

In 1975, Dr Bernard Rose composed one of his finest works: Feast Song for St Cecilia. It is a setting of a poem by one of his sons, Gregory Rose, and the text begins with this verse: *When the sun with great flashes of grandeur breaks over the edge of the earth, Cecilia, nine trumpets blazing at her side, glides over sea and land rousing great organs and voices to join in song.* And then comes the refrain, which has a haunting treble solo floating across the top of it: *Sing precious music, sing to the Creator as this great saint sang in her heart.* That last phrase is a reference to the tradition established by an early account of Cecilia's life and martyrdom, which records that, as the musicians began to play before her wedding, Cecilia '*sang in her heart to the Lord.*'

As we approach Cecilia's feast day on Wednesday of this week, we will be celebrating not only her patronage of musicians, but also the fact that Cecilia has come to symbolize the central role of music in the church's liturgy. Offering music in our worship of God is a tradition that Christianity inherited from Judaism. In the first lesson this evening, we heard how a trumpet was blown after Solomon was anointed and proclaimed king of Israel, in order to celebrate his accession and to express the people's joy and thanksgiving to God for the gift of a new king. Indeed, trumpets feature in at least eighteen books of the Old Testament, and most often in a liturgical or ceremonial context: and throughout the Bible there are plenty of references to other instruments as well as to singing. Unlike some of the other Christian denominations arising from the Reformation in Europe, the Church of England retained the use of congregational and choral music in worship, thanks largely to the influence of Queen Elizabeth I and her Royal Injunctions of 1559. In the four and a half centuries since then, choral foundations in cathedrals and collegiate chapels like the one here at Magdalen have cherished and developed the sacred choral repertoire: it is a precious spiritual resource as well as a rich cultural heritage. In recent years, however, the rising costs of maintaining a choral foundation have caused many of the smaller cathedrals to face challenging questions about whether choral music has a continuing role in the mission of the church. When money is tight, it's often the music department that feels the pinch. So I thought that, to honour Cecilia and to arm us for the fight against potential budget

cuts, we might spend a few minutes reflecting on the vital role that music plays in our worship, in expressing our faith, and in advancing the church's tasks of mission and evangelism, because the survival of a choral foundation is no longer something that can be taken for granted: we must learn how to explain its continuing value in language that today's Church can understand – a church in which musical literacy is (sadly) declining.

But where to begin? In the first place, music gathers us and celebrates who we are as a Christian community. The music that we offer in worship expresses not only who we are, but also whose we are – we belong to Christ. Identity-seeking is an important part of adolescence and early adulthood, and the Church needs to attract more young people. Hymns, psalms, worship songs and anthems all help to shape and develop our spiritual identity, and to express what it means to be a part of the community of faith: they state our belief in Christ and they speak of our relationship with God, leading us into prayer and into a deeper relationship with our Lord Jesus. As we lift our voices in praise of God, we are cementing ourselves into the spiritual fabric of the Church.

Secondly, hymns, psalms, worship songs and anthems inspire us and teach us about God, and this is true of repertoire from all periods. The treasury of sacred music – both old and new – presents the essential tenets of our faith in a memorable way, and offers insights into God's presence and activity among us. That is why commissioning and performing new repertoire is so vitally important. I well remember when I was a treble, how exciting it was to sing Benjamin Britten's *Jubilate* in C: he composed that setting in 1961, and I sang it just a few years later, as an eight-year-old chorister. It made a deep and lasting impression upon me – so much so that I included it in the service for the enthronement of our bishop in 2014, moments after the climax of the service, when the bishop is placed in his throne. In the past a solemn *Te Deum* would have been sung at that point in the service, but we don't want to be solemn on such a happy day – we want to rejoice and Britten's *Jubilate* in C works much better in that context. The combination of Britten's music, which bubbles with joy, and the inspiring text of Psalm

100, encapsulates and expresses the Church's core mission, which the new bishop will lead: 'O be joyful in the Lord all ye lands: serve the Lord with gladness and come before his presence with a song. Be ye sure that the Lord he is God.' The sacred choral repertoire doesn't get more affirming than that.

And then, thirdly, music challenges us to witness to the Gospel not only with our songs, but also with our lives. Hymns, psalms, worship songs and anthems all challenge us to take the Beatitudes as our inspiration, and the Eucharist as our source of spiritual food, so that we are strengthened by God's grace to perform loving works of charity and justice in the name of the Lord Jesus, and to play our part in building the kingdom of God on earth, making the world a kinder, more loving place for everyone's benefit, and deepening our discipleship at the same time.

Finally, we must not overlook the fact that music is an international and ecumenical artistic medium, that enables us to communicate across language barriers and to bridge cultural and spiritual differences. Music expresses ideas and emotions in a way that we can't always describe with words. Music transcends the limitations of verbal language: so, for example, a peaceful song in a foreign language will still sound peaceful to us, even though we might not understand what the words mean, because the sound itself communicates, and draws performers and listeners into relationship with one another, enabling them to establish common spiritual ground, and drawing them into a closer relationship with our Creator. In this way, music helps to strengthen the Church as an international community of faithful believers and to advance the ecumenical project.

So there we are. Music in traditional and contemporary styles can express and develop the gift of faith in each rising generation, and it is an effective tool in our daily work of worship, mission and evangelism. It can draw people of all generations into church and into the habit of worship, exposing them to the riches of Scripture and to sacred poetry through hymns, anthems and worship songs, that lift our hearts to God. Music is an art for which we should always be offering thanks to God, as we (like Cecilia) sing the

praises of the One who, in his infinite love, created, redeems and inspires us day by day. To him be the glory yesterday and today and for ever. Amen.