral organ stools of, successively, Hereford, Exeter, Winchester and Gloucester, not to mention Leeds Parish Church. On the way, he was appointed a Professor of Organ at the Royal Academy of Music. Church choirs of all shapes, sizes, sexes, denominations and competences in the last couple of centuries have relied heavily on Samuel Sebastian’s output of skilfully-crafted anthems, imaginative and enjoyable: *Lead me, Lord; Wash me thoroughly; Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace; In exitu Israel; Ascribe unto the Lord; Blessed be the God and Father*; and, of course, *Cast me not away*; while clergymen, choirs and congregations alike have had cause to bless the man who has provided hymn books with a cornucopia of strong, memorable and, above all, singable hymns. *Ancient and Modern New Standard* uses seven different SSW tunes; the new Methodist hymnal, *Singing the Faith*, five; *New English Hymnal* four; *Common Praise* five.

Cast me not away is typical of its composer's work: soundly based on a scriptural source, it is reflective and devotional, but not lachrymose – which it might well have been, given the penitential, pleading tone of the verses from Psalm 51:

*Cast me not away from Thy presence, and take not Thy Holy Spirit from me;
Restore unto me the joy of Thy salvation, and uphold me with Thy Spirit.*

*The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and a contrite heart Thou wilt not despise, O God.
Make me to hear of joy and gladness, that the bones which Thou hast broken may rejoice.*

Wesley's setting of the words alternates fervour with lyricism, polyphony with passages where all parts sing with identical rhythm in a sort of quasi unison. For a relatively short piece, checking in at around five minutes, its mood and tempo swings can be quite disconcerting, if in the end enormously satisfying – for both listener and singer.

Maurice Greene (1696-1755) was more of an Establishment figure than S S Wesley could ever have been (or would have wanted to be. Wesley could be awkward cuss when it suited him). Surviving portraits of Greene invariably display him in formal academic dress. Chorister and subsequently Organist and Master of the Choristers at St Paul's Cathedral (a post he held from 1718 until his death), First Organist of the Chapel Royal; Professor of Music at Cambridge; Master of the King's Music for the two decades preceding his death. This largely honorific, but nevertheless coveted, post indicates the eclectic character of his compositional output: operas; keyboard music for both harpsichord and organ; and much church music, of course, including oratorios on Biblical themes and verse anthems which remain in the repertoire of cathedral and collegiate choirs. But more modest parish church outfits are eternally grateful for the bouncy simplicity of Greene's harvest anthem, *Thou visitest the earth and blessest it*. Budding treble soloists can show off their vocal range and agility sweetly duetting in *O praise the Lord, ye angels of his* – and then go on to star in the middle section* of this evening's offering:

*Lord, let me know mine end, and the number of my days:
That I may be certified how long I have to live.
Behold, thou hast made my days as it were a span long:
And mine age is ev'n as nothing in respect of Thee;
And verily ev'ry man living is altogether vanity.*

**For man walketh in a vain shadow, and disquieteth himself in vain;
He heapeth up riches and cannot tell who shall gather them.*

*And now, Lord, what is my hope? Truly my hope is ev'n in Thee.
Hear my prayer, O Lord, and with thine ears consider my calling.
Hold not Thy peace at my tears.*

O spare me a little, that I may recover my strength: before I go hence and be no more seen.

Greene's setting makes ingenious use of imitative melodic phrases, often employing 'pass the parcel' polyphony, one voice handing on the theme to another voice, which sings it in modified shape before surrendering the initiative to yet another voice to carry the theme forward in the same way. Greene picks and mixes from a whole box of compositional tricks: elements of fugue which almost become rounds; declamatory and some 'pleading' sections being written homophonically, before morphing back into the imitation game. A prosaic critic might dismiss the anthem as too clever by half. Singers in the last three centuries have revelled in the cleverness.

The readings

One sodden day in France in the depths of the First World War, two Tommies trudged past a hut on which hung a sardonic sign: 'Vicarage'. "Bill", said one, "here's the bloody Vicarage." The occupant emerged, a little dark untidy man with big eyes, a large mouth and jug-handle

ears. “Roight!” the man affirmed. “And here’s the bloody Vicar!” The soldiers had just met Captain the Revd Geoffrey Anketell Studdert Kennedy MC, the army padre and poet known to legend as *Woodbine Willie*.

From the very start of his service in France, at Christmas 1915, Studdert Kennedy earned his legend – and acquired that curious moniker – by the simple process of passing among troops at or on the way to the Front, doling out copies of the New Testament from one haversack and packets of the eponymous fags from another. The scriptures were standard issue for padres to distribute; Woodbine Willie almost certainly paid for the ciggies himself. Contemporary antipathy to smoking makes it difficult to understand these days just how important was the comfort and the relaxation and the companionship engendered by the humble cigarette for men minutes away from mass slaughter by machine gun, shell and mortar. Studdert Kennedy even wrote a poem eulogising the famous fag. What was it that kept men going, in the face of such terrors? Not the brilliance of the generals; nor the drilling of the NCOs; nor the trench catering; and certainly not the padre’s pieties. ‘*I know what keeps us smilin’. It’s the Woodbine Cigarettes...just a fag – and many Tanks.*’

And, true to his nickname, Woodbine Willie was not above smoking them himself: incessantly, particularly while he was writing – countless sermons, more than a dozen books, including one novel and several collections of poetry, the best known being *The Unutterable Beauty* and *Rough Rhymes of a Padre* – dialect poems imitative of the regional vocalities of enlisted men – verses laced with sardonic humour, proto Pam Ayres-like whimsy, biting, moving anti-war Christian rhetoric, and real poetic flare. It is his poetry that keeps his name and reputation alive today, and from which this evening’s readings have been drawn.

The War over, Studdert Kennedy was appointed Chief Missioner for the newly established Industrial Christian Fellowship (whose offices were at one time located in St Katharine Cree) He became, in effect a perpetual missioner, continually criss-crossing the country in answer to the unceasing calls on his oratorical gifts, his outsize personality, and his tortured, battle-tested Christianity. His blatantly populist poetry and wartime exploits, with and without the trademark cigarette – the MC was awarded for suicidal bravery, tending and retrieving wounded men, allied and foe alike, under heavy fire – had given him the status of what we nowadays call a ‘National Treasure’. In the end, what with his congenital asthma, a ‘flu epidemic, not to mention his beloved Woodie, it killed him: dead in 1929 aged 45.

To Stretcher-Bearers

S S Wesley ~ Cast me not away from Thy presence

Solomon in all his glory

Rheinberger ~ Stabat mater

Good Friday falls on Lady Day

Victoria ~ Ecce quomodo moritur iustus

Greene ~ Lord, let me know mine end

Faith

City Singers and the St Olave Singers

Directed by Philip Collin, Stephen Harrow and Ben Lewis-Smith

Tuesday 11 April 2017 at 5.30pm

Retiring collection to support the St Katharine Cree Restoration Fund ***sph / 09.04.17***

