

Lent Compline Talks 2017

## Faith in and at Work

St Mary's Kidlington

Holy Week Tuesday, 11th April

Prof John Morris

### Musicians

Because this is our one sung compline, in this series of short addresses on work and faith, I want us to think about musicians and music which, with the linked dancing feature a lot in both the old and the new testament.

One of the early references is to a harpist. When Saul was troubled in spirit he asked his servants to 'seek out a cunning harp player' – who turned out to be David, who would be king after Saul and one of the most prominent persons of the old testament. "And it came to pass that when the evil spirit was on Saul that David took a harp and played so Saul was refreshed and was well." Music can literally reach parts of the brain that other sedatives cannot touch. MRI shows us that music tends to be represented on the opposite side of the brain to speech – and is associated much more with emotion than with logic. It is interesting that even when well advanced in dementia, people can often join in singing a song that they know. Music in one form or another has been known to rouse people from a coma when other stimuli such as words have failed, and music therapy is a well-known part of therapy for various mental disorders.

Music and dance form an important part of all celebrations. Continuing the story of David in 1 Samuel, "When David and Saul returned from defeating the Philistines, women came out of all the cities of Israel with singing and dancing, tabrets and instruments of music." But you will remember that this was when, because they praised David more than him, that Saul started to become suspicious and eventually tried to kill David. Music heightens emotional responses in all sorts of ways.

Some of the psalms – particularly 149 and 150 the praise psalms – have extensive mention of the music of the day. "Praise the Lord, for it is good to sing praises" (Ps 149) and best known in Ps 150 "Praise him in the sound of the trumpet, praise him with psaltery and harp; praises him with timbrel and dances; praise him with stringed instruments and organs; praise him upon the loud cymbals" Praise to our God has always been associated with music, dance and singing.

But music is used not only for praise and joy, but also for in displays of grief. When Jesus was preaching, a ruler came to him saying "my daughter has died but come and lay your hand on her and she will live' When Jesus went to the ruler's house, it was surrounded by musicians and many people making a great deal of noise, who Jesus sent away before he healed the child. And where would our Remembrance Day services be without the solemn music? Music is often a source of great comfort at funerals when so often whatever has been a favourite piece of music or song is asked for.

Music and religious ceremonies have been yoked together since time immemorial and in all civilisations. For example, it is clear from countless wall murals that in Ancient Egypt instruments of all kinds, including string, wind and percussion were widely used with the numerous religious rituals, with associated dancers and those listening clapping their hands. Sadly none of the music itself has come down to us. In the Christian church, church bells announce that services are about

to occur; bells announce the consecration of the host. It's not just the hymns and settings of the mass for services, but also the wonderful solo organ music used as voluntaries. Most of the great early vocal music has a religious aspect. One only has to think of some of the greatest classical choral and orchestral music and its popularity even among those with little or no religious faith. Last weekend Woodstock Parish Church was packed out for two nights running for a performance the highlights of which were Mozart's Ave Verum Corpus and his Requiem Mass. And music of a very different style forms a huge part of the worship of gospel and evangelical services.

But music can also stir the emotions in very different ways. Music of a variety of types have played a large part in military action. I suspect that it was not literally the blast of the ram's horn trumpets that made the walls of Jericho come tumbling down, but that the Israelite army, hyped up by parading round the walls of Jericho for six days, were all keyed up waiting for the trumpet signal. So that when the blast of the trumpets finally came it signalled the final successful advance – 'every man straight ahead'. Reading that phrase brought back to my mind descriptions of the battalions of Scottish soldiers who marched, to martial bagpipe music – every man straight ahead – into no-man's land during battles in the first world war. Yes, music is capable of arousing very deep emotions, for good or for ill – you only have to think of Hitler's passion for the music of Wagner and how that affected his world view.

Another very different way in which music with dance was used for ill is illustrated by the party that Herod threw for his birthday, with all his lords and captains round him. Down below, in the dungeons was John the Baptist who had dared publicly to criticise Herod for taking Herodias as his wife despite the fact that she had previously been married to his brother. Herodias was at the party, as was her daughter, Salome. The dance – doubtless to music – that Salome performed before Herod and his assembled guests so entranced Herod (who had also no doubt drunk copiously at the party, but it is quite possible almost literally to become drunk on music) that in the hearing of all the guests he told Salome to ask 'whatever she wished – up to half his kingdom'. And, as you will remember, Salome asked her mother for advice and asked for, and was given the head of John the Baptist on a plate because Herod could not take back the promise given in front of all his guests. Yes, music and dance (particularly when coupled with wine) can be dangerous stuff.

Perhaps that is why St Paul urged the Ephesians 'and be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess, but be filled with the spirit, speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs and making melody in your heart to the Lord'. And perhaps that is why the Quaker's (the Society of Friends) eschew any form of music in their services – they don't trust it not to engender the wrong sort of emotions.

Musicians, through their art, have very great powers to affect the emotions, and music can be chosen to represent things of supreme importance. And nothing could be more important than the point at which we are finally called to meet our maker. Who can hear the trumpet solo that starts "And the trumpet shall sound and the dead shall be raised" in the Messiah without the hair on the back of their neck standing up – I know mine always does. Matthew gives us a graphic vision of the end of time "And then shall appear the sign of the Son of Man in the heavens, and we shall see him coming in great glory, and he shall send his angels with a great sound of trumpets." Yes, the angels of God are also musicians!