

Chichester Cathedral
Fifteenth Sunday after Trinity, 10.00am Mattins, 9 September 2018

So might we compare last night's 'Last Night of the Proms' with the worship of heaven as described in the book of *Revelation*? It's a bit of a stretch, but not a totally crazy idea. For a start, at your typical finale to the Proms there is joy, and plenty of it. The performers exchange their usual black outfits for bright dresses and pin flowers in their buttonholes, and the conductor's podium is festooned with streamers. And although usually considered a thoroughly British evening, the flags on display come from all around the world. Even the conductors in recent years have been Finnish, Czech, and American. So although the Last Night may not quite cover every nation, tribe, people, and language, it's heading in that direction. And it isn't a stony-faced, silent crowd – this multitude raises its voices together in song, in a way that does have echoes of heavenly worship.

What you won't get in the Albert Hall, however, is half an hour of silence. I think the Last Night crowd would struggle with that, and indeed it comes as a bit of surprise in the *Revelation to John*. 'There was silence in heaven for about half an hour', and this silence follows the opening of the seventh and final seal on a scroll. After the Lamb of God opens each of the first four seals, one by one the four horsemen of the apocalypse are released, bringing violence and death. After the fifth seal, John tells us, he saw the souls of those who had been slaughtered for the word of God. The sixth brings a cataclysmic earthquake and the day of God's wrath.

What could possibly follow all this, as the final seal is broken? Just silence; at least for a while - I love the fact that John's extraordinary vision contains the prosaic, down to earth observation, 'for about half an hour'. The quiet is eventually broken in an anything but prosaic way: by seven angels with seven trumpets.

So what is going on in that silence? Many theories have been put forward, but the most convincing builds on a comparison between the worship of heaven as portrayed in *Revelation*, and what we know of worship in the Jerusalem temple. Temple worship featured trumpets, and incense, both mentioned in today's reading, and there are many other parallels that can be drawn with other parts of Revelation. Most relevant of all, is the time of prayer in the temple liturgy. Our thirty minute silence is best explained through a Jewish tradition: that sometimes the angels of heaven stop singing, so that the prayers and praises of Israel may better be heard.

In that half an hour, then, God is listening. Listening to the prayers of his people.

The *Revelation to John* is a complex, visionary book, full of strange imagery and repeated motifs. Seven golden lamp stands, seven stars, seven churches, seven seals, seven trumpets – to give just one example. The book is notoriously hard to interpret, and it has sometimes been used for off the wall predictions about the end of the world.. But underlying it all, the plot line is actually pretty clear: God's people are

being horribly persecuted, their persecutors will get their comeuppance, God's people will be vindicated and blessed in the new Jerusalem, when all creation is made new.

So in the silence the prayers of heaven are hushed, that the prayers of God's suffering servants on earth may better be heard and attended to. The prayers God is listening to are emerging from a context of persecution and injustice. Of course there will be other prayers being made as well: perhaps prayers such as Jonah prays in our first reading: an angry prayer because Jonah doesn't like the fact that God has been merciful to the Ninevites. Jonah's personal agenda needs and receives God's wider perspective; in this way he is answered not in the way that he wants, but in the way that he needs. An outcome like that is the best thing for many of our prayers!

God does not neglect the Jonah type of prayer, but the *Revelation* reading suggests that in that half an hour God's *primary* concern is for the suffering, the persecuted and the martyrs: to listen to their heartfelt prayers.

Which perhaps indicates a better shape for our prayer than personal agendas and gripes: to attend to and pray for the heartfelt prayers of the suffering in today's world, and the stories and situations out of which they emerge.

I may seem to have strayed a long way from Last Night of the Proms. But last night's Last Night wasn't all waving flags and patriotic songs. For example, it included the world premiere of *Songs of Darkness, Dreams of Light* a work commemorating the end of World War One, and a reminder that contemporary violence shows this was *not* the 'war to end all wars'. And then there was Hubert Parry's setting of John Milton's 'At a Solemn Music', which expresses a longing for the perfect music of heaven. To suitably jarring harmony, the audience heard how human sin 'broke the fair music'; and yet there is a desire to keep in tune with heaven until, at last, we 'live with [God], and sing in endless morn of light'.

So there may not have been much silence in the Albert Hall, but the suffering of the world, and the promise of renewal, were not entirely absent. And the promise contained in the *Revelation to John* is of a God who not only hears prayers, but labours for healing and reconciliation and peace. This same labour is at the heart of what Christ's Church is called to be and do – sustained by the divine promise at the end of *Revelation*, of a new creation in which there is no need for half an hour of silence, for weeping and suffering and death are no more. AMEN