

**Southern Cathedrals Festival Eucharist – Chichester Cathedral, Friday
16th July at 11.00 a.m.**

Readings: Rev 4:1-11/Rom 11:33-36/Jn 3: 1-5

There is a story told of Johann Sebastian Bach, when he was shown a new Church organ somewhere. He sat down at the console, pulled out every single stop, and declared, ‘I want to know if this organ has got any lungs.’ Whether any of his hearers – or even the great man himself - was impressed, Bach certainly knew about human lungs as well - that in the very act of singing, goodness knows how many muscles are used, in order to vary pitch, volume, timbre, and much else. Whether singing in a choir or blowing a trumpet, the end-result is about how ‘air’ is controlled, ‘wind’ channelled. No wonder it’s such a powerful image of the presence and power of the ‘Spirit’ – the ‘breath’ - of God, as well as a driving-force in the production of music.

At this year’s festival, the focus is on two very different musicians, born two hundred years ago, and the mantle of Bach hovers over both of them. Samuel Sebastian Wesley was given that middle name by his father in the German composer’s memory; and when he went on to become a great Cathedral organist, he campaigned – forthrightly almost to a fault - for the English organ to have a proper pedal-board, German-style. So it is to him that nimble-footed players in this country owe so much – but it also explains why clod-hopping attempts at pedal-playing by people like me are so hampered by having to wear size thirteen shoes with wide-fittings.

His legacy of Church music straddles the divide between the older tradition of the verse-anthem, and the Victoriana chromatic chords of the later nineteenth century. There is a ‘dry’ sweetness about the SS Wesley sound. Perhaps that reflects Wesley’s family background. On the one hand, there is the poetic legacy of his grandfather, Charles Wesley, arguably the greatest English hymn-writer of all, a master at punchy syllabics. On the other hand, his great-uncle, the Methodist leader John Wesley, found difficulty in making responsible relationships with women. More of that is what we find in Samuel Sebastian’s own father, whose children came, first, from a reluctant marriage, and then, in Samuel Sebastian’s case, without any marriage at all. And he apparently became a Roman Catholic, but later quietly returned to the Anglican fold – so what’s new. Some of all this baggage must have left a mark upon the young SS Wesley.

With Robert Schumann things could not be more different. He was born at Zwickau in Lutheran Saxony, at a time when the memory of Bach was coming back into vogue, and was a strong influence on him. Yet Schumann wrote little for the Church. He is part of the Romantic Movement search for truth, beauty and meaning in the String Quartet, the Symphony, the Song. But he was no Gareth Malone; he could never have charmed the most unlikely crowd into singing high-class music on television. Schumann didn't relate easily to people. But he could plumb the depths of human experience, culminating in those last two years of his tense life spent in seclusion. I remember a time of acute personal sadness when that haunting slow movement in the 'Rhenish' Symphony was a great comfort: all you can do when life is caving in on you is to accept those depths for what they are, and wait for a later time when some kind of coherence might break through. Superficial reassurance from the religious caring brigade didn't do me much good, so I asked it kindly to go away.

SS Wesley and Schumann in combination are a good parable for the Christian enterprise in our time, precisely because one of them is a devout musician of the Church, the other very much on its edge. Both are fragile figures, like all celebrities unusually gifted but obviously flawed people - whose music lives on, when the words of so many others have been long forgotten.

The reason why we have music festivals (I suspect) is that words on their own are not enough; for many people nowadays, in an age that mistrusts public debate, words are not always convincing. But sooner or later we have to use them, not just in what we sing, but in what we say. As a word-smith in the religious trade, I know that words must be used with care, whether in scripture-reading, praying, or in preaching, where they are vital; otherwise Christianity is no more than vague spirituality - even though that is what some people would really prefer it to be, in case it gets too close. The worship that we offer needs to blend music that explores and echoes and resonates, with words that inspire and engage, and that seek to interpret the mystery of God's greatness, and how human experience fits into it.

There is, therefore, a questing side to the life of faith, which is what we see in the gospel passage just read to us: Jesus in interview with Nicodemus, a well-placed Jew from a family with impeccable religious establishment connections, who does not have the courage to come to Jesus openly by day,

but has to do so under cover of night. It is an appropriate passage for Trinity Sunday, and for occasions like today when the Trinity prayers are used. Nicodemus has serious questions – and he is disturbed that he has them at all, because the religion he has inherited ought to be enough. In Nicodemus I can see a bit of myself – the religious official often expected to dole out certainties at the drop of a hat (or even a mitre!), and whose experiences make him suddenly challenged by Jesus. But I also see in Nicodemus today's questing outsider, the person whose life is spiritually in the dark, and who wants to speak with Jesus – not in a yak-yak churchy talking-shop – but on his own.

Make no mistake: this is all very real. Like music, Christianity is more than a mental activity, rightly engaging the intellect. Nor is it a purely historical exercise, which you can dabble in by reading about. It is profoundly geographical, because it lives and grows here and now in geographical space: a space where we often appear an unpleasant community, wrapped up in ourselves, insufficiently penitent about our glaring weaknesses. More time and energy could be spent on celebrating God, showing that He really is believable, and in a public space, which the speech of Christianity – though thankfully not the music - seems to have passed by, and from which many a secularist would like to banish us altogether. Anglicanism is no mere heritage industry. It is a bold, precious and vulnerable running experiment in the difficult but divinely-driven task of holding together Scripture, Tradition, and Reason – a real gift, like music itself, of the breath of God.

So we come again - together - to the altar of God, whether with Schumann-like lives of emotional turmoil, or Samuel Sebastian Wesley experiences of awkward family relationships. Whoever we are, and whatever our circumstances, however deep our doubts, however strong our convictions, like Nicodemus we can be changed, transformed - reborn in lung as well as in soul - so that, as this morning's liturgy puts it, 'we may find a voice' – yes, 'find a voice' – to sing the praises of the one true God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Kenneth Stevenson