



Saints – Cecilia

21 October 2018

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Song of Solomon 2: 10–13; 8: 6–7 Revelation 14: 1–3

Blessed Cecilia, appear in visions to all musicians, appear and inspire;
translated daughter, come down and startle, composing mortals with immortal fire.

Some verses from W.H. Auden's *Anthem for St Cecilia's Day*.

Cecilia is our saintly companion this evening. Her feast, almost exactly a month from now on 22 November, is a day when musicians herald her as their patron. She has long been the muse of poets and artists, and she is often cast as a romantic figure harping upon a harp or sensuously playing the pipe organ – I believe that is not impossible, whilst also proving that girls can play the organ too!

According to 'tradition', Cecilia sang with all her heart at her own wedding, at which she committed herself to remain a perpetual virgin, I'm sure to the delight of her new husband. She is then credited with converting him and his brother to Christianity, with the help of an angelic vision.

She was martyred and, again according to what we might call 'the legend', she was put in a bath of fire and yet remained untouched by the flames. It then took three attempts to kill her by the sword. With her head severed she remained alive for three days, preaching and converting many to the faith. Her body is said to have been exhumed in the sixteenth century and found to be un-corrupt and smelling of roses.

One notable reference to this story is found in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, but there were many other re-tellings which were equally fanciful and became prevalent as a form of pious romance. Saintly women were often pledged in love to God alone, even if they were married, to vanquish the transgression of Eve with which they were stained, so becoming bright lights to lift mortal vision.

This is the St Cecilia for whom odes, poems, songs and anthems have been written, this is the St Cecilia who has been portrayed in art and music as chaste and ethereal, a translator of the songs of heaven for mortal ears.

Will the real St Cecilia please stand up?

Like many other Saints, there is actually very little to say about the real St Cecilia, other than she was probably a Roman noblewoman who allowed Christians to meet in her home and led a church within it, and therein lies the probable reason for her martyrdom in about the year 230.

Other sources say that Cecilia was a powerful preacher and converted hundreds of people to Christianity. A church was established on the site of her house in Trastevere, Rome, and she became one of the most revered martyrs of the Roman Church; one of only seven women in addition to the Virgin Mary, remembered in the Canon of the Mass. Whoever she was, this much is true: She was a Christian. She was martyred for her faith and she has been revered ever since.

Can we compose a story, a hagiography, which does justice to her sanctity, the tradition we have received, and speaks to us today?

What if ...

As a devout and practising second-century Christian, Cecilia was a singer, a musician. Her faith was expressed through song and music and from girlhood she would sing to the Lord with all her heart and her faith was infectious. She fell in love with Valerian, who was not a Christian – but day by day, he became enraptured by her music which she sang to the glory of God.

Perhaps she did sing at her wedding, because she understood that all love was an expression of God's love for the whole world, and who could not sing upon believing such good news and being embraced by such love?

Perhaps she sang to her husband words from the Song of Solomon, *Rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away. For, lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone; The flowers appear on the earth; the time of the singing of birds is come,* and through her song, he came to faith. So their home became a house of song, and a house of prayer in the city of Rome.

When she invited other Christians into her home, at great risk to herself and her family, they sang psalms, hymns and spiritual songs together – for Cecilia, the only way to express her love of God was through song.

Her church was a singing church, and as it grew, it sang fervently and loudly to proclaim Christ as Saviour of the world. Its choir was augmented by the choir of the redeemed of one hundred and forty four thousand, who joined in from the throne of heaven, and the more these choirs sang together, the more people were drawn in to worship in her little church here on earth. This was music with a mission.

Through her generosity, through her music, through her witness, many came to faith, and the more people who came to faith, the more Cecilia's ministry became known. People were singing of God's love everywhere, in the streets, at home, in the market place, old and young, high and low, rich and poor, one with another, the word of God was spreading and the means by which it was spread was music.

When the Roman authorities caught wind of Cecilia and her singing church, they set out to kill her – they had to silence the song. When they barged into her house with only violence on their lips, she knelt down and sang defiantly as they struck her dead, *O Give thanks unto the Lord, for he is gracious and his mercy endureth for ever.* But this was not the end. As life emerged from a stone-cold tomb so her song continued ...

Through the life and witness of St Cecilia we learn that music is both the handmaid of the liturgy and the servant of mission: music and song communicate in ways beyond words alone; music and song take us to the heart of heaven and music can help build the church in the world today.

Augustine is believed to have said that 'to sing is to pray twice', and from the *Anthem for St Cecilia's Day*, W.H. Auden imagines that Cecilia 'constructed an organ to enlarge her prayer, and notes tremendous from her great engine thundered out on the Roman air'. Music seems to extend and magnify prayer, a vehicle for praise, a means of expressing faith with all of our body, our soul and our might.

J.S. Bach understood, perhaps as St Cecilia did, that music was made *to the glory of God* and would often sign his music *Soli Deo Gloria*, or Glory to God alone, to signify who and what the music was for.

Is the church still a singing church? In our colleges and cathedrals the tradition of music and song remains – but it's expensive and often not very accessible. What about out there – in the Fens, in the suburbs, in the inner cities of our land? Can music be the means to share the good news to a world that has forgotten how to sing? Is the church in danger of only ever preaching to the choir rather than encouraging the choir, through music and song, to preach to the whole world?

How can we free our music and let everyone join in? Old and young, high and low, rich and poor, one with another. Can the music of the church, so precious and so powerful, which carries the word of God so effectively, be the very thing we should be sharing with our whole heart and mind and strength? The very thing that might help the church flourish and grow today? The very thing that might bring people to faith.

Is our vocation, as a church, to teach the world to sing to God's glory, as St Cecilia did?

I happen to believe that our God is musical, and that the music of the spheres, the music of creation, the music of love, and the music of the church witnesses to this God. Music has the power to transform lives *to the glory of God*. As a church our deepest desire might be to see more people singing, more people knowing the joy of hearing a mighty organ thunder through the air, more people able to hear the new song that is still being sung by Christ the singer. Christ the singer, who sang a hymn in the Garden of Gethsemane, who sang Psalm 22 from the cross, who sang a new creation into being when he rose from the dead.

Blessed Cecilia appear in visions to all musicians, appeal and implore,
That their gift, enlightening, may be shared for the brightening
of Hearts and souls from shore to shore,
At music entrancing, the angels dancing,
Lift up the praises of mortals on earth –
That the Church may sing her song, once again,
To God's glory alone, Amen, and Amen.