

Choral Evensong Harvest Festival 2017

Rev Godfrey Hilliard

For the Lord giveth wisdom: out of his mouth cometh knowledge and understanding. Proverbs 2: 6

The tradition of celebrating Harvest Festival in churches as we know it today began in 1843, when the Reverend Robert Hawker invited his parishioners to a special thanksgiving service for the harvest at his church at Morwenstow in Cornwall. Victorian hymns such as "*We plough the fields and scatter*", "*Come ye thankful people, come*" helped popularise his idea of harvest festival and spread the annual custom of decorating churches with home-grown produce for the Harvest Festival service.

Thanksgiving ceremonies and celebrations for a successful harvest are both worldwide and very ancient. In Britain, we have given thanks for successful harvests since pagan times. We celebrate this day by singing, praying and decorating our churches with baskets of fruit and food, usually during mid to late September or early October. Harvest Festival reminds Christians of all the good things God gives them. This makes them want to share with others who are not so fortunate. In schools and in Churches, people bring food from home to a Harvest Festival Service and collections are made for organisations like the Food Bank. As the history of the Harvest festival has progressed from days in Cornwall in 1843, so today we use Harvest festival as an opportunity to consider not just the thanksgiving of the harvest that guarantees that we will eat for another year. It gives us the opportunity to consider the implications that harvest festival has on a local and global scale.

The Church of England is proud of its idiosyncratic traditions. Harvest Festival is one and Choral Evensong is another and this evening, in this beautiful and idiosyncratic church, we celebrate them both. There were two reports of competing trends in British church attendance in the news recently. Evensong attendance is up but cathedral tourism is down for a number of reasons including admission fees.

Thousands of people are turning out to hear free choral music around Britain, many for the first time. This beautiful church music has been

around for centuries and is getting a new audience due to a new website set up to enable people to find choral evensong services at cathedrals, colleges and churches anywhere in Britain and Ireland. St Mary's advertises on this website-yes, we have come into the 21st century! The website is now receiving about 8,500 hits a month and 11,500 followers a month and that number is rising. There are now 505 churches, chapels and cathedrals with their own pages on the website and the number keeps growing and the effect on congregations is staggering. I hope you will follow our website to keep up with our music programme which we hope to expand in the future as a part of our vision growth. From my own family experience, I have a god daughter living in Exeter, who is not exactly "gospel greedy" but she and her family are regular attenders at Choral Evensong in Exeter Cathedral.

BBC Radio 3 Choral Evensong celebrated its 90th anniversary this autumn with a live broadcast from the Abbey on Wednesday 28th September, on the Eve of the Feast of St Michael and All Angels. The service was sung by the Choir of Westminster Abbey conducted by Organist and Master of the Choristers, James O'Donnell, who enjoyed giving an organ recital here not long ago. Apart from a problem in 1970, Choral Evensong has been broadcast every week since the very first transmission. That service was live on the National Programme from Westminster Abbey on Thursday 7th October 1926 and even during the war years, Choral Evensong was still broadcast, although for two years from 1940 to 1942 the venues were not revealed - simply from 'a public school chapel' or 'a Western or Northern Cathedral'.

In the popular imagination, evenings in the colleges of Oxford and Cambridge are a time of drunken hedonism, white tie parties or angry political agitation, depending on one's preference according to the Daily Telegraph, and they should know! However, one evening pursuit which has been enjoying an unexpected boost in popularity is Choral Evensong. College chaplains have seen a steady but noticeable increase in attendances at this service which combine contemplative music with the language of the Book of Common Prayer and the King James Bible. College chaplains say the mix of music, silence and centuries-old language appears to have taken on a new appeal for a

generation more used to instant and constant communications, often conducted in 140 characters of Twitter rather than the phrases of Cranmer. One chaplain commented;

“We get people, especially very hard working postgraduate students who say that it provides a time towards the end of the day, when you can just sit in silence and tune out all of these influences and instead tune in God perhaps,” he said.

“We get a lot of people who perhaps come to faith or return to faith by being drawn into that worship experience.....

Although the language of the Prayer Book is rather alien to modern ears, precisely for that reason it’s also less threatening and more inclusive.”

Melvyn Bragg has said that it is a disgrace that the Bible is no longer read or taught in schools – but what would it mean if it were? Bragg’s interest in the Bible is not that he thinks it is true, but that the language of the Authorised Version of 1611 is beautiful – which, in parts, it undoubtedly is.

Bragg compares the Bible and the Book of Common Prayer to Shakespeare and this captures something very important. They are all texts written to be read out loud, indeed to be acted. Both the priests and the congregation have their parts to play and it is only by reciting the words, or by listening to them as a collective action, that they can do their work.

This is what the law still more or less says that schools ought to do. There is a requirement for a daily act of worship of a “wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character” in all state schools. In Bragg’s childhood this would have meant readings, or performances, from the Bible every morning. But that law is a dead letter nowadays.

The Ouseley Trust is a registered charity set up to promote and maintain to a high standard the choral services of the Church of England, the Church in Wales and the Church of Ireland. It does this by making grants to cathedrals, choral foundations, parish churches, choir schools and other relevant institutions and tonight’s Choral Evensong comes to you courtesy of their generous grant, for which we are very grateful and came about by the insight of our truly excellent Director of Music, Robert Woolley, with his part in the vision for musical excellence here at St Mary’s, and Hugh Bryant and his friends in the Prayer Book Society,

who strive to maintain this excellent liturgical heritage which we ignore at our peril.

“For the Lord giveth wisdom: out of his mouth cometh knowledge and understanding.”

The book of Proverbs gives us wise advice. We will be well advised to heed these words because they apply to us at St Mary’s when it comes to our approach to the traditions that we hold so dear. The wisdom of knowledge and understanding, sometimes from the forgotten books like Proverbs, give us this insight because we only hear it at the readings chosen for Evensong. We forget them, like Harvest Festival, at our peril.

“For the Lord giveth wisdom: out of his mouth cometh knowledge and understanding”.

Choral Evensong is an integral part of the future vision of St Mary’s, Stoke D’Abernon and, as Associate Rector, I welcome you here tonight and look forward to seeing you again. Amen.