

GOD AND MUSIC: BENJAMIN BRITTEN

Easter 3 - 3 May 2009 Trinity College, Cambridge

SS: “Are you happy?” someone suddenly leant over and asked me recently. I must admit I was a little taken aback. For the subject of our own happiness, like death and sex, isn’t one we generally find easy to discuss, to expose our innermost emotions – especially as this particular person was somewhat agitated herself. Like many people, she felt that happiness, joy, was something she was missing out on – and that was unfair.

Our anthem this evening is a piece of music by Benjamin Britten, his setting of words conceived by a fine and sensitive mind crumbling under the stresses of life. Christopher Smart is the poet and his extraordinary unfinished poem ‘Jubilate Agno’ – ‘Rejoice in the Lamb’ - was written between 1758 and 1763 while Smart was confined to a private home for the mentally ill in Bethnal Green in East London. Smart called it ‘my Magnificat’. It’s a litany of praise to God from a procession of ‘nations, and languages, and every Creature in which is the breath of Life.’ But it’s also a reminder that those who’ve made some of the greatest contributions to human life – writers, poets, artists, musicians, saints – have almost always not been what we would call happy. They’ve often been deeply troubled people, people who’ve agonised to grasp the truth of things at a more profound level.

We’re going to hear the choir sing Britten’s cantata in sections, interspersed with my thoughts. Michael and Stephen kindly allowed me to present it this way, which I’ve done once before on a broadcast act of worship. If it doesn’t work for you, then I take the blame entirely!

On that particular occasion I was with a choir singing in a Victorian school chapel, a strong and imposing building which expressed the confidence and assurance that was typical of the Victorian age. But actually, underneath that confidence, the Victorians expected the spiritual life to be made up of much toil and pain. Think of their hymns, full of phrases like ‘Through the night of doubt and sorrow’ and ‘Lead kindly light amid the encircling gloom’. It’s been said that our Victorian forebears thought of life as a hard and difficult journey to a better country. On the other hand, we expect to be happy all the time. So who is right? The Victorians who resigned themselves to life as a long uphill struggle - or ourselves who demand instant gratification? I’ve no doubt that both are wrong. Our forebears were prone to accept too easily misery which could have been eliminated – especially when it was other people’s. And we delude ourselves that life will give us a trouble-free path to happiness. Life doesn’t offer that. But there’s something more than happiness, something more enduring that faith can provide. It’s a kind of sudden transcendent experience - what a former Dean of Trinity, Harry Williams, calls the Joy of God. ‘It’s ours already,’ he says, ‘but, being too blind to recognise it, we have to discover it, not in religious theory, but in the warmth and sweetness and dryness and terror of actual living.’

Let's then use Britten and Christopher Smart's 'Rejoice in the Lamb' to accompany our exploration. It arose out of a commission from the Revd Walter Hussey, vicar of St Matthew's Church, Northampton, for a piece to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the church's consecration. Hussey had already shown enlightened patronage of the arts by commissioning a statue from Henry Moore and a mural by Graham Sutherland. But when he heard a programme of gramophone records chosen and introduced by Britten on the radio, he was struck by Britten's comments. So he wrote to the composer about, as he put it, 'the bee in his bonnet to do with a close connection between the Church and the arts.' Britten replied with enthusiasm, suggested the words he would like to set to music, and conducted the first performance in the church on its patronal festival, the Feast of St Matthew, September 21st 1943.

Music:

Rejoice in God, O ye Tongues; give the glory to the Lord, and the Lamb.
Nations, and languages, and every Creature, in which is the breath of Life.
Let man and beast appear before him, and magnify his name together.
Let Nimrod, the mighty hunter, bind a Leopard to the altar, and consecrate his spear to the Lord.
Let Ishmael dedicate a Tyger, and give praise for the liberty in which the Lord has let him at large.
Let Balaam appear with an Ass, and bless the Lord his people and his creatures for a reward eternal.
Let Daniel come forth with a Lion, and praise God with all his might through faith in Christ Jesus.
Let Ithamar minister with a Chamois, and bless the name of Him, that cloatheth the naked.
Let Jakim with the Satyr bless God in the dance.
Let David bless with the Bear – The beginning of victory to the Lord – to the Lord the perfection of excellence –
Hallelujah from the heart of God, and from the hand of the artist inimitable, and from the echo of the heavenly harp in
sweetness magnificent and mighty.

SS: 'Hallelujah from the heart of God, and from the hand of the artist inimitable.' The words and indeed the tragic story of Christopher Smart were a great inspiration to Britten - not surprisingly really with his keen interest in poetry and sensitivity to the human condition. And I think his genius is the way he organises the text into a thematic progression. His work begins with a general expression of praise to God, moves to Biblical figures praising God, to animals praising God, to flowers praising God, to even Christopher Smart himself in his prison darkness praising God. Smart's madness has been described as religious mania. He loved God to the point where he would insist that passers-by on the street get down on their knees and pray with him. He was committed on at least three occasions to an asylum, but Samuel Johnson, coming to the poet's defence, remarked that he would sooner pray with Christopher Smart than anyone else!

So listen now to how Smart reflects on the various ways in which nature praises God simply by being as God created it. Because people can be sentimental about the natural world and especially animals, we may disparage those who seem continually to extol the God who inhabits the beauty of flowers, trees, mountains and lakes, the God whose glory can also be found in our faithful pets! Some may point only to the Church and the Bible as the places where the real God can be found with adequate guarantees. But surely the teaching and parables of Jesus are full of references to God's

natural world. It's God, says Jesus, who clothes the grass of the field and the lilies as they grow and it's He who feeds the birds of the air, while there is even providence in the fall of a single sparrow.

Apparently Walter Hussey, when discussing the text of 'Rejoice in the Lamb' with the composer, had slight hesitations about the inclusion of Smart's beloved cat Geoffrey, but Britten assured him that he couldn't see 'how it could hurt anyone. After all, he's such a nice cat!' No qualms though about Geoffrey's antagonist, the valiant mouse!

Music:

For I will consider my Cat Geoffrey.
For he is the servant of the Living God, duly and daily serving him.
For at the first glance of the glory of God in the East he worships in his way.
For this is done by wreathing his body seven times round with elegant quickness.
For he knows that God is his Saviour.
For God has blessed him in the variety of his movements.
For there is nothing sweeter than his peace when at rest.
For I am possessed of a cat, surpassing in beauty, from whom I take occasion to bless Almighty God.

For the Mouse is a creature of great personal valour.
For – this is a true case – Cat takes female mouse – male mouse will not depart, but stands threat'ning and daring.
..... If you will let her go, I will engage you, as prodigious a creature as you are.
For the Mouse is a creature of great personal valour.
For the Mouse is of an hospitable disposition.

For the flowers are great blessings.
For the flowers have their angels even the words of God's creation.
For the flower glorifies God and the root parries the adversary.
For there is a language of flowers.
For flowers are peculiarly the poetry of Christ.

SS: 'The flowers are peculiarly the poetry of Christ.'

The dark centre of 'Rejoice in the Lamb' is an anguished setting of Christopher Smart's description of his own tribulations. It's also the theological centre of the piece for Britten responds persuasively and sensitively to the poet's reflecting on his suffering, comparing it to that of his Saviour. Indeed it's been pointed out that the sequence of four notes that Britten uses for the words 'silly fellow' is the musical signature of his fellow composer and good friend, Dmitri Shostakovich, who was at that time (the early nineteen forties) 'at variance with the officers of the peace' in Soviet Russia. But whether that secret musical message of sympathy moves you or not, the similarity with Jesus's torture and anguish isn't hard to recognise. If God is within us and within everything around us, then our discovery of God requires of us no esoteric journey into some spiritual stratosphere. It's in the grit of earth that we find the glory of heaven. It's in our being human, with all the vulnerability that that entails, that God enables us to share his own divine life.

Music:

For I am under the same accusation with my Saviour –
For they said, he is besides himself.
For the officers of the peace are at variance with me, and the watchman smites me with his staff.
For Silly fellow! Silly fellow! is against me and belongeth neither to me nor to my family.
For I am in twelve HARDSHIPS, but he that was born of a virgin shall deliver me out of all.

SS: ‘For I am in twelve hardships, but he that was born of a virgin shall deliver me out of all.’

Yes, there's a hard core of mental and maybe physical pain too that will always be with us: the insecurity of life, sudden accident, the prospect of death, grief and the sheer difficulty of making and maintaining relationships. And it's in those times of strain, when prayer becomes such an effort, that our main support may only be sheer determination. Metropolitan Anthony, leader of the Russian Orthodox Church in this country for over forty years, in one of his broadcast talks said that ‘whatever we may feel at a given moment, our position stays the same: God remains our creator, our Saviour, our Lord and the one towards whom we move. He is the object of our longing and the only one who can give us fulfilment. So, though we may think we're unworthy of praying – and even that we have no right to pray – every drop of water, from wherever it comes, pool or ocean, is purified in the process of evaporation; and so is every prayer ascending to God.’

Christopher Smart's outpouring of profound and chaotic emotion may be the product of an unbalanced mind but his determined prayers expose him not only to God but also to his world where, at the deepest levels, agony and ecstasy are so closely intertwined. And the more we discern God's joy everywhere the greater will be our sensitivity to the cost and pain by which that joy has been brought about. For that, I believe, was the experience of Christopher Smart. And the breathing out of God's spirit, the expiration of breath – ‘For H (huuh) is a spirit and therefore he is God’ (as Smart puts it) – it's that that takes us and the poet into the blaze of eternity. And if, sadly, I can be intensely personal for a moment and tell you how Rosie (my wife) and I have been sitting this past couple of days by the bedside of my father, watching his breathing gradually fade away, taking him, I firmly believe, into that same blaze of eternity, I think you'll understand!

Music:

For H is a spirit and therefore he is God.
For K is king and therefore he is God.
For L is love and therefore he is God.
For M is musick and therefore he is God.

For the instruments are by their rhimes.
For the Shawm rhimes are lawn fawn moon boon and the like.
For the harp rhimes are sing ring string and the like.
For the cymbal rhimes are bell well toll soul and the like.
For the flute rhimes are tooth youth suit mute and the like.
For the Bassoon rhimes are pass class and the like.
For the dulcimer rhimes are grace place beat heat and the like.
For the Clarinet rhimes are clean seen and the like.

For the trumpet rhymes are sound bound soar more and the like.
For the TRUMPET of God is a blessed intelligence and so are all the instruments in HEAVEN.
For GOD the father Almighty plays upon the HARP of stupendous magnitude and melody.
For at that time malignity ceases and the devils themselves are at peace.
For this time is perceptible to man by a remarkable stillness and serenity of soul.

Hallelujah from the heart of God, and from the hand of the artist inimitable,
and from the echo of the heavenly harp in sweetness magnificent and mighty.

SS: So that 'remarkable stillness and serenity of soul' came eventually to be felt by Christopher Smart himself. And Benjamin Britten's music too, I think, takes us to the very heart of the mystery of suffering. He also succumbed to depression and was wracked by doubt from time to time. At his funeral in December 1976, Bishop Leslie Brown giving the address said that attempting to describe Ben was 'like trying to keep sunlight in a string bag'. But he pointed out as well that Britten was scrupulously honest about his faith, and he wrestled with despair. Whilst he believed deeply in a Reality which works in us and through us and is the source of goodness and beauty, joy and love, he was sometimes troubled because he wasn't sure that he could give the name of God to that Reality.'

That though is the experience of so many. I have to admit that occasionally it's mine, and I wouldn't be surprised if it's yours too. It's the start however, as I said at the beginning, of the journey to true happiness: recognising our dependence on the natural world, on the fruits of human creativity, and, most of all, on other people – in the time of their good fortune but especially in their time of tribulation. William Law in his book 'A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life' wrote that 'if anyone would tell you the shortest, surest way to all happiness and perfection, they must tell you to make a rule to thank and praise God for everything that happens to you.' We long for happiness, but really we're asking God to lead us beyond happiness to a joy from which nothing can separate us.

Perhaps then we should look for assurance to those words from our second reading tonight – The Revelation of St John the Divine. They were read at Britten's funeral service in Aldeburgh Church and they are the essence of Britten and Christopher Smart's cantata. Above all, they encapsulate the triumph over tribulation. 'They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.'

I have no doubt that both Benjamin Britten and Christopher Smart discovered the Joy of God at the end. Pray that we will too. Amen.

The Reverend Stephen Shipley

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