

CAROL FESTIVAL 2009 NOTES ON THE SERVICE

Ever since Edward Benson, the then Bishop of Truro, and later, Archbishop of Canterbury, devised the original Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols for use in his Cathedral, at 10.00 pm on Christmas Eve 1880, the Festival has grown in increasing popularity to become, in the words of the late Rev Michael Perry, "the biggest evangelistic opportunity of the church year". Throughout the world, the Festival is one of the best attended of all services in the year and in 2009, provides our Parish with another opportunity to put *Connect 09* into practice. Indeed, Saint Martin's was the first Parish on the North Shore to present the Festival and 2009 marks the 49th consecutive year of our Festival.

However, whilst over the years, I have experimented with formats other than that of King's College Cambridge, it is time to try yet another format. This year, the Festival is based on a liturgy devised by the Royal School of Church Music, with which our Parish has been affiliated since 1961. The carols (from England, France, Poland, Spain (Galicia) and Germany) and readings are the same but the liturgy is drawn from contemporary sources. I hope it is helpful and uplifting and in the words of Saint Augustine, "*Let us sing as travellers do on a journey to keep up their spirits and help them keep on walking. Press on from good to better in this life, sing up, my friends, and above all, keep on walking*". [Augustine, Sermon 256].

MARY

Like one of us, that's how he came.
No great event, or so it then appeared
In all the fuss and turmoil of that day.
A mother's pain, a baby's cry;
Another child to share earth's joys and woes:
That's what we saw that night in Bethlehem.

Until the shepherds came, that is;
And then the promise of that messenger
Nine long hard months before, came crowding in.
The doubts, disgrace, a fam'ly's wounded pride,
A growing burden, neighbours' scorn,
And Joseph's name, strong arm and steadfast faith.

And is that promise now fulfilled?
A Saviour, so the shepherds said.
Oh God, whatever can that mean?
For saviours talk of war and blood and death.
Oh Lord my God, what have you done to me
That this my little child should face
So hard a call? See how he sleeps so quiet;
Then wakens, smiles and searches for my breast!
Another Hebrew child! The shadow of a
shepherd's staff
Fell on his face. For all the world it looked
More like a sword, its point against my heart.

This poem, or to give it its full title, *Mary the Mother of our Lord*, comes from a collection of poems *A Singing in the Fields*, by Dr Allan Bryson of Roseville. Dr Bryson is known to many at Saint Martin's. His wife Elsie is our Rector's aunt.

The poems are beautifully crafted "Songs of the Saviour", directed both to the initiated reader and to those "coming out of a completely secular background".

Of this poem, Allan Bryson says: "We easily forget the nine months of her pregnancy, and the doubts, fears, disgraces and other pressures that must have been felt during those months. There seems little doubt that Luke received directly from her some details of her life as the mother of Jesus. The only recorded boyhood episode in the life of Jesus comes from Luke".

THIS LITTLE BABE

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| 1. | This little Babe, so few days old,
Is come to rifle Satan's fold;
All hell doth at his presence quake,
Though he himself for cold do shake;
For in this weak unarme'd wise
The gates of hell he will surprise. | 3. | His camp is pitche'd in a stall,
His bulwark but a broken wall;
The crib his trench, hay-stalks his stakes,
Of shepherds he his muster makes;
And thus, as sure his foe to wound,
The angels' trumps alarum sound. |
| 2. | With tears he fights and wins the field,
His naked breast stands for a shield;
His battering shot are babish cries,
His arrows looks of weeping eyes,
His martial ensigns Cold and Need,
And feeble flesh his warrior's steed. | 4. | My soul, with Christ join thou in fight;
Stick to the tents that he hath pight,
Within his crib is surest ward;
This little Babe will be thy guard.
If thou wilt foil thy foes with joy,
Then flit not from this heavenly Boy. |

Whilst Southwell's *The Burning Babe* is arguably, his most famous poem, nevertheless, *This Little Babe* shot to prominence by Benjamin Britten's use of it in his incomparable *Ceremony of Carols*. The image of a baby shivering with cold, yet causing all hell to shake, is a graphic illustration of the power of God, overcoming evil, and gives confidence to all of us of a righteous outcome to our present, difficult and troublesome times. Southwell himself, a Jesuit Priest, was writing in the midst of 'war' as he resisted the efforts of the newly established Church of England to stamp out the Catholic faith and as he ministered to the Catholics of England. For his trouble, he was sentenced to death, hung, drawn and quartered. It is recorded that as he hung, dying, from the gallows, and attempting to make the sign of the Cross, the chanting onlookers tugged at his feet to hasten his death. Sound familiar? Benjamin Britten was also writing at the time of war, the Second World War. He composed his *Ceremony* in 1942 whilst crossing the submarine-infested Atlantic. The paradox is inescapable.

HAIL TRUE BODY

The words are ascribed to Pope Innocent (d.1276) in a 14th Century manuscript of Reichenau. They are also found in a manuscript in the Bodleian Library, Oxford University, dating from *circa 1340*. The words, in their Latin form *Ave verum corpus*, have attracted the attention of many composers over the years, such as William Byrd, Josquin des Prés, Cherubini, Samuel Wesley, Gounod, W A Mozart, Elgar, and Vierne, to mention just a few. I wrote this setting for the Choir of Christ Church Cathedral Newcastle, this year. These motet settings are frequently sung in the Mass or Eucharist and the Roman office of Benediction.

LONG AGO PROPHETS KNEW

Fred Pratt Green MBE, who died in 2000 in England, aged 97, was perhaps the most prolific hymnographer of the 20th Century. He composed more than 300 hymns, including the hymn to celebrate the Queens Jubilee in 1977. His hymn was selected above that of Sir John Betjeman's offering, described as "banal and absolutely pathetic". Betjeman had spent three months on his effort; Green, a mere two hours!

Green was a Methodist minister and it is perhaps not surprising that he should write on social issues and other subjects overlooked, or ignored, by others. He did not start writing until towards the end of his ministry.

INFANT HOLY

This beautifully simple carol comes originally from Poland. Its date is uncertain but it may have been written as far back as the Middle Ages. However, whenever it was written, its message remains as clear and relevant today as in the past and, in my opinion, is arguably more successful and didactic than such very popular carols as the much loved 'Away in a manger'! The present translation was made by Edith Margaret Gellibrand Reed (1885-1933) who devoted her life to the cause of promoting good music among young people. It was first published in the December 1921 issue of *Music and Youth*, a magazine Edith Reed founded and edited, to promote musical education among young people.

The tune, which is that used for the original Polish carol, first appeared in England in the 1877 edition of *The Hymnal Companion to the Book of Common Prayer*, where it was set to 'Angels from the realms of glory'. However, it is now inseparable from 'Infant Holy' and makes a perfect marriage, both from the metrical point of view and also, the sense of the words.

The arrangement sung tonight is by that doyen of carol arrangers, Sir David Willcocks, who turned 90 years of age this year. Many carol arrangers turn a simple carol into an extended anthem form, difficult to learn and perform, losing the essential sense of fun and spontaneity in the process! But Sir David enhances these qualities in his arrangements. He followed his time as organist of King's College Cambridge with an equally distinguished time as Director of the Bach Choir. He is a humble and friendly Yorkshireman, as I discovered when I assisted him out of a car park dilemma he had managed to get into! He was most grateful!