

Solus ad victimam

As we look to Holy Week, the Anthem we had planned for Palm Sunday Evensong at St Michael's summarises its inner journey in the words of a poem by Peter Abelard (1079-1142), Solus ad victimam. Translated by Helen Waddell (1889-1965), and set to powerful & solemn music by Kenneth Leighton (1929-88), this conjunction of three talented people enables 12th century words to meet 20th century music to vivid effect.

“Alone to sacrifice thou goest, Lord, giving thyself to Death whom thou hast slain.

For us thy wretched folk is any word? Who know that for our sins this is thy pain?

For they are ours, O Lord, our deeds, our deeds. Why must thou suffer torture for our sin?

Let our hearts suffer in thy Passion, Lord, that very suffering may thy mercy win.

This is the night of tears, the three days' space, sorrow abiding of the eventide,

Until the day break with the risen Christ, and hearts that sorrowed shall be satisfied.

So may our hearts share in thine anguish, Lord, that they may sharers of thy glory be;

Heavy with weeping may the three days pass, to win the laughter of thine Easter Day.”

With all Church Services cancelled, here's an online link to listen to.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vCfyVmPbZ9s>

Kenneth Leighton was born in Wakefield and was a chorister at the Cathedral there. He won a scholarship to Queen's College, Oxford, and graduated in both Classics and Music in 1951. Leighton spent the majority of his career composing and teaching Music at the University of Edinburgh, where he was Reid Professor from 1970 until his death in 1988.

I first encountered Leighton's music as a student at St Andrews, singing his Missa Brevis with the Chapel Choir, and Laudes Montium (commissioned by the University Music Society). His setting of George

Herbert's "Let all the world", with its rhythmic intensity and well-judged dissonances is popular with choirs, as are his Responses and his setting of the Coventry Carol.

Helen Waddell was born in Japan, to missionary parents from Northern Ireland. One of the first women to graduate from Queen's University Belfast in 1911, she later studied in Oxford & Paris, becoming an expert in medieval literature and also the Desert Fathers of the 3rd & 4th centuries. Her books on the lives & sayings of these pioneers of Christian monasticism opened up the Egyptian desert to the general reader.

Her well-researched historical novel on the life of Peter Abelard (whose poetry she also translated) was a best seller in the 1930s. Sadly her creative life was cut short by what was probably early onset dementia, which left her as a contemplative for nearly two decades.

Peter Abelard – philosopher, teacher, poet, musician – was the brightest intellect of 12th century France. Crowds attended his lectures at Notre Dame de Paris. Aged 35, his logical academic life was turned upside down by romance. He and his most talented student Héloïse, a gifted linguist, fell in love, had a son (whom she named Astrolabe after the scientific instrument!) and secretly married.

I suppose nowadays Abelard would fall foul of safeguarding; then it was her jealous uncle who cut short their relationship in a most cruel way. Their love now limited to letters, some of which survive to this day, Peter Abelard became a monk, and Héloïse a nun, eventually a strong-minded Abbess. They had arguments both theological & liturgical with Bernard of Clairvaux.

In death their religious communities arranged for them to be buried side by side, their star-crossed lives becoming one of history's great love stories.

That was The End of my thoughts before Public Worship was suspended on St Patrick's Day, Choir Practice being the first thing to be cancelled. So the last music we had sung as a Choir (until further notice) came to mind.

The new Mass Setting we had learned together by Cabena, written in the liturgical revolution of the 1960s. A sad & slightly sinister setting in the Dorian mode, somewhat reminiscent of Leighton in D, and strangely effective for Lent 3.

Our Anthem, Herbert Howells' setting of verses from Psalm 42, was composed in the midst of World War II, but, as Tony Pugh remarked, 'with a little bit of Gershwin' in it.

**Like as the hart desireth the water-brooks;
so longeth my soul after thee, O God.**

**My soul is athirst for God, yea, even for the living God;
when shall I come to appear before the presence of God?
My tears have been my meat day and night;
while they daily say unto me, Where is now thy God?**

When shall I come to appear before the presence of God?

And the Gospel from John 4, Jesus to the Samaritan woman at the well, “the hour is coming when you shall worship the Father neither on this Mount(ain) nor in Jerusalem... God is a Spirit and they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth.”

Best wishes and blessings to all our choirs & congregations.



Richard Barnes – 22/03/20.