

Sermon at the special evening service on The Presentation of Christ in the Temple

Sunday 29th January

In thanksgiving for the gift of music and for John Varney's years of service



The Temple in Jerusalem that Mary and Joseph brought the child Jesus to was a place of music-making. It was the focal point of the people's worship of God. The place where they came from day to day to offer praise in the best ways they knew how. The psalms which we still sing are a lasting testament to that. It's amazing to think that those very same words which we sing from the service books of our church were once sung in the Temple so many thousands of years ago. So in Psalm 104 we read:

As long as I live I shall sing to the Lord;
I shall sing psalms to my God all my life long.

Well, John Varney has been doing literally that. Pretty much all his life long he has been singing psalms to our God – and leading many others to do so too: directing them to observe those funny lines and dashes, pauses and changes to the chant that sometimes seem so mystifying! What a wonderful vocation to have: leading the praises of God! In more youthful years John first received that invitation and he gave himself fully to it. If you've heard the wonderful clock he now has at home, chiming the hours with melodies from J S Bach, you will recognise it as symbolic of how music early on came to be absolutely everything for John. He might be retiring from the post here as Director of Music now, but we can be quite sure that he will not in any sense be retiring from music-making. We confidently trust that he will find other ways to widen his enjoyment and participation in that – and we know that he will certainly continue to have a ministry in God's Church. For in many parishes the availability of a retired organist is often a real God-send.

The motto of the Royal School of Church Music is, from Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians: 'I will sing with the spirit and with the understanding also'. John's love of church music has always been the outward expression of his own personal sense of being created and loved by God. Not all church musicians have that. So perhaps what we ought to be most thankful for today is that for so many years we have had a Director of Music here who has cared first of all about his inner relationship with God, whose devotion to music-making has genuinely flowed from his spirituality. John Varney wouldn't claim – I think – to be Frederick George Handel reincarnate (much as he idolises that particular composer!). Yet to the best of his abilities John too has

tried to beautify the House of God in its offering of music. He has done that here for us so faithfully. All those Sundays. All those Friday choir practices, turning out again and again on dark, cold January evenings when it would have been nicer to stay at home with his feet up and the tv on. We shall long remember Christmas carol services, special events such as the singing of Faure's Requiem (just last November). And not least the incredible summer trips to Tewkesbury and Sherbourne and elsewhere. Golden memories for us – and I know especially for John himself. Much for to be very thankful for indeed.

So for all of us there come moments when we can finally step down and gratefully accept a slower pace of life. New opportunities usually open up. Other ways for us to continue our lives with God. But it's always a bit traumatic to retire, always a bit of an unknown. A future, difficult to anticipate, also faced Mary and Joseph that day in the Temple. The old prophetess Anna spoke some oddly disturbing words. The sword which *would* pierce Mary's heart would lead her into the mystery of her Son's redemptive suffering for the world.

So it is that music leads us all into the depths of the great mystery of our Christian faith. A good sermon can help us to understand better, but it's often singing that can lead us more surely, more deeply into the truths of the living God. So it is that music and singing appears so often in the Bible. At the end of the Last Supper we hear that the disciples sang the Passover hymn before going out to the Mount of Olives and the Garden of Gethsemane. When Paul is in prison the Acts of the Apostles tells us how he and Silas were, in the middle of the night, singing praises to God – when suddenly there was an earthquake and they were set free. Often just singing to God, even literally in the midst of all our troubles, can set us free and open up new vistas. James advises the early Christians in his Letter: 'Is anyone among you in trouble? Let him pray. Is anyone in good heart? Let him sing praises'.

So we all join together this evening in doing that. Let's sing indeed from the bottom of our hearts to the One who holds us in the mystery of Love. Giving thanks for these years of faithful commitment from his servant, John. Looking forward to building on the good foundations of music-making in worship that John has laid for us: for its renewal and development in our life here – which will bring its own challenges and open up good new opportunities. Above all, giving thanks for this most wonderful gift of music, which enables us to release ourselves in a way that goes so completely beyond words, and beyond all the limitations of our thinking: God-given melody which heals and restores and can bring us all into the peace of God that passes understanding.

Father Andrew