

## **Wells Cathedral Sermon**

Evensong – 7 September 2019

I love the extraordinary. The greatest buildings we have created here on earth, the greatest symphonies written, the greatest artworks painted or sculpted... they are not mundane, they are not out of a mould, but unswervingly break the mould. They mint the coin afresh.

One of my very favourite buildings is the extraordinary Cathedral in Orvieto, a small city in the centre of Italy. It may be a mere whippersnapper compared to this mighty edifice, having only been constructed in the 14th century, but it's a gem nonetheless. Dedicated to the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, it stands proud on a volcanic outcrop, looming over a very pretty but relatively unassuming Renaissance town.

I came to love the place during the summer of 2012, when, escaping from the Olympics at the encouragement of our local council in southeast London, my husband and I took the opportunity to drive to Italy. To Orvieto. And it was to be a fabulous holiday. For four weeks, we pretended to be locals, going about our daily lives – collecting focaccia, eating gelato, drinking negronis, partaking in the nightly passeggiata – while other mere tourists came and went.

But despite seemingly going native, we were still wowed by the Cathedral in Orvieto every single evening, as the setting sun hit its west end, making the series of mosaics and friezes glitter in the orange light. A beautiful Gothic façade that is one of the great masterpieces of the Late Middle Ages, it prompted Pope Leo XIII to suggest that on Judgment Day, the Cathedral's own beauty would carry it up to heaven. And I can't help but think that Wells will be pretty close behind it.

But you don't have to go back to the Middle Ages to find beauty on such a level. Some, more recent creations also offer the unexpected within the expected. In London, just a stone's throw from Paddington Station, is a particularly wonderful 19th-century building: St Mary Magdalene, the masterpiece of architect George Edmund Street. Street was also responsible for the Royal Courts of Justice, but in this rather unassuming corner of London, a cramped inner-city slum as it once was, he squeezed a riotously beautiful, polychromatic temple onto an awkward site abutting the Grand Union Canal. But that was the very point. What Street wanted to provide, much like the architects of Wells or Orvieto, was the extraordinary within the ordinary. Through brick, stone and glass, he hinted at what lies beyond. To carry us up with beauty. And for those who lived in that slum, Street's church stood as a beacon of hope.

Our own small city thankfully has none of the slums of Street's Victorian era or the daily violence and warring factions seen in Renaissance Orvieto. But Wells or rather the Wells of 2019 certainly faces uncertainties, negativities, causes for concern – personal, political, global. And so we, like our Umbrian and Victorian predecessors, need constant access to the extraordinary. Which is what this building offers. But I think that a building alone isn't enough. After all, Wells Cathedral, like the Duomo in Orvieto and the Church of St Mary Magdalene in Paddington, was built with a purpose. A purpose of worship and evangelism and thought and prayer. And it is a building that is so exquisite in its beauty, in its extraordinariness, that we need to

acknowledge that in the way in which we worship here. For those who created it and, most importantly, the thing it was created for.

Poetry, incense, candles, vestments, lighting, banners, processions. Like the adornments of the temple of Solomon described in this evening's Old Testament Reading, these are the many ways in which – through which – humbly, we acknowledge that the things we seek in this building are not immediately within our grasp. And they can't be. Understanding the limitless love of God is a lifelong task. But while I, personally, love the conduits offered by things such as poetry, incense, candles, vestments, lighting, banners and processions – in fact, dear chapter, if you're still listening, the more the merrier – there is one thing, provided here every day, that helps us better than anything to move towards an understanding of God and his extraordinary acts. It is, of course, the music created within this Cathedral and that was, again, central to the worship of Solomon's Temple.

Music, by means of its total separation from the concrete, from the physical, suggests extraordinary matters. The 20th-century Swiss writer Max Picard put it beautifully when he wrote that in 'sound itself, there is a readiness to be ordered by the spirit and this is seen at its most sublime in music'. Steeped in German thought and word, Picard was echoing ideas that had been uttered by many before him, not least the 19th-century philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer:

Music stands [he wrote] quite apart from all the [other arts]. In it we do not recognize the copy, the repetition, of any idea of the inner nature of the world. Yet it is such a great and exceedingly fine art, its effect on man's innermost nature is so powerful, and it is so completely and profoundly understood by him in his innermost being as an entirely universal language [...] that in it we [...] have to look for more [...]. We must attribute to music a far more serious and profound significance that refers to the innermost being of the world and of our own self.

What Schopenhauer is driving at is that in music, we touch the philosophical and evade the physical. In fact, music is metaphysical. Schopenhauer's successor and, to some extent, refuter, another philosopher called Friedrich Nietzsche, called Richard Wagner's 1865 opera *Tristan und Isolde*, the greatest metaphysical work ever created. And that was because Wagner had communicated through music. Of course, Nietzsche, being the God-fearing and then God-denying, moustache-wearing irritant that he was, overlooked one other great metaphysical creation: not Wagner's *Tristan*, but Thomas Cranmer's evensong. I'm not saying that evensong is the only access point to the metaphysical enacted in this space, but I do consider it pretty supreme.

For every night, as the light descends around this great Cathedral – and it's going to get darker over the coming months – a spark of the divine is ignited. It is not visible, it is musical, metaphysical; it is a hint of that light invisible of which Bishop Lancelot Andrewes, overseer of the great King James Bible, once wrote. While each of us struggles to find our way to that light – its lack of immediate visibility within our world makes it hard to perceive – we rightly cling to those whose energies are focussed on aiding our transport to a place of understanding or, at least, partial insight – seeing within.

And so we must be thankful, as we begin another academic year, for those individuals, emblematic of the gifts of the spirit described by St Paul in this evening's New Testament reading – our choristers, choral scholars, vicars choral, organists – who form but part of a team here that allows us, every day, particularly at its end, to gain a glimpse of the divine. Evensong, that wonderful Anglican 'cut and shut' vehicle, formed out of the Catholic offices of Vespers and Compline, is the shrugging off of a day in which, despite all natural light, we so often perceive moral darkness and, simultaneously, the embracing of night, in which, despite the physical gloom, we are able to grasp 'a far more serious and profound significance' thanks to the beauty and music offered in this place. O worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness, the hymn goes. But it is due to evensong being a daily, routine office – like the saying of the Rosary or the utterance of a mantra – that the introduction of different responses, psalm chants, canticles, anthems and hymns proves so powerful. A combination of forces, both ordinary and extraordinary, with different cadences, tuttis, solos, harmonies and melodies, comes into play at a powerful point in our daily timetable.

It is not for nothing that as the sun sets, we come to perceive, to see, to hear the divine, the extraordinary, as our darkness is lightened by the metaphysicality of music, 'lend[ing] us a fragment of the immortal air' and 'a light to light us through time-fettered night', as we're told in this evening's anthem. And besides, in its temporal specificity, the office of evensong represents those crucial moments in the Christian story – the Incarnation, alluded to in the nightly canticles; and the Resurrection – both of which occurred not in daylight but in darkness and were yet swathed in dazzlement. In the microcosm of evensong, every twilight, as we hear our Cathedral choir and are reminded of music's unique 'readiness to be ordered by the spirit', we come closest to the 'innermost being of the world'. Amen.

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