

Trinity 5 Mattins 2019

In 1879 Edward Elgar, the composer of the anthem we have just heard, became bandmaster of the Worcester and County Lunatic Asylum. If the designation of mental illness as lunacy jars on our 21st century ears the management of that institution was, in fact, very enlightened. Elgar was appointed because music was seen to be important to the well-being of disturbed patients.

And music therapy has a long history stretching right back to the OT and this morning's reading about King Saul. That reading rather shockingly describes Saul's mental anguish as an evil spirit sent from God. But, we need to remember that the world view of the OT is of a world without secondary causes – everything, even suffering and evil, is traced back to God who is sovereign. That does not mean that we have to buy into the same world view in all its fullness. What, perhaps, is more helpful to know is that the Hebrew word for evil here means bad in the sense of someone with a bad temper. And certainly Saul is portrayed as a King with

violent and unpredictable mood swings; as someone who is paranoid and beset by inner demons. In our own day we would probably describe him as having a personality disorder. And his civil servants believed that the remedy for all this was music. So David was brought to court and told to play his harp in order that Saul might be calmed and his demons, if not eradicated, at least temporarily pacified.

The contemporary psychiatrist, Anthony Storr, in his fascinating book “Music and the Mind” suggests various reasons why music can be a source of healing for the anguished mind. One of those reasons is that music is structured and Storr suggests that music passes on this sense of order to the disturbed mind – and also to the disturbed body. Another psychiatrist, Oliver Sacks, describes how numerous neurological conditions have been helped in various ways by music therapy. For instance, those with Parkinson’s, he says, are helped by music with a firm rhythmic character; stroke patients with loss of speech are helped by song and so on. And when we see life-giving order and peace coming into

these situations of physical and mental breakdown we are seeing the marks of the Holy Spirit.

We have just heard Elgar's "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me", the very text Jesus used to announce his public ministry as we heard in our second reading. From that moment on he set people free from chaotic forms of evil and mental disintegration; he brought healing and forgiveness to those afflicted with disorders of body and soul; and he brought comfort and relief to those weighed down with suffering. But, this power of healing, as Luke's gospel makes clear, comes from the Holy Spirit, the life-giver and comforter. And this is always so. Whether healing is channelled through the skill of a doctor or through the ordered beauty of music or through the offering of prayer in the name of the Lord – all these are channels of the Holy Spirit.

Today we say farewell to 2 choristers, Jago and Josh; to two lay vicars Jake and Tom and to our organ scholar Mitch. We thank them very much for their contribution to the making of music in this place which has given us a foretaste of the

glory of God. But, let us remember today that through the power of the Holy Spirit music can also be a source of healing and renewal in ways that may surprise us. And for that grace of salvation let us praise the Lord as we stand to sing hymn 427.