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“THE WORD PREACHED – THE WORD READ”
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CATHEDRALS AND EVENSONG

The Very Rev Dr John Arnold (Anglican President of the Society)

I take as my text an old Punch cartoon, that splendid full-page Du Maurier picture of a young Edwardian beauty with hour-glass figure, reclining upon a chaise longue and receiving a visit from a very proper young curate in full morning dress, his top hat, stick and gloves set out on a stool beside him. He is leaning forward and asking her earnestly: "My dear, would you rather be beautiful or good?" And she, gazing back at him in sultry fashion through heavy lidded eyes, is murmuring: "I would rather be beautiful and repent."

Cathedrals have no choice. They can only be beautiful - and repent. I do not need to speak to you of their beauty - the stone, the wood, the glass and iron, the flowers, the setting, the music all speak for themselves: and we thank all those living and departed who have contributed to these many delights. It is however worth pausing to note that the very fact that we take the alliance of beauty and worship for granted in cathedrals such as Salisbury has been bought at a great price. If the Anglicans led by Richard Hooker had not defeated the Puritans in the interpretation of the Elizabethan settlement, if Church and King and Bishop Cosin and the Book of Common Prayer had not been restored after the Commonwealth, we would of course still be worshipping God, but in bare buildings with maimed rites and plain notes if any. Cathedrals exist to keep open a large view of God and of His goodness and a large view of human potentiality, as well as a profound and realistic view of human sinfulness and of the possibility of repentance. They are places for experiencing deeply the all-embracing corruption of sin and - even more deeply - the all-embracing scope and grandeur of the love of God. A Russian Orthodox priest said to me, when he learned that I was Dean of an English cathedral (Rochester then, not Durham): "Father John, where there is very great beauty there is always very great wickedness." That is true; and one of the reasons why it is true is that some people give themselves to the cult of the beauty of inanimate objects, not as a means of enhancing their love of God and neighbour but as a substitute for them. And that is idolatry. In a place so often visited by George Herbert I quote as a clue to the use of cathedrals:

*A man that looks on glass
On it may stay his eye
Or, if he pleaseth, through it pass
And there the heaven espy.*

Of course, cathedrals are not found in Scripture or in the Early Church and they are not necessary to salvation; but they may still serve the Kingdom of Heaven. The word derives from the Greek *kathedra*, the throne from which a bishop ruled his diocese and, more importantly, taught the apostolic faith. In the early church, centred on the Mediterranean Sea, the bishop was the principal celebrant and preacher at the Sunday Eucharist in every city or significant settlement. There were about 500 dioceses in Italy, which is roughly the size of Great Britain. Word, sacrament and ministry were all focussed in the cathedral church there. But Northern Europe was missionised on a tribal, rather than an urban, basis, with enormous dioceses and itinerant bishops, who eventually became great magnates and landholders.

In England, only Kent developed on the Roman model with two small dioceses, Canterbury and Rochester. The rest of medieval England and Wales was covered by fourteen huge dioceses. One result of the frequent absence of the bishop from his cathedral was the establishment of a community there to maintain word and sacrament, eventually stabilised after the reforms of Chrodegang of Metz into a Chapter of Canons under a Dean. In England, almost uniquely, some cathedrals were placed in the care of Benedictine monks, or more rarely Augustinian canons, who elected one of their own number as Prior. The weekly celebration of the Eucharist was supplemented by the daily recitation of the hours or offices, centred on the Psalter and obeying the word of the Psalmist: 'Seven times a day do I praise thee' - Matins, Lauds, Terce, Sext, None, Vespers and Compline. Then at the Reformation the monasteries were dissolved, except where they already served or became cathedrals. These were refounded and became known as cathedrals of the New Foundation, although they include some of the oldest like Canterbury and Winchester, in contrast to those of the Old Foundation like York and Salisbury.

Meanwhile, Cranmer was preparing his books of Common (as opposed to private) Prayer in English, concentrating on the Eucharist. But he also wanted to provide forms of daily prayer both for the parochial clergy and also for the people. The church had already been de-monasticised; now it was to be de-clericalised, not by taking the liturgy away from the clergy but by making it available to the laity, too. Hence the injunction in 1552 that "the curate ... shall say the (service) ... and shall cause a bell to be tolled thereunto a convenient time before he begin, that the people may come to hear God's word and to pray with him." That meant that common prayer had to fit the rhythm of daily life, not of monks and nuns, but of ordinary people. In a stroke of genius, Cranmer reduced the seven services to two in the shape of the working day. This pattern has been vindicated over the past 450 years. Indeed, for four centuries, after the failure of both the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation to get people to take communion weekly, Morning and Evening Prayer became the staple form of Sunday worship for the majority of English Christians, a task for which they had not been designed but which they successfully carried out. Cranmer had two other main aims. One was to produce uniformity of worship throughout the land in place of the local variants or uses currently in operation. The other was to simplify the Calendar and Lectionary by getting rid of unbiblical saints and non-biblical readings, which, he thought, obscured the

Gospel. He sought help wherever he could find it - in the Use of Sarum, the best of the old English rites, in the reformed Breviary of the Spanish Cardinal Quinones, in the provision for daily prayer which Bugenhagen had made for the Church of Denmark and even in the Eastern Orthodox Liturgy ascribed to John Chrysostom, a well-loved prayer from which may serve to illustrate his skill as a translator and his mastery of the rhythms of English prose: "Almighty God, who hast given us grace at this time with one accord to make our common supplications unto thee; and dost promise that where two or three are gathered together in thy name, thou wilt grant their requests: Fulfil now, O Lord, the desires and petitions of thy servants, as may be most expedient for them; granting us in this life knowledge of thy truth, and in the world to come life everlasting. Amen."

When you enter the Nave of a cathedral, you find yourself in a Temple, as Hooker taught and as is illustrated at Rochester by the statues of Solomon and Sheba at the great west door with their implied message: "She came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and, behold, something greater than Solomon is here!" It is a public space for the celebration of the Eucharist and for great occasions of Church and State, and the seats face forward. When you pass through the Screen into the Quire, everything is turned through ninety degrees. [Alas, the screen has been taken down in Salisbury, but you will be able to see what I mean in Winchester.] The seats face inward; the atmosphere is more domestic and intimate, more like a village synagogue. This is where a community, sometimes just a dozen (a *shevot*) or even that two or three of which Jesus Christ and John Chrysostom spoke, gathers daily around the reading of Scripture, the recitation of the Psalms and the saying of prayers, continuing a conversation with God, which began in Ancient Israel three millennia ago and which will continue until the end of human life on earth. With our outward ears we only hear one half, rather like overhearing a telephone conversation; we need to train the inner ear to use the silences to hear the other half, which is the voice of God.

Evening Prayer begins with an elaborate introduction, originally designed to be said daily, as people needed to be taught what they were doing, but now only used on Sundays, if then. The early sixteenth century was acutely aware of the effects of sin and of the need for the assurance of forgiveness before approaching God. Cranmer provides for this with a choice of scriptural verses and a long preface, which incidentally sets out the purpose of the service: "We assemble and meet together to render thanks for the great benefits we have received at (God's) hands, to set forth his most worthy praise, to hear his most holy word, and to ask those things which are requisite and necessary, as well for the body as for the soul." There follows a noble confession, which eventually most English people knew by heart until recent times, and a form of absolution, which makes clear that it is God Himself, who pardons sin. This preparation ends with the Lord's Prayer, said by all.

The service itself begins with a dialogue between Priest and People - in Cathedrals between Priest and Choir, "O Lord, open thou our lips", establishing from the start that God Himself enables us to worship

him properly. He gives us in Holy Scripture what we need; and the words are taken from the Bible to a greater extent than in the liturgy of any other church.

The Psalms are the heart of Evensong. They cover every human emotion, including some unpleasant ones; and, by hearing them in order, we become accustomed to disciplining our emotions under God, feeling what others may be feeling, not just indulging in what we happen to feel at the time. We listen to the Spirit meeting our spirit and assuring us that we are children of God.

The Psalms are followed by substantial readings from the Hebrew Scriptures and from the New Testament, interspersed with two songs or canticles, taken from the New Testament. Cranmer had put Matins and Lauds, with their canticles, together to make Morning Prayer. Now he put Vespers and Compline together with their respective canticles, *Magnificat* and *Nunc Dimittis*, to make Evening Prayer. This produced a strong and rather massive structure, compared with the old offices. They usually had one very short lesson and one canticle, as we can see when we say Compline on its own. They may be compared to many continental cathedrals with their simple, cruciform ground plan. Just add a Western facade and towers, and a shrine and Lady Chapel at the Eastern end, and the ground plan corresponds to the shape of Evensong with its two lessons and canticles and its introduction and ending:

The Apostles', or baptismal, Creed forms a kind of hinge between the input of God's word in Psalms, lessons and canticles, and our response in prayer. This begins with another little dialogue, invoking the Trinity, followed by the Lord's Prayer as the inspiration and ground of all our prayers. The remnants of an Eastern Orthodox litany form are found in the continued dialogue with its prayers for salvation, the Queen, the ministry, the laity, peace and that purity of heart, without which none of us will see God; and the service proper ends with three short prayers, called Collects, because they originally collected up the petitions in the Litany. The first varies with the week and links Evensong to the Sunday Eucharist; the second, for peace, is taken from Vespers, and the third, from Compline, is one of Cranmer's many masterpieces in this art form: "Lighten our darkness, we beseech thee, O Lord; and by thy great mercy defend us from all perils and dangers of this night; for the love of thy only son, our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen." Note its imperative directness, its use of two words ('perils and dangers', like 'desires and petitions'), where one might have sufficed, but which gives greater accuracy and fullness and improves the rhythm, and the extension of the conventional 'through Jesus Christ Our Lord' to 'for the love of thy only Son our Saviour Jesus Christ' with its perfect cadence for the end of the day (as Shakespeare said "it hath a dying fall") and its evocation of God's love and of our salvation. Like the music of Mozart or a picture by Rembrandt it defies analysis and, simply as a piece of prose, is beyond praise.

The service came to be extended on Sundays with hymns, a sermon and the four set prayers, which are usually replaced now, not necessarily to our advantage, by free intercession. They encourage us to pray, as St Paul taught, first for the Queen and those in authority in the world, for the Royal Family and

thus for all families at home and abroad, for the Clergy and People 'that they may truly please thee', and finally, as we have seen, for everything, which is expedient for us. It is rounded off appropriately with St Paul's Trinitarian grace.

But I have skipped over the rubric *In Quires and Places where they sing here followeth the Anthem*, which is the key to unlocking the secret of specifically Choral Evensong, with its perfect balance between God's word spoken and God's word sung.

The abolition of purgatory (uniquely in England by Act of Parliament) and the dissolution of chantries, where clerks were paid to sing masses for the departed, might well have been a disaster for music and musicians. It is a great irony that, if you ask what is Cranmer's heritage today, most people would say, 'Cathedral Evensong', whereas he disliked cathedrals and despised elaborate music, which, he thought, obscured the meaning of the words. But this little rubric gave musicians their chance; and in cathedrals and one or two other 'places where they sing', like the Chapel Royal, collegiate churches, public schools and the colleges of Oxford and Cambridge, the musical tradition not only survived but revived and flourished with a galaxy of composers - Byrd, Tallis, Weelkes, Morley, Tomkins and Orlando Gibbons among them. Lay clerks replaced the monks in choir, cathedral schools continued to supply flawless treble voices, women and girls remained excluded until recently; and the characteristic English cathedral sound emerged with big, grown men singing alto, tenor and bass and boys taking the top part. Simplified and harmonised plainsong formed the basis for Anglican chant, as an unobtrusive way of carrying and conveying the meaning of the words of the psalms. Composers set the canticles; and the provision for an anthem was interpreted widely to provide for an ecumenical treasury of Christian praise, for new compositions and for instrumental music to complement the ubiquitous organ.

The resulting professionalisation of the music has its disadvantages in restricting the vocal participation of the congregation. But does it reduce its active participation? Listening is also an activity; and congregations contribute to worship by attentive and appreciative hearing. The worship in cathedrals is not something we make on earth and then offer to Our Father in Heaven. It is something we receive by faith with thanksgiving; and the offering is that of 'ourselves, our souls and bodies to be a living sacrifice'.

Now listen to another voice. 'Lara was not religious ... she did not believe in ritual.' That's not me, that's Boris Pasternak in his masterpiece *Doctor Zhivago*. 'Lara was not religious ... she did not believe in ritual; but sometimes, to enable her to bear her life she needed the accompaniment of an inward music and she could not always compose it for herself. That music was God's word of life and it was to weep over it that she went to church. Once at the beginning of December ... she went to pray with such a heavy heart that she felt as if at any moment the earth might open at her feet and the vaulted ceiling of the church cave in ... In the time it took her to make her way past the worshippers, buy two candles and find

her place, the deacon had rattled off the nine Beatitudes at a pace suggesting that they were quite well enough known without his help. "Blessed are the poor in spirit. .. Blessed are they that mourn. .. Blessed are they that hunger and thirst after righteousness ... "

Lara trembled and stood still. This was for her. He was saying: "Happy are the downtrodden. There is after all something to be said for them. They have everything before them. That was what Christ thought. That was His opinion."

That's magical, isn't it? Only a great poet could have written that as the best expression I know in prose of what can happen in cathedrals, where wounded souls can slip in, feeling like death and hide behind the pillars and listen to someone else singing the liturgy and be touched by God's word of life and be broken down and lifted up in one and the same movement, and know that they count, that they are a child of God, worth more than any sparrow. Pasternak, who was a great sinner as well as a great poet, not very brave, not very faithful, was preserved by God alone of all the poets of the Russian silver age, who perished everyone in the great terror or the war, he was preserved to write that, to say what God's grace can do for the teenage mistress of a middle-aged *roue*; and he could say it because he knew what it could do for him.

It can do the same for us and for our cathedrals and for those who come to them, seeking beauty, which they know they are seeking, and repentance, which they may not know they are seeking until they hear the music of God's word of life, which they cannot compose for themselves - and now at last realise that they do not need to, because both beauty and repentance are free gifts, pure grace. For which we, taking the advice of St Paul to the Colossians, should "be thankful and let the word of Christ dwell in us richly as we sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with thankfulness in our hearts to God." (Col. 3, 16.)