3 February 2019: Choral Matins
The Fourth Sunday after Epiphany
Micah 6:1–8, 1 Corinthians 6:12–end
The Revd Canon Graham Ward, Regius Professor of Divinity
‘Being Good’

“He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.”

This week marked the 25th anniversary of the first showing of Steven Spielberg’s film *Schindler’s List*. He began as a director of some of the best and most well-known action movies: *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, *E.T.* and the *Indiana Jones* series. But in the mid-1980s he turned his attention to human figures caught up in atrocious conflict and oppression which, magnificently but not ostentatiously, they overcame. What followed were films like *The Color Purple*, *Schindler’s List* and what I believe is his best film, *Saving Private Ryan*. I’ll come back to *Saving Private Ryan* later, but it’s *Schindler’s List* that I want to begin with because this film and *Holocaust*, a TV series first aired in 1979, brought to the world’s attention the horrors of the genocide that took place under Nazi rule in Germany. These productions appeared while the Cambodian genocide was taking place and, ironically, came before the other genocides that shattered international confidence in the innate goodness of human beings: the ethnic cleansing in Bosnia, Dafur and Rwanda.

The 25th anniversary of Spielberg’s film marked Holocaust Memorial Day and it was brought to mind this week because last Saturday evening I attended a concert in the Sheldonian in which the Cathedral Choir gave a magnificent performance of Igor Stravinsky’s *Symphony of Psalms*. I don’t know whether the concert organisers knew that they were staging this piece on the eve of Holocaust Memorial Day and the week of remembrance that followed. If they did, no mention of it was made in the programme. And yet Stravinsky’s choral symphony, rewritten in 1948, seems to me to be a deeply moving tribute to the Jewish situation throughout and immediately following the Second World War; a tribute also to the massive displacement of peoples across Eastern Europe and Russia. It’s not a slow lament. It’s often *staccato* and *expressivo* – expressive of tightly
controlled rage. Stravinsky was not himself Jewish. But he came from a long line of people associated with Poland and Lithuania before his exile from Russia following the First World War. The word ‘exile’ is key here and it’s announced in the first of three Psalms Stravinsky uses to structure his work: Psalm 39, a Jewish shema: “Hear my prayer, O Lord… For I am a stranger with Thee, and a sojourner.” Stravinsky uses the Latin text: “quoniam advena ego sum apud te et peregrinus” and the translation, though accurate, lacks the resonance in the Latin. Advena can be stranger, but it’s more alien or exile and peregrinus is sojourner but with the sense of migrant, even refugee. The force though of the Latin text lies in apud te, and particularly that preposition apud – ‘in the presence of’. So what this text is saying is “I am an alien and a refugee in your very presence” – and that is theologically as profound as it is paradoxical. This isn’t cleverness. I’m not trying to score erudite points. I hope you feel the tension of a prayer to God, an act of worship in which God is directly addressed, from a people exiled and displaced. Do you feel the fear of betrayal? How can this displacement be allowed before God? How can God be the Lord when His people stand exiled in His very presence?

These questions, it seems to me, only deepen as Stravinsky continues in a breath-taking and audacious piece of musical scoring for the third and final Psalm he uses in his symphony: Psalm 150. This is one of the concluding Psalms of praise and thanksgiving in the Hebrew Bible. It is the final Psalm, sounding repeatedly and imperatively laudate - praise. The Psalm is a hymn exalting music itself – naming instruments for song and dance within the liturgy. “Praise him with fanfares of trumpets…praise him with tambourines, praise him with flutes and strings, praise him with the clash of cymbals.” And yet Stravinsky scores these lyrics with tonal twists of lament and dissonant confusion. The German philosopher Theodore Adorno once wrote “There can be no poetry after Auschwitz”, and what Stravinsky’s composition for Psalm 150 announces, to me, is a similar sentiment: “There can be no music after Auschwitz”. And yet there is music; music that strains against itself as the choir forces out laudate – “O praise the Lord” – in the very face of the devastation, alienation and displacement affecting the Jewish people and affecting the whole of eastern Europe at that time. It is sung out repetitively with vast expressive range – nostalgia, reverence, revulsion and overwhelming resignation in the sense of overwhelming loss. Dom-in-um.

It is the sheer act of audacious artistic goodness that I want to point to because being good is neither easy nor simple in a world full of sound and fury, signifying nothing. It is this audacious goodness that Spielberg’s Schindler’s List reveals. For Schindler himself, on
the face of it, was not exactly a good man. A hard drinking, womanising capitalist, he nevertheless sets about rescuing fragments of the six million Jews deported to the death-camps; for every individual man, woman and child saved is an act of redemptive love. And Schindler is now recognised. He is himself listed among the Righteous Gentiles who are commemorated in the avenue of trees leading up to the Yad Vashem – the Holocaust Museum in Jerusalem. But his action brings us back to the prophet Micah and this morning’s first lesson: “He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.”

In the closing scenes of Spielberg’s *Saving Private Ryan*, Ryan, now an old man, kneels among the unnamed graves, the simple white crosses and Stars of David stretching in this direction and that, marking where so many of the allied troops in the Second World War are buried. Among them are the men who died that he might be saved and returned to the States to his mother - who had already received the news that three of her other sons, Ryan’s brothers, had been killed in the war. He is the last remaining descendent. But the generations of Ryan’s own family stand behind him as he kneels, at a respectful distance, and speaks to all those fallen of how he has tried to live worthy of their sacrifice. He stands and turns to his wife with a simple request: “Tell me I’ve lived a good life. Tell me I’m a good man.” Do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with your God, and be true to the wisdom that has schooled you – for the good we are called upon to do is sometimes necessarily audacious.