

CANDLEMAS 2020

For mine eyes have seen thy salvation, which thou hast prepared in the sight of all people

Words from the Nunc Dimittis - the Latin for the first two words of Simeon's song, which has been said or sung in this cathedral every night since the Prayer Book was introduced, and before that for four hundred years or so at the night office of Compline. The musical settings of those words are some of the finest in our choral tradition. Think of William Byrd's Latin setting from 1605, with its rising and falling phrases - you can hear the yearning for a more peaceful existence under the new king, James. Or, Herbert Howell's setting written for King's Cambridge in 1944, where the exhaustion of a war-torn nation seeps his long phrases...and yet, in both pieces, we also hear a light breaking forth like an unexpected dawn: a yearning answered, a hope fulfilled, permission to depart in peace.

The yearning of Simeon and Anna for God's coming is one that speaks to all of us in our own search for meaning in life, perhaps especially to those of us in later life and indeed even if we wouldn't consider ourselves 'religious'. It's captured well by French novelist Andrei Makine in his book *A Life's Music*. In one very striking scene he depicts a man stuck at a railway station deep in the Urals one night in the 1970s, waiting for a delayed train to Moscow. He looks around him and sees a bleak landscape: a young mother, two soldiers, ruffians and a prostitute: an encapsulation of what he describes as the 'blind, grey mass with no aspirations, no hope, seemingly no regrets...that fatalism and resignation' that characterised lives in the Soviet Union. It sinks traveller into a mire of despondency and cynicism when, all of a sudden, his thoughts are interrupted by music: someone, on a distant piano, playing chords. Makine writes:

I look at my watch: half-past three. Even more than the time and place at which this music has emerged, what surprises me is its detachment. It renders my philosophical rage of a few minutes ago perfectly futile. Its beauty does not invite me to flee the smell of tinned food and alcohol that hangs over the mass of sleepers. It simply marks a frontier, evokes a different order of things. Suddenly everything is illuminated by a truth that has no need of words: this night lost in void of snow; a good hundred travellers huddled here; each seems as if he were breathing gently upon the fragile spark of his own life; this station with its vanished platforms; and these notes stealing in like moments from an utterly different night.

It simply marks a different frontier, evokes a different order of things. Beautiful words. For the fourth-century theologian Athanasius, every human has the capacity to cross that frontier. Men and women are stretched, he wrote, between what they are by nature and what they are called to become by God's promise. Yet, he would say, that in our longing for God, we regularly lose our orientation, become weighed down by our own desires and confusions - and our eyes become directed downwards instead of upwards, our vision shrivelled by cynicism.

Yet the wonder of the Incarnation is, for Athanasius, that God comes to meet us: not as a thunderbolt from above, nor in a scripture dictated by an angel or by the force of an army, but in a human being. With God having become human, now all *our* senses, he would say, have the capacity to reveal God to us: he famously wrote, “He became human, that we might become divine”. Each of us might now cross this new frontier, as if through C.S. Lewis’ eponymous wardrobe: we might, in our lives, discern Eternity in our midst; might, with Simeon and Anna, see that light breaking into our darkness.

And note, if you might, that this all happens on an ordinary day in the busy Temple courts, amidst the jostling politics of the priesthood and Pharisees, the noisy exchange of cash; the institutional paraphernalia and heaving crowds of pilgrims: like any English cathedral, really. And here, in the *mêlée*, an elderly priest and a prayerful old woman see something missed by everyone else. Note they’re not granted an angelic appearance; there’s no star, there’s no miracle. They have been so steeped in prayer that they spot what the world misses. The Light shines in the darkness, and they comprehend it.

It’s worth remembering this scene. Luke will later present the adult Jesus expressing almost contempt for those who minister in the Temple and will generally prefer to deliver his teaching in the countryside, away from this high-octane politics of the city. He’ll describe the religious teachers of his own day, to paraphrase Matthew 23, as ‘whitewashed tombs: all the veneer’s in place, their lawyers are lined up to defend them, and yet their house will be left desolate.’

It has a certain ring of familiarity, doesn’t it? Indeed, if we are depressed with the current state of the Church of England, Candlemas must surely offer us some hope: Luke makes it very clear God’s salvation is spotted by a faithful priest and an elderly woman humbly, quietly, diligently seeking out the frontier into God’s kingdom and who discover - to their joy and delight - God himself crossing the frontier to meet with them. As we gather to break bread and drink wine, we too celebrate heaven in our midst, that God has drawn near to us in Jesus Christ and, by his cross, nothing can now separate us from his love. In all the confusion of our society and Church, may we learn afresh with Simeon and Anna what it means to learn how to pray and how to die: that we might in time be able to say, with them, ‘mine eyes have seen thy salvation, let thy servant depart in peace’. Amen.