



Christ Church Cathedral

OXFORD

9 February 2020: Choral Matins

Septuagesima

Jeremiah 26:1–16, Acts 3:1–10

The Revd Canon Grant Bayliss, Diocesan Canon Precentor

‘Te Deum Laudamus’

Picture the scene: the small hours of the Easter vigil on the night of April 24, 387, the darkness punctuated by brightly burning candles around a large eight-sided font of the church in Milan. From the waters arise a middle-aged man and his illegitimate son, two among many who have given their lives to Christ in a new way that night. The older man, filled with the Spirit, cries out, ‘Te Deum laudamus – we praise thee, O God’; and the bishop sings back, ‘we acknowledge thee to be the Lord.’ Like Simeon and Anna, ecstatically moved, St Augustine and St Ambrose antiphonally improvise line after perfect line of what would become one of the most well-known Christian hymns of the next 1600 years.

Sadly, that romantic late eighth-century legend speaks more of wishful thinking, than historical reality; no more true than the tale of the apostles each miraculously composing a line of the Apostles’ Creed. But have you ever stopped to think about the Te Deum, where it came from and what it means?

There are in fact very few words in Prayer Book Matins or Evensong not directly drawn from Scripture. The opening versicles and responses, the psalms, the Gospel canticles, the preces are all expertly woven in Cranmer’s English and the monastic offices before him from Bible texts, decontextualized and repurposed to give warp and weft to our daily life before God. In Evensong the only major non-scriptural interpolation was the Apostles’ Creed but in Matins, there’s another a hymn so old that many forget it too is not a biblical text – the Te Deum, included in monastic rule after monastic; making the cut in hymn-books from the fifth century to the twenty-first.

When the Reformers were decluttering our Western liturgies of centuries of evolution, composition and duplication, Luther, Calvin and Cranmer alike all made exception for this great poem, which joins our praise with that of heaven and makes the big things of

faith – doctrines of Trinity and incarnation – not abstract theories for philosophers but everyday realities to be taken into heart and soul. When Richard Baxter wrote his Savoy Liturgy (1661) as an antidote to the unscriptural, ungodly, soul-constricting Prayer Book, he kept the Te Deum. Martin Luther even styled the Te Deum one of the three great Creeds of the faith, even though it was not written as such.

A few editions still naively write ‘by St Augustine and St Ambrose’ at the bottom but Wordsworth and others were probably right to see a more complex evolution in Western churches through the third and fourth centuries as a cosmic paeon of praise (that may have been known to St Cyprian in Carthage) was supplemented: first by a more carefully polished Christ-centred verse that improved its post-Nicene credentials – ‘Thou art the king of glory, O Christ’; and then by the standard psalmic litany of the daily round of worship – ‘O Lord, save thy people’. Today we occasionally omit that last part – just as we sometimes omit the liturgical doxology to the Lord’s Prayer that never formed part of Christ’s teaching – ‘For thine is the kingdom...’ But that possible earlier division is more often shown up by composers who naturally sense a moment for a change of voice, tempo or mood.

Whatever the liturgical archaeology, it is the hymn as a whole that speaks to us, the hymn as a whole that touches us today.

There are certain settings I can’t hear without being catapulted back to a particular time, a particular place – a few notes of the Berlioz is enough to catapult me back to days watching the precise beats of Claudio Abbado’s baton, one voice lost in a wall of sound; the Howells’ ‘Coll Reg’ instantly speaks of family, transporting me to St Helen’s Witton and my first seconds as a married man with Chris radiant beside me; to the room in the JR where Beth was born – a moment of transcendent peace after a crash cart had left and Bee had started to breathe and we realised things were going to be okay. I’d always loved that Howells from first singing it as a boy but it became a sort of totemic anthem for the great moments of life and my gratitude as I sought to follow the example of Shakespeare’s triumphant Henry V after Agincourt, ‘Do we all holy rites. Let there be sung Non nobis and Te Deum’ (Henry V, Act 4, Scene 8).

But it’s other settings that have taught me a deeper truth about singing Te Deum in season and out, in times of sadness and of joy. The poignant interplay of the Gibbons, the slow build of the Britten we’ve just heard as it crescendos to the great cry of Holy, holy, holy; then the haunting delicacy of the treble solo, echoed by the chorus’ ‘Christ’.

For God is not just God when things are good. We don't get to choose to 'acknowledge him to be the Lord' only when life is going well and we have many blessings to be grateful for.

This is where praise is different from thanksgiving. Praise is big-picture stuff. It is framing our horizons correctly, telling it as it is – God is God, creation is creation, and humanity has a proper place. The verses order the cosmos – angels, heavens, powers cherubim and seraphim; 'the glorious company of the apostles', 'the goodly fellowship of the prophets', 'the noble army of martyrs' – all bowing before 'the Father, of an infinite majesty', his 'honourable, true and only Son', 'the Holy Ghost, the Comforter'.

And Christ is put in his place – both the face of the invisible God, 'king of glory', 'everlasting Son of the Father' and the one who in a line that's really hard to translate from the Latin doesn't just decide to become human but 'took upon' himself a human life to deliver all humanity, neither abhorring the visceral realities of birth, nor deeming the paradoxical virgin womb beyond the economy of his salvation. This is not Jesus as abstract idea or distant history, this is Jesus Christ now, Jesus-in-relationship; God addressed through his human ears, human cares and human life all taken up to the right hand of the Father – 'Thou art the King of Glory, thou...thou'. Christ is as he is whether that truth is proclaimed by the massed crowds of the Berlioz or a single tremulous voice like the Britten.

And last but not least what was probably once the next bit of the service, the prayers after the hymn, tacked on calls and responses between cantor and congregation, make this presentation of God as he is the key to his love, care and daily intervention in our lives: 'O Lord, save thy people and bless thine heritage'; 'O Lord, in thee have I trusted, let me never be confounded'.

God is who he is in eternity and because of that he became who he was in history, in a real place, in a real person, in a real time; not a god apart but God with us, God for us. And it is as that incarnate God that we can trust he is solid ground in which to put our hope, not shifting sand that will be washed away by the first storms (cf. Mt. 7).

As some of you know, for me personally these feel like dark times, as I do my best to support my once radiant wife through her battle with cancer, as she faces gruelling treatments with grace and strength. And many others here today will be facing their own darkneses and difficulties, some known and shared, others unspoken and private. The Te Deum is for these dark days as much as the triumphant ones. It is a song as much for

Job sitting in his ashes as for Peter upon Mount Tabor, not because it wishes all the bad things away or because it dismisses pain and suffering with some sort of theological hand-wave but because it can hold the reality of life within a larger perspective.

The Te Deum may not be a biblical text, may not have been miraculously composed in Milan but in its poetic words and perhaps even more so in its musical settings, it sets a summary of the whole Bible before our eyes. Those early monastic guides Caesarius and Benedict knew what they were doing when they made it part of the round of daily worship. And even if we here only hear it once a week, it can temper our days, temper our faith all the way from 'We praise thee, O God' to 'let me never be confounded'.