

## Sermon in Lydney Parish Church to mark the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the death of Herbert Howells

It is the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his death, but it is in the place of his birth that we meet tonight to honour the memory of Herbert Howells and to allow his music to tune us in to heaven. He died in London on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of February 1983 and is buried in Westminster Abbey, alongside Elgar, Walton, Stanford and Vaughan Williams. But he was born in Lydney on the 17<sup>th</sup> of October 1892, learning to play the organ first of all in Lydney Baptist Church, where his father was organist, though later he sang in the choir and played the organ here in the Parish Church, as the memorial declares. We honour tonight a son of the Forest and we celebrate a great church musician.

For all that we delight in his being a son of the Forest, a local lad made good if ever there was one, we must be grateful that he forsook the Forest and, stage by stage, found a wider world in which to use his talent. Clearly very significant was his association with Gloucester Cathedral, which is why it is so good that the Cathedral Choir are with us this evening. Significant for the musical works performed there - ranging from Handel's *Messiah*, which deeply inspired the young Howells when he heard it at a Three Choirs Festival, to his own *Hymnus Paradisi*, much of it derived from his Requiem for his son who died in infancy, which received its first performance in the Cathedral. Significant also for the people he met there, and principal among them Herbert Brewer, from whom he received lessons from the age of 13 and to whom he was articled at the age of 17, staying until he won his scholarship to the Royal College three years later.

I do not know exactly what the affect of those three years was upon him, but it does seem to me that part of what he absorbed in Gloucester, and which was to serve him well in future years, was an instinct about the worship of the Church, or more particularly about the worship of the Church of England and its *Book of Common Prayer*, and yet more particularly the worship of its cathedrals.

Herbert Howells composed other things of course. He set many of Walter de la Mare's poems to music. He wrote some instrumental music, though we hear little of it today. But Howells was essentially a composer for the liturgy. He first met that world in Gloucester, though later, for just a short time, was Assistant Organist at Salisbury. His first liturgical work, his Mass in the Dorian Mode, was written for Westminster Cathedral Choir in 1912, the year he went to the Royal College. But, though he wrote for the Mass and for Morning Prayer, it was for Evening Prayer, for Choral Evensong, that he was most prolific, writing more than 20 settings of the *Magnificat* and the *Nunc Dimittis*. I suppose his Collegium Regale, *Coll Reg*, for King's Cambridge is the most famous and the most frequently sung. Here in Gloucestershire, of course, the setting we have heard tonight, his *Gloucester Service*, has a special place. But there are so many more. Not to mention his psalm chants, for psalmody is the staple diet of the divine office, and his responses, that strike terror into precentors - at least they always struck terror into this ex-precentor!

I chose the readings for this evening - they always ask you to choose the readings long before you know what you want to preach about! - because they give us two biblical pictures of the predictable on-going daily worship of the people of God. Isaiah Chapter 6 speaks of a highly significant moment in the prophet's life. It is the occasion when he experiences God's call. "Whom shall I send and who will go for us?" "Here am I, Lord, send me." A unique moment for Isaiah, but the setting is not unique. The setting is routine. Isaiah has gone into the temple and in the temple there is worship going on. They are singing, "Holy, holy, holy." I'm not sure who the "they" are, but the liturgy is being celebrated and the incense is burning as the prayers ascend - "the house was filled with smoke" (shades of Stainer intervene!). And what does that do for Isaiah? It lifts him

from earth to heaven. He doesn't hear the earth-bound singers. He is caught up in the song of the angels. He doesn't hear the words of the priest. He finds himself drawn into the conversation of heaven. He finds himself in dialogue with the Lord of hosts.

That's the potential of the liturgy. Not just on the great occasions, when all the stops are pulled out, and not just by the organist, though such occasions do indeed have the power to sweep people off their feet and put them down again somewhere quite different. That's the potential of the liturgy every day. The man or woman who wanders in, may be in search of refreshment, may be just in search of good music, may be with no motive at all, and, hearing the responses and the psalms and the canticles and the anthem is transported to the heavenly places, touched, transformed. All worship is intended to be transformative. In that moment through that music for that person, God becomes real, life changes, may be, as with Isaiah, vocation clarifies. The composer and the performer needs to know - they are handling something precious and powerful and wonderful. I think Herbert Howells knew that. He writes as if his music might through the action of the Holy Spirit bring the hearer into communion with the Living God.

I suppose that is why I am an unrepentant marketer. Every day, well almost every day, the Cathedrals of England offer in a very unspectacular way this offering of prayer and praise that has the potential to touch the heart, to renew, to refresh, to change. We offer it whether anybody comes or not. It is no less valid on those days when there is scarcely anybody there but the choir and the clergy, with a verger appearing a key moments, and, of course, there are always the angels, usually unseen and unheard, but making their presence felt in more ethereal ways. It isn't less valid on a day like that, for we are giving God the glory and offering his church and his world up to him as a duty and a joy. It isn't less valid, but it is a missed opportunity. Evensong on Radio 3 is a delight and praise the Lord it is going back to Wednesdays. But Evensong there in the Cathedral, not on Wednesdays but every day, is a wonderful gift on offer and we ought to market it well, so that many more can experience it, to their soul's good. Even from Lydney, deep in the Forest, sometimes people might set out, all the way to Gloucester, for Choral Evensong!

Our second lesson reinforces this theme. Zechariah, the old priest, soon to be the father of John the Baptist, is taking his turn doing the evening liturgy. In cathedral terms, he is the canon in residence! There's incense again. There's prayer again. No mention of music this time. There's an angel, only one, but one with a very clear mission. And there are people and they are waiting outside for Zechariah to emerge to bless them. But he can't because he has seen a vision and been struck dumb. The point once again is that something really special happens - the annunciation to Zechariah that began the whole saga that leads to Bethlehem and later to Calvary - but within the context of the ordinary. Every day the priest went into the sanctuary to offer the incense. Zechariah didn't do it every day, only when it was his turn, but every day it happened. And every day the people were there outside, praying, waiting for the priest to come out to them. It was predictable. It was reliable. It was part of the cycle of their lives.

I think Herbert Howells understood that, for the music he wrote for the divine office was not, on the whole, spectacular, never over the top. It was sensitive to the function of the liturgy to be a daily offering of prayer, to be in a way quite ordinary, for all its restrained beauty. There he was setting the same texts over and over again and knowing how they would be sung over and over again at the hour of the evening offering of prayer. And so they will be for many a year to come.

I never tire of saying when I can to those who work in cathedrals that they must never lose sight of what a cathedral choir is for. It exists to enhance the daily offering of prayer and praise. There are some treats and some jollies in being a cathedral choir. Sometimes you sing a concert and people come and applaud and wise men write encouraging reviews. Sometimes you make a recording and may be with it some money. Sometimes you do a broadcast and, though not quite

on the same scale as filming Harry Potter, it's quite exciting, watching for the red light and getting the timing right and being determined you will not cough. Sometimes you go on tour, even to exotic places. But it's not what you exist for. You exist to sing the Mass and to sing the daily office, in season out of season, that God may be glorified and his people transformed. The moment that ceases to be the absolute priority, we're in trouble. I think Herbert Howells understood that.

But we're not in a cathedral tonight. We are in a parish church, the parish church where Herbert Howells sang and first experienced the Anglican liturgy. Cathedrals and parish churches are different, but at heart they have in common that they are both of them centres of worship and mission. There are not the musical resources to sing every day in a parish church, but, if there is a building, there is a place that needs to be prayed in. I don't have much time for those who think our parish churches are no longer fit for purpose and that some of them should be declared redundant. But I do get quite upset when I find a church that is used only once a week. George Herbert, whom the Church remembers this coming week, had it right. "Seven whole days, not one in seven, I will praise thee." What I would like to see is every parish church prayed in by a little group of people each day. They might even manage to sing a hymn - you don't need an organ to sing a hymn, though a tuning fork can come in handy! Just like the folk in Jerusalem who gathered at the hour of the incense offering and prayed. And I'd like them, when they meet, to sense their fellowship with all those other people doing the same in churches across the diocese and beyond and, in particular, to say to themselves, "There's them in Gloucester, singing Evensong now. I wonder whether they're singing any Howells today?" and to have a real sense of communion, an understanding that we are engaged together in a wonderful joint enterprise that joins us all together and has us all, fleetingly, in tune with heaven.

**+Michael Gloucestr:**