25 December 2018: Choral Matins
Christmas Day
The Revd Canon Dr Edmund Newey, Sub Dean

From the Te Deum sung by the Choir as this morning’s first canticle: ‘When thou tookest upon thee to deliver man, thou didst not abhor the Virgin’s womb.’

In nomine…

One of the rounds in the quiz at this year’s Cathedral staff Christmas dinner was: Guess the carol from its second line. [Yes, we know how to have a good time here at Christ Church!] It’s actually harder than you might think, even for those of us who have spent many hours singing carols over the past week or so. ‘Joyful and triumphant’ is easy enough; what about ‘a draughty stable with an open door’ or ‘wing your flight o’er all the earth’ though? But one of the blessings of the carolathons that Cathedral choirs and clergy undertake each year is the way in which unexpected moments of illumination come, even on the most well-known territory. Once you’ve got past the familiarities of the first verse most carols become much more interesting. We have just sung ‘In the bleak midwinter’. The opening verse is deservedly much-loved with its unforgettable images of dead cold: ‘earth stood hard as iron’; ‘water like a stone’. But beautiful though it is, the first verse is really just setting a scene and it ends on a note of recollection that strikes at first as sentimental: ‘in the bleak midwinter, / Long ago’.

But we should never underestimate Christina Rossetti: the nostalgia of all this ancient beauty, seemingly tucked away in the dim past, ‘long ago’, suddenly breaks in upon us here and now in the wonderful opening of the second verse: Our God, heaven cannot hold him / Nor earth sustain.

In the transition from one verse to the next we are brought into the presence of God – our God – God, who cannot be contained in heaven nor constrained by our earthly limitations; God, whose very nature it is to reach out. And in the place of ‘long ago’ at the close of the first verse, here at the end of the second verse we have the name of God, ‘Jesus Christ’. The poem relishes the paradox: ‘a stable place’ suffices for the one who is
at one and the same time ‘The Lord God Almighty’ – the beginning of each word capitalised – and the frail human baby, Jesus Christ. ‘Our God, heav’n cannot hold him’ – what a wonderful image that is: heaven cannot hold him, but Mary his mother can. And as she does so we realise that the stale smallness of our imagination has been blown wide by the fresh wind of the Holy Spirit: God is not distant, God is here with us: heaven cannot hold him; we can.

Many Christmas carols have a similar pattern: a first verse that meets us where we often find ourselves at this time of year: standing at some distance from the seasonal cheer, perhaps wondering whether Christmas is going to work its magic on us as once it did. But as we sing on, if we will let them, the carols take us to new places, deeper into the mystery of God’s love manifest in a manger. The second verse of ‘O come all ye faithful’, for instance, where the lines suddenly contract in length to no more than two or three words:

God of God / Light of Light / Very God, / Begotten, not created

The formulas of the Nicene Creed are distilled down to an essence, inviting us to worship at the crib: adoring as we do with any newborn at the gift of new life, but seeing here something more than a new life. This child is not just a new life, but new life itself: humanity made new:

This little babe so few days old,
Is come to rifle Satan’s fold;
All hell doth at his presence quake;
Though he himself for cold do shake.

(Robert Southwell, set by Benjamin Britten in A Ceremony of Carols)

And in the middle of the carol’s verse another tantalising phrase: ‘Lo! He abhors not the Virgin’s womb’. The observant of you will know that the phrase is drawn from the Te Deum, sung as this morning’s first canticle:

Thou art the King of glory, O Christ.
Thou art the everlasting Son of the Father.
When thou tookest upon thee to deliver man,
thou didst not abhor the Virgin’s womb.
It’s important to remember who is being addressed here: not God the Father, but God the Son, Jesus Christ. ‘Thou, O Christ, didst not abhor the virgin’s womb’: in other words, God in Christ chose to be born among us, as one of us. This is another paradox, most beautifully expressed by Dante in the last canto of the *Divine Comedy*, where the poet addresses Mary as ‘Vergine madre, figlia del tuo figlio’, ‘Virgin and mother, daughter of your own son’ (*Paradiso* XXXIII). The infant Christ is Mary’s child, but he is also her Saviour and ours, the one by whom she – and we with her – are made adoptive children of the heavenly Father.

The salvation that Christ brings is worked out not by remote control from afar, but as it were from within: in human flesh and blood. Aristotelian physics teaches us that nature abhors a vacuum and it’s that sense of abhor that the *Te Deum* has in mind. Just as a vacuum is an unnatural state of affairs, so it might be supposed that it would be unnatural for God, eternal and unchanging, to be united with the vulnerability of a human body. But the Christmas wonder is that God in Christ did not abhor the virgin’s womb, but took our nature upon him, becoming one with us in our humanity that we might become one with God in his divinity.

These of course are mysteries beyond words, better encountered in worship and sacrament than from the mouths of preachers. But the words that get closest are those of the poets, above all when they are set to music. In recent weeks the music offered in this Cathedral has opened up for all of us new avenues of understanding. From Messiaen’s astonishing organ meditations on *The Nativity of the Lord* to Francis Greer’s *Alleluias*, chanted almost at a shout prior to the Prologue of Saint John’s Gospel at the Services of Nine Lessons and Carols. But, for me at least, this morning’s setting of the *Te Deum*, Herbert Howells’ *Collegium Regale*, surpassed them all.

I hope I do no disservice to our Organist and Choir if I say that, to my mind, the key to the whole piece is that brief moment in the middle of the setting where silence descends. Having addressed God the Father in its opening strophe, the second section of the *Te Deum* speaks to God the Son: ‘Thou art the King of glory, O Christ’. Howells heralds this shift with thunderous chords on the organ, soon joined by the full force of the choir’s resources. But, having praised Christ as ‘the everlasting Son of the Father’, the volume and pace drop almost to nothing and the mysterious words that herald our salvation are softly spoken: ‘When thou took’st upon thee to deliver man, thou didst not
abhors the Virgin’s womb’. The still small voice in which the choir voices our worship of God echoes the still small voice by which God speaks to us:

a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and brake in pieces the rocks before the LORD; but the LORD was not in the wind: and after the wind an earthquake; but the LORD was not in the earthquake: And after the earthquake a fire; but the LORD was not in the fire: and after the fire a still small voice. (I Kings 19:11-12 AV)

And even as the music swells to narrate Christ’s suffering and death and glorification, so it will momentarily still again in the unparalleled beauty of the last line:

O Lord, in thee have I trusted; let me never be confounded.

Amidst the noise of our lives the Christ child, born among us today, is the still small voice by which God speaks. Heaven cannot hold him. Dare we?

In nomine...