

It may come as a surprise to see me standing here as preacher this evening. I do so with a little trepidation. Having said that, I am glad that I accepted Mandy's invitation to switch on this one occasion from the organ loft to the pulpit. This has been a useful opportunity for me to reflect on the role of music in our worship and, in particular, on the ways in which music acts for me as, I hope for others, as a catalyst to spiritual experience.

But first, an admission. As I lead the music of a service, yoyoing between organ loft and chancel, and as the choir attempts to absorb a large amount of new musical information each Sunday, I confess that it is all too easy for me and probably for others to get bogged down in musical problem-solving. Does our striving for musical excellence therefore come at the expense of more reflective thought? For singers and congregation alike I realise that performance can become an end in itself, a distraction from, rather than an enhancement to, communication with God.

It is perhaps for this reason that I find visits to morning and evening prayer - when I don't have to worry about whether the sopranos are going to miss their entry or the tenors sing flat – spiritually therapeutic, clearing the mind for the day or week ahead.

But of course music does not have to be, and seldom is, an obstacle to spiritual experience. Far from it. Music has been recognised as playing a vital part in Christian worship from the earliest days of the church. It is wonderful that St Mary's cherishes that tradition.

I now want to consider, with a little help from the choir, three forms of music within St Mary's Church, which as a Christian I have found spiritually affecting: firstly, choral settings of lesser known Christian writing; secondly the music of JS Bach; and final, congregational singing.

People who love and work with choral music are exposed to much beautiful Christian poetry in addition to biblical texts - some of which we may find spoken in services - take John Donne's poem Bring us O Lord, well known to choral singers thanks to William Harris' beautiful setting. In other cases, we get to know the work of Christian writers *because* of a musical setting and the musical setting helps us to really understand the text. The early seventeenth century poet, composer and physician, Thomas Campion's reflection on the individual's relationship to God in his poem View me Lord is a case in point. The poem takes the form of an intimate dialogue between an individual and God. We know Campion's words because of the contemporary composer Richard Lloyd's setting. The words are:

View me, Lord, a work of thine!
Shall I then lie downed in night?
Might thy grace in me but shine,
I should seem made all of light.

In thy word, Lord, is my trust,
To thy mercies fast I fly;
Though I am but clay and dust,
Yet thy grace can lift me high.

We will now hear the choir sing them.

Lloyd's emotionally restrained setting, the gentle rise and fall of the tune, the way in which the harmonies resolve, perfectly captures the sense of Campion's words, creating a mood of great tranquillity. The choir's heartfelt renditions of this short piece, at St Mary's and in Christ Church Cathedral in Oxford last month, fed me both musically and spiritually. In Oxford, Campion's words were quoted in the prayers following our anthem, heightening the prayerful impact of the choir's singing.

Secondly, the music of J.S. Bach. I experience each year a kind of thirst for Bach's Passions during Lent, as Passiontide approaches. These powerful musical illustrations of Christ's sacrifice and suffering are central to my experience of Holy Week. The chorales of Bach's Passions were intended to represent the voice of mankind as a whole, reacting to events as they unfold in the gospel text. It is therefore appropriate that they should be sung by the whole congregation, and this is what Bach intended. The first chorale of Bach's St John Passion is a sort of microcosm of what is to follow. The words are:

O wondrous love, o love beyond measure,
that brought You to this path of martyrdom!
I lived with the world in delight and joy,
and you must suffer.

We'll now hear the choir sing this short chorale.

Through musical dissonance in this chorale, particularly at the end on the German word 'leiden', meaning suffering, Christ's suffering, John's account of which is about to unfold, is brought vividly to life. I have found the communal singing of Bach at St Mary's to be an enriching shared experience in Holy Week. The performance of the St Matthew Passion on Palm Sunday last year, when the church was full to the rafters with many people who are not usually church goers, and who were clearly moved by the experience, was truly unforgettable.

Such communal hymn-singing is, of course, characteristic of many a thriving church community, Sunday by Sunday. With the best hymns, a kind of miraculous reaction seems to occur between text and music, creating something that is spiritually uplifting. As I stand in the chancel on a Sunday evening, surrounded by the heartfelt hymn singing of the evensong choir - about "a still small voice of calm" or about that "love, so amazing so divine" - words that have been part of me for many years - I experience something that is both enriching on a human level, and spiritually nourishing. We are lucky in this church to hear Andrew Lenon's very imaginative accompaniment of hymns, which use the various colours of the organ to emphasise the meaning of the words.

To end, a word about the joy of Christian music. I firmly believe that the joy which I derive from music making in church is God given....Two moments of spiritual joy through music at St Mary's, in the singing of the Gloria: firstly at the family service at 11:15 each Sunday morning. At this service, the congregation now sings a "call and response" setting of the Gloria, accompanied by a drum. This style of song is easily picked up and enables young children to take an active part. It is a delight to

witness children as young as four, their faces beaming, as they sing out this hymn of praise. Spiritual joy through singing, which lifts us.

Second, perhaps less likely, the Gloria within the Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis at evensong. It is easy for choirs that sing evensong canticles regularly to adopt a rather perfunctory approach to the expression of this text. But the musical setting of the Gloria of a Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis is often very uplifting. I wonder if, as singers and listeners, we can allow the music to touch us with a sort of spiritual glow. Or am I preaching to the converted?