

Music Notes 2017 – Sunday of Corpus Christi

On 27th November 2016 – which was Advent Sunday, and therefore the start of the church's new year – a sequence of seasons and services began that ends this Sunday. Advent was followed by Christmas, and then came Epiphany, Lent, Passiontide (including Holy Week), Easter, Ascension, Pentecost, Trinity, and now comes the Sunday of Corpus Christi. Especially in urban churches such as ours, it has become increasingly difficult to bring together far-flung congregations to attend celebrations of church Feasts when they fall mid-week, with the result that it has become usual to transfer the celebration of these Feasts to the Sunday following. This is the case in our parish, and therefore we will be observing the Sunday of Corpus Christi, a Feast that technically fell on Thursday of this week.

Corpus Christi is, actually, the second annual bite at the cherry of the Last Supper and the Eucharist. The first occurs – obviously – on Maundy Thursday, when the Last Supper is commemorated. The disadvantage of making this the sole celebration of the institution of the Eucharist is that it takes place in the undeniably solemn context of the forthcoming Crucifixion and death of Christ. Indeed, that service begins in ebullient form, with the *Gloria* brought back for a last minute “hurrah”, but as the service proceeds, the mood becomes ever more sombre, and in the end, the High Altar is stripped bare. In the early thirteenth century, the idea was put forward by the Belgian Norbertine Canoness, Juliana of Liège (c.1192–1258), that there should also be a more joyful opportunity to celebrate the central act of Christian worship, and, before long, the church at large was also celebrating also the Feast of Corpus Christi each year. In the Counter-Reformation, when something of a bonfire of the festivities took place, this feast was one of two such special events to survive the axe, the other being last weekend's Trinity Sunday.

The title “Corpus Christi” – the Body of Christ – raises the question of the so-called Real Presence, which is a code word for the Catholic/Orthodox/Lutheran understanding that in some sense Jesus becomes spiritually present in the Sacrament, although the bread and wine remain physically as they were. Is this the only way we understand “Real Presence”? If the church is – as S. Paul says – The Body of Christ, isn't there also a Real Presence there? If “the Kingdom of heaven is amongst you”, is that not also an example of Real Presence? And, following Pentecost Sunday, if we have each received the indwelling Holy Spirit, is there not a Real Presence within each of us as well? In this sense, the Real Presence in the Eucharist is one of several powerful ways in which our lives are suffused with the presence of the Redeemer in our lives, so much so, in fact, that this last in the sequence of Sundays outlined above is celebrated with an immense focus on the sacramental presence before we go into the six months or so of Sundays after Trinity.

The Mass setting for this special service is the *Missa O sacrum convivium* by Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina (1525–1594). This is a parody mass (i.e. one that quotes another work and uses it as a jumping-off point for newly created music). The motet at the Offertory is going to be Palestrina's own motet based on the *O sacrum convivium* plainchant. However, that is not in fact the motet that is parodied in his mass setting. Instead, it is a five-part motet of the same name by the Spanish composer, Cristóbal de Morales (1500–1553). Palestrina was evidently much taken with the piece. Rather than just quoting from the work and then leaping off in his own direction, he uses much of the substance of Morales's own music, reworking it into new textures, that are denser and richer than the original. Palestrina creates something distinctively new and special under the structure of the material that was there before: a passable image for what happens in the Eucharist itself as bread and wine are transformed into spiritual sustenance for us. The motet has contrasting sections of faster and slower music, and Palestrina cleverly finds ways to combine these sections so that they are heard simultaneously.

Palestrina's five-voice motet, meantime, was published in Venice in 1572, in *Motetorum liber secundus* for five, six, and eight voices.

Evensong on this special Sunday takes place in the presence of the exposed Blessed Sacrament on the High Altar. This is known as an "Exposition", and while the monstrance is being positioned, the choir sings the motet *Cibavit eos* by William Byrd (1539–1623), one of the pieces from his second book of *Gradualia* published in 1605. This was part of an extraordinary project in which he aimed to provide choral settings of all the "propers" – that is, the special texts such as *Introit*, *Gradual*, *Alleluia*, *Offertory*, *Communion* (which we usually hear sung to plainchant) that would be needed for the most important Feast days of the year. The text in this case is from the *Introit* for Corpus Christi: *He fed them from the fullness of the wheat, alleluia; and sated them with honey from the rock, alleluia. Rejoice in God our helper, sing for joy to the God of Jacob. Gloria Patri, etc.* Although *Corpus Christi* is clearly a feast associated with sacrifice, Byrd lifts the tone by setting this in what is known as the Mixolydian mode, the medieval precursor to our modern key of G major. Being an English composer, furthermore, he was also inclined to inflect his Mixolydian in the direction of a modern major key, making the music particularly bright and cheerful.

The canticles are the *Evening Service in D* by Edward Bairstow (1874–1946). We last heard his music on Easter VI, when he was composer of the anthem at Evensong. You may recall that he was a Huddersfield boy who went south for a time but ultimately ended up back in Yorkshire, where he was Organist of York Minster from 1913 until his death in 1946.

The *Magnificat & Nunc Dimittis in D* was written in 1906, the same year in which Bairstow was appointed organist and Director of Music at Leeds Parish Church,

early on in his career. Early though it may be, the harmony is often quite extraordinary, as though he were trying out certain transformations to see how they would work. Although this is fascinating, and extremely striking, the most impressive aspect of this work is its extraordinary architectural assurance. By this is meant not only the layout of the piece itself – how the different ideas in the text are assigned to the choir and illustrated in the organ part – but the sheer forcefulness of his melodic structures. Right at the start, the top line sets off with a jagged and dramatic line that climbs up from a low start in a highly assertive way, making the rising excitement of the Blessed Virgin's ecstatic utterance seem almost visible to our eyes. This is a muscular concept of the *Magnificat*, with no time for the kind of maidenly innocence that Howells (1892–1983) would later try to lend to the Virgin's words, for example in his *Collegium regale* setting that we heard on Pentecost Sunday.

Just before the end of the text of the *Magnificat* itself, Bairstow brings the music to a kind of semi-colon just after the rich have been sent empty away. At this point, he pays tribute to another famous *Evening Service in D* – in this case D minor – that of Thomas Attwood Walmisley (1814–1856), who also brings the music to a semi-colon in the same place, and then continues in the related key of F major for *He remembering his mercy hath holpen his servant Israel*, with music in a different, triple time signature, and with a semi-chorus or soloists singing the music. Bairstow duplicates this procedure and key shift exactly. The beginning of Walmisley's melody is a brief, downward scale – the notes of *Three Blind Mice*, as it so happens – while Bairstow does exactly the opposite and gives us *Three Blind Mice* inverted, going up, but gives the section over to solo voices as a kind of semi-chorus. The sense of paying tribute to his compositional predecessor is strong. Once this section is complete, the organ starts off a forthright *Gloria*, and then the canticle is over, fairly briskly and efficiently but with a strong and dramatic finish.

When it comes to the *Nunc Dimittis*, Bairstow returns to the notion of inverting a melodic idea, but in this case, it is the shape of his melody from the start of the *Magnificat* that he turns upside down. Just as the top line in the opening section of that piece climbed in steps from the lower parts of the voice to the highest, in the *Nunc Dimittis*, it follows the opposite trajectory, with the tenors and basses progressively stepping down lower and lower. Again, it is all remarkably architectural and assured. The text of this canticle is anyway pretty short, and rather than string it out to give himself sufficient space for expression, Bairstow constructs a rapidly thickening and soaring block of music that quickly gets us through *a light to lighten the Gentiles* and on to *thy people Israel*. Then in bursts the organ again, and we seem to go back into the same *Gloria*. On first hearing, one can be forgiven for wondering whether in that case it isn't all going to be rather brief as a canticle. However, there is much skill applied to this structural challenge: Bairstow heads off at *As it was in the beginning* in a brisk fugue that begins with the basses and then rises

up through all the voices. Finally, they join together in *world without end, Amen*. But he's not done yet: off go the basses yet again and everybody piles in rapidly thereafter in a complex and thrilling texture. Having referred to Walmisley in the *Magnificat*, this time Bairstow is using an idea derived from the extended *Gloria* in the *Nunc Dimittis* of Purcell's (1659–1695) *Evening Service in G minor*, which would have been very familiar to him. In fact, we know today that the "Purcell" *Gloria* he would have known was actually an addition to the work by Ralph Roseingrave (1795–1747) to give the piece a more dramatic finish than Purcell had conceived – and, clearly, Bairstow, who is unlikely to have known about Roseingrave, is simply following suit.

The anthem is a relatively substantial work, *Lo, the full final sacrifice*, by the British composer Gerald Finzi (1901–1956). We heard his music recently; it was the anthem on the Sunday of the Ascension. Finzi was a somewhat depressive character, probably something to do with a personally shy and retiring nature, the loss of his father just before his eighth birthday, his music teacher's death on the western front in the First World War, and the deaths of no fewer than three of his brothers, one also in the War, one to pneumonia, and one to an overdose, although whether deliberate or not is difficult to determine. He himself was to die at the early age of 55. This anthem was commissioned by that extraordinary benefactor of composers, sculptors and artists, the Revd Walter Hussey, then Vicar of St Matthew's Northampton and later Dean of Chichester. The occasion was the 53rd anniversary of the consecration of St Matthew's in 1946, and it was first performed on 21st September that year. The following year, Finzi orchestrated the piece for inclusion in the Three Choirs Festival. The text, which is a celebration of the Holy Eucharist, was assembled by Finzi as a fractured jigsaw of material from two poems by the English cleric and metaphysical poet, Richard Crashaw (c. 1613–1649), who had himself formed them as free translations of two Latin poems by S. Thomas Aquinas.

At Benediction, the *O Salutaris* is a setting by Franz Liszt (1811–1886). He was a deeply spiritual man, who had seriously considered entering the church as a young man. Later in his life, in 1865, he was in fact to receive certain minor orders after joining the Third Order of S. Francis, which welcomed lay people. This aspect of his life persisted alongside his virtuoso performing career and his life as one of the most remarkable composers of his day. This setting dates from the years just after he received minor orders, and is part of an entire suite of small scale religious choral works from this period.

Meantime, the *Tantum ergo* is by Anton Bruckner (1824–1896), who was also an organist (Yay!) as well as deeply involved with church music and spirituality. He wrote many settings of this text, which evidently spoke to him profoundly.