Sounds of Worship

Good Friday

The Good Friday liturgy is the second part of the Holy Triduum which leads us through the sorrows of Passiontide to the resurrection Joy of Easter Eve. On Good Friday we recount the passion story and venerate the cross.

We would have opened the service by singing “There is a green hill far away” AM 153. The words of which were written by Cecil Frances Alexander (1818-895) which are slightly ambiguous names for the wife of a clergyman. Mrs. Alexander was born and lived in Ireland near Dublin. From an early age she was interested in literature, poetry and hymn writing. In 1848, (2 years before she married William Alexander, a young priest who ultimately became the Bishop of Dublin and Raphoe) she published a collection of hymns under the title, “Hymns for Little Children”. This remarkable collection includes three of the best-known hymns still in use today, “Once in Royal David’s City”, “All things bright and beautiful” and “There is a green hill.”

“There is a green hill” has the feel of a bed-time story about it. It sets time and place of the story in the first two lines and in very direct and concise way, during the course of the hymn, states the redemptive power of the crucifixion. The bed-time story feel of Alexanders’ children’s hymns is even more apparent in “Once in Royal David’s city” by emulating the, ”Once upon a time……” formula.

In terms of time and place of the story “There is a green hill” is set more in “Green and pleasant land” than a dusty, scrubby, outskirt of 1st century Jerusalem. This crucifixion is set in a rural (Irish) environment but, ”far away”, to use another bedtime story cliché. Another familiar feature of this hymn is the second line, “Without a city wall”. Without can mean either the absence of something or, as in this case, outside. However, at first glance it is easy to assume, the former meaning which reinforces the open, rural nature of the green hill. But why not use “outside”, instead of “without” to make the meaning unambiguously clear? This is where the poetic sound of the words becomes important, “without” continues the alliteration of the ”w” in away, wall and where. Try reading the verse out loud and substitute “outside” for “without”. It destroys the phonetic flow of the verse.

For many generations, this hymn has been learnt by children at primary school and is remembered by many for a lifetime. When one sings it, later in life, it can evoke childhood innocence which I perceive adds to the power of the emotional response to Good Friday knowing that Jesus was himself innocent of a crime but sacrificed for all humanity’s sins.

The most popular tune for this hymn is Horsley, written by William Horsley (1774-1558). The tune starts with a simple ascending scale and the harmonies shift the music away from its home key first to a related one at the end of the second line and to an even more distant one at the end of the third but then very quickly returns to the home key in the final line. A simple musical device which gives the hymn a sense of journey and safe return, just like a good bedtime story.

Figure 1 "There is a green hill far away" Click on the arrow-head and again on the next one to play the video

1. There is a green hill far away,
   Without a city wall,
   Where the dear Lord was crucified,
   Who died to save us all.

2. Oh, dearly, dearly has He loved,
   And died our sins to bear;
   We trust in His redeeming blood,
   And life eternal share.
3. We may not know, we cannot tell,
   What pains He had to bear;
   But we believe it was for us
   He hung and suffered there.
4. He died that we might be forgiven,
   He died to make us good,
   That we might from our sins be freed,
   Saved by His precious blood.
5. There was no other good enough
   To pay the price of sin,
   He only could divine life give
   And dwell Himself within.

The Good Friday liturgy contains a reading of the passion story. The setting of the St John Passion by J S Bach is one of the most dramatic and moving musical settings of these words ever written. There is always a performance of either this work or Bach's more extensive but reflective Matthew Passion on Radio 3 on Good Friday. I recommend you explore these or other recordings.

Another key part of the Good Friday liturgy is the veneration of the cross for which the hymn "When I survey the wondrous cross" AM 157 is highly appropriate.

Figure 2 "When I survey the wondrous cross"

1. When I survey the wondrous Cross
   On which the Prince of Glory died,
   My richest gain I count but Loss,
   And pour contempt on all my Pride.
2. Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast,
   Save in the cross of Christ my God:
   All the vain things that charm me most,
   I sacrifice them to his blood.
3. See from his head, his hands, his feet,
   Sorrow and Love flow mingled down!
   Did e'er such Love and Sorrow meet?
   Or thorns compose so rich a Crown?
4. His dying Crimson, like a robe,
   Spreads o'er his Body on the tree;
   Then am I dead to all the globe,
   And all the globe is dead to me.
5. Were the whole realm of nature mine,
   That were a present far too small;
   Love so amazing, so divine,
   Demands my soul, my life, my all.

The words are by Isaac Watts (1674-1748). Watts is credited with writing c750 hymns. He was a non-conformist minister who had a significant influence on the development of hymn writing. Metrical hymns as we know them today have their origins in paraphrases of the Psalms and biblical texts. Watts composed many hymns in that form but he developed a broader range of subjects and means of expression which led to the huge increase of hymn writing in the 19th century and beyond. "When I survey" is an excellent example of using the hymn as a means of personal expression of faith. It is written in the first person (unlike the story-telling third person of "There is a green hill") and expresses the desire for total dedication of life of Christian love.

It is interesting comparing this hymn with "My song is love unknown" (Sounds of Worship Palm Sunday). "My song is love unknown" is also set in the first person singular and illustrates the concepts of Christian love. Samuel Crossman, an earlier contemporary of Watts was also a non-conformist but was subsequently was accepted into the Church of England.

"When I survey the wondrous cross" is sung to the tune Rockingham which was written by Edward Miller (1731-1807). Edward Miller adapted ROCKINGHAM from an earlier tune, TUNEBRIDGE, which had been published in Aaron Williams's A *Second Supplement to Psalmody in Miniature* (c. 1780). The tune's title refers to a friend and patron of Edward Miller, the Marquis of Rockingham, who served twice as Great Britain's prime minister.

A competent flute and organ player, Miller was organist at the parish church in Doncaster from 1756 to 1807. Miller was active in the musical life of the Doncaster region and composed keyboard sonatas and church music. His most influential publications were *The Psalms of David for the Use of Parish Churches* (1790), in which he sought to reform metrical psalmody (and which included ROCKINGHAM), and *David's Harp* (1805), an important Methodist tunebook issued by Miller with his son.

Normally the Good Friday liturgy ends in silence but I had prepared to play the Chorale prelude on "Herzlich tut mich verlangen" (My heart is filled with longing) by Johannes Brahms for a voluntary on Passion Sunday (March 29th) but it is equally suitable to provide a coda to the Good Friday liturgy. The Chorale "Herzlich tut mich verlangen" is also set to the well-known hymn "O sacred head surrounded". Brahms wrote very little for the organ but at the end of his life he wrote Eleven Choral Preludes for organ (Opus 22), which contains two settings of "Herzlich tut mich verlangen". The one I have chose is No 10 in the set. The manual part is set low on the keyboard and has a persistent underlying pulsating beat to it. The chorale is soloed on the pedals but given the low pitch of the manual part it sounds in the middle of the texture. The recurring pulsating figure lends a sense of menace and forbidding to the piece. Then there is a middle section where the manual part rises up the keyboard and the pulsating figure stops. This effect has the symbolism that would have been familiar to J S Bach, that is an ascent to heavenly glory. Then the music sinks back to earth and the pulsating accompaniment returns. The pulse becomes slower and more irregular towards the end of the piece and reveals its true nature as a heart-beat that is strong in life but fades away and stops in death.

Figure 3 "Herzlich tut mich verlangen" Opus 122 No 10 J Brahms