22 September 2019: Choral Matins
The Fourteenth Sunday after Trinity
Isaiah 45:9–22, Revelation 14:1–5
The Revd Canon Graham Ward, Regius Professor of Divinity
‘Te Deum’

“And I heard a voice from heaven like the sound of many waters and like the sound of loud thunder: the voice I heard was like the sound of harpers playing on their harps, and they sing a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and before the elders. No one could learn that song except the one hundred and forty-four thousand who had been redeemed.” Question: have you heard the song of creation? Because you cannot learn a song if you haven’t heard it. The number mentioned in our second reading this morning from the Book of Revelation is symbolic; a kind of mystical mathematics. The number twelve was considered the perfect number and related to order and governance: so, there are twelve tribes, twelve disciples, and the new Jerusalem has twelve gates made of pearl and walls 144 cubits high. The author of the Book of Revelation was a mathematical mystagogue and twelve or twelves ripple through his vision. One hundred and forty-four thousand is twelve x twelve x 1000 – it sums up the perfect number of all those redeemed. And in being redeemed, so the Scripture I started with tells us, they learn a song – and no one else, not even the angels, could learn that song because it is the song of the redeemed. It is the song learnt as we journey on through faith for faith, repeatedly encountering every ogre and trickster that populates John Bunyan’s Pilgrim’s Progress - doubt, anger, hypocrisy, despondency, you name it and we encounter it (if not in others then in ourselves). But the journeying forms within us a spiritual understanding, a spiritual discernment, a spiritual discipline – and somehow that formation, as it finds expression, sings. Not that sainthood is a career choice. No one would embark on such a career. Because sanctity is forged, and no one steps into the fire or lays themselves across the anvil unless God’s good providence and grace goes with them.

Back to my question: have you heard the song of creation? I ask this because whatever the song being sung in heaven, being sung by the redeemed in consonance with that
unidentifiable voice “like the sound of many waters and like the sound of thunder” – that song has to be learnt, and heard, here among all things created. Just like the choir here learning to sing Boyce’s *Te Deum* and *Jubilate*. How ever much Steven might wish they could simply sing it on instantaneous request (because somehow it was written into their genetic makeup) – the wish is futile, and the practice has to continue. And the choir can only learn because they read and hear and phrase and rephrase and watch continually how they are being conducted. The song of creation, similarly, has to be learnt because we are being taught how to listen for it, listen to it. And this is, in part, a listening to ourselves as part of creation; listening to the movements, rhythms, modulating tones that continually communicate in us, between us and the rest of creation. This isn’t mystical in any immaterial, out of the body, sense. It is quite at home with the mundane – the thank you from a stranger, the antics of a squirrel in the park. This isn’t romantic pantheism. Poets have found significance is ascending balloons, a sail filled with the wind, and steaming bedsheets drying on a washing-line. This is just attunement; learning to be attuned to some fundamental resonance of goodness in being created; some fundamental meaningfulness and coherence; some recognition of being part of a complex gift of life and love from a God who lives and loves. This is worship, and most of the canticles that are found are our liturgies are songs of creation; songs others have heard and given expression to. And so the *Te Deum* opens with “All the earth doth worship thee” and the *Jubilate* with “O be joyful in the Lord, all ye lands,” and, my favourite, the *Benedicite omnia opera* “O all ye works of the Lord, bless ye the Lord.”

Creation sings. It sings because God sings – that unidentifiable voice “like the sound of many waters and like the sound of thunder”. The account of the creation of all things in the Book of Genesis is unique among all the Babylonian, Sumerian and Egyptian myths of creation because it is the only mythical account of creation in which the work is done not through struggle and violence, but by poetic speech. And what is poetic speech but song? Creation sings because God sang creation into being from absolute nothingness and for no other reason than love, a love that loves to bring to life. And it is that song, creation’s song and the song through which creation came to be, that those who are being redeemed learn how to sing.

There’s a beautiful *Benedicite* composed by St. Leonidas of Cyprus who died in 1930. It voices a long tradition in the Eastern Orthodoxy of our distinctive calling as human beings to the song of creation:
Through heaven and earth and sea,
Through wood and stone,
Through all creation visible and invisible,
I offer veneration to the Creator and Master and Maker.
For creation does not venerate the Maker directly and by itself,
But it is through me that the heavens declare the glory of God,
Through me the moon worships God,
Through me the stars glorify God,
Through me the waters and the showers of rain,
Dews and all creation venerate God and give Him glory.

As I said, worship does not need to disappear into choral heights or mystical abstractions. However mundane it redeems me and redeems creation. It is the song of my redemption in becoming attuned to the declaration of the glory of God in all things created. And how all that works is a mystery. For only the other morning, as dawn was rising and the light seeping back across the meadows and the river, I heard the rasping cry of the red kite, circling the trees, and looking for breakfast. But somehow even the kite swoops within the vortex of God’s bestowal of life, and love.