

THE HOMILY PREACHED AT THE SERVICE
FOR THE
ROYAL CANADIAN COLLEGE OF ORGANISTS
CHURCH OF SAINT BARNABAS, OTTAWA
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This afternoon, I will be reflecting on the importance of music in our Services of Worship. Music is an integral part of what we offer and of what we receive when we come together to worship as a community. A religious Service is an offering to God. That is at the deepest level what we are doing right now: offering ourselves to God in praise and thanksgiving. This Service of Evensong from the Anglican Book of Common Prayer provides an Exhortation which describes with grace and beauty the purpose of public worship. Here is a portion of that description: “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 the soul.” The whole Service, including the music, should be the best we can offer.

It is also true that we receive something of great value in a Service of Worship. Through it, we are brought closer to God – our relationship with God is nourished and strengthened. Music, both sung and heard, can enrich that worship tremendously, as it has for centuries in our Judeo-Christian tradition. The Book of Psalms is accurately titled the Hymn Book of the Bible. All 150 Of these songs were sung either responsively or by the community as a whole, often with instrumental accompaniment. Today’s Psalm 150 vividly illustrates this. “Praise God. . . in the sound of the trumpet. . . upon the lute and harp. . . upon the strings and pipe. . . upon the loud cymbals.” The Psalm ends, “Let everything that hath breath praise the Lord.” – a sort of cosmic shout! This afternoon’s Epistle Reading, from the Letter to the Colossians, surrounds us with “psalms and hymns and spiritual psalms, singing with grace in your heart to the Lord.” What a wonderful way to sing – with grace in our heart to the Lord.

As Organist, Choir Director, or Choir Member, your contribution is one of beauty; you worship the Lord with holy beauty, and thereby beautify the Service. Beauty in worship presupposes standards – standards of excellence, and Church musicians have the responsibility to provide, each week, the best music that the community can experience. It was with the idea of objective standards of excellence in mind that I selected this afternoon’s Old Testament Reading, from the Book of Exodus. I can practically guarantee that you will not hear this passage at a Sunday Service! It is obscure, to say the least, and like many other Old Testament lections, requires some contextual explanation. The Israelites are still in the wilderness, on their way to the Promised Land, and God instructs them, through Moses, to build a Tabernacle which will be a worthy housing for the Ark of the Covenant - the two stone tablets on which are inscribed the Ten Commandments. The tabernacle is to be built to a high standard of excellence, and for this reason God selects two outstanding craftsmen, Bezalel and Aholiab, and gives these two men,

these leaders, his Spirit – which endows them with skill, intelligence, and learning, as well as the ability and authority to teach others.

What is true for visual and plastic art applies to music as well. Church organists and others involved in sacred music can (and, I hope, do) understand that their skill, intelligence and learning are gifts from God – gifts which they themselves have stewarded in the liturgies of the Church. I firmly believe that Directors of Music who so understand their gifts should have the discretionary freedom to set and maintain appropriate standards of music for their Church. [*After a brief pause, to let this controversial declaration sink in, I repeated the last sentence!*] When you are inquiring about a position in a Church, a vital question you can put to the Priest and/or interviewing Committee is: “Can I set standards – standards for Singing, and standards for attendance and attitude as well?” Listen very carefully to the answer, for what is said and for what is not said.

A Church Service is in many respects a performance, a play, in the best artistic sense of those words. One significant difference is that everyone participates in some way. We all participate by our prayerful presence. God calls some to be readers, some to be leaders of prayers, servers, preachers, administrators of the Sacrament, greeters. God does not call everyone to sing in the choir; that discernment can and should be made by the Choirmaster.

For the first thirty-three years of my life (from the age of 10), my primary experience of liturgical worship was through membership in Church choirs, which led me dangerously close to the notion that only choristers should sing. My subsequent thirty-three years, as a Parish Priest, have taught me that everyone can participate by singing – that’s what the hymns are for! In a sense, the hymns of a Parish belong to the community, and you may need to relax your standards from time to time. If “Oh, there’s oil in my lamp, keep it burning!” is your congregation’s national anthem, go with it – once in a while. We all need the serenity to accept what we cannot change, the courage to change what we can, and the wisdom to know the difference.

As the Organist, Director of Music, or Choir Member, you offer music first to God, and then to the congregation, to enrich their experience of God. The last words I wish to offer are not my own, but rather those of a German musician, and of an English poet. J.S. Bach said of his creative genius, “All my music is offered to the glory of God, and to the good pleasure of the human spirit.” John Milton, in his Lyric poem *Il Penseroso*, wrote of hearing Sacred music:

“There let the pealing organ blow / To the full-voiced choir below, / In service high and anthem clear /
As will with sweetness through mine ear / Dissolve me into ecstasies / And bring all heaven before
mine eyes.”