

GOD: THE ANTHEM

A Sermon for the Feast of the Holy Trinity, May 30, 2010

Text: John 16:12-15

O Lord our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! (From today's psalm, Ps. 8:1)

As I was reading the lessons appointed for today, I started hearing voices. (!)

On this Sunday that is named after a doctrine, instead of hearing the readings as proof texts which buttress a doctrine, I was hearing a song of praise. Something like a polyphonic anthem with four voices. The theme of the anthem is praise to God, for his decisive love towards us. Yes, us.

I invite you to listen with me to the voices within these texts.

I think I hear altos singing, in Proverbs. They sing a message from Wisdom, personified as a woman. Smart and beautiful. Often identified with the Holy Spirit. Wisdom is raising her voice, she is singing out. Her song is calling to us in public places, luring us to our senses. In verse 4 we read "my cry is to all that live," but the word "cry" is more accurately translated "voice," if we want to avoid the connotation of an emergency. Her voice is lifted up, "to all that live," with a message.

What inspires Wisdom to sing? She is commending herself to us. She sings that she has been around from the beginning, since before God made any of the wonders we see, the earth, the sea, the hills. Wisdom was there as a master worker, working with God to see that everything was "good." "Tov meoth." Including, verse 31, that uniquely delightful centerpiece of creation, the human race—which made Wisdom laugh with delight.

Wisdom speaks for God when she says that God took delight in, among all the worlds he made, this inhabited world. God likes it, that you and I are here.

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Do I hear sopranos? Are they perhaps the "infants and children" of Psalm 8:2? Their voices are also lifted in praise for God's creation. "When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars you have set in their courses . . ."

Have you ever looked at the moon without being quieted? We know it is just a mote in the universe—yet how splendid! And everything else!

But the sopranos do not merely praise God for the glory of nature. They want us to notice and appreciate the gift we have received, to be placed in our unique position with creation. "Little less than divine," we are. Crowned with "glory and honor," that's us. God has given us responsibility vis-a-vis flocks and cattle, even the wild beasts of the field, the birds of the air, the fish of the sea, etc. The creator has placed us in an interesting, mediating position. I mean, who are we, that God should be mindful of us? Yet God has been mindful of us.

This message is in harmony with what the altos are singing, isn't it? God has been loving and good to us, making us what we are.

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Now the tenors come in, with a more technical iteration of that theme, not as lyrical as the alto part or as dramatic as the soprano. They enhance the message, bring it closer to us, by bringing into the picture the work of our Lord, Jesus Christ. They relate what Jesus has done by stipulating that through him we “have peace with God.”

Why do we need peace with God? Doesn't God just delight all the time in the human race? Are you kidding? Don't you read the newspapers? Do you think God is delighted about our getting oil all over his marsh? Just for instance.

We skipped reading several verses of Proverbs 8, such lines as “Pride and arrogance and the way of evil and perverted speech I hate”; and “those who miss me injure themselves; all who hate me love death.” Sadly, the song of God's kindness towards us and his affection for us are not all we hear in this world; humankind often scorns wisdom, and walks in paths not of righteousness.

Yes, we need peace with God. And that is the point the tenors are making here, with their enriched commentary on God's love for us. God has taken upon himself to create the peace we need. He has (verse 5) poured his love into our hearts, through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us. Backing up a bit, we see an outline of the peace process. We have peace with God “since we are justified by faith,” “through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained this grace in which we stand. And we” (high notes here) “boast in our hope of sharing (once again) the glory of God.”

Like everything else in this song, peace is pure gift from God. It is a restoration of the standing from which we had fallen because of our sin, and it is simply bestowed on us, with (once again) the master worker, the Spirit, channeling everything from God to us.

Furthermore, this precious peace, of being restored to the glory God intended for us, is not taken away from us even by sufferings. Sufferings usually eat away at our hope—but our hope does not disappoint us, because, you see, God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit.

(The tenors want to go off in a corner and create a motet out of the verse about how, when you have faith in Jesus Christ, sufferings lead not to despair but to hope, by way of endurance and character. We'll let them sing that some other day.)

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Finally, last not least, the basses are heard. Basso profundo, is this message from the Gospel of John.


Who should not be represented by an eagle, [the shield is in the fifth box, red shield] but by an elephant: solid, weighty, almost immovable. John utters profundities, picks up logs and waves them around. “All that the Father has is mine,” Jesus asserts. “And it will soon be yours.” By means of the Spirit of truth.

Sounds like the Father in the Parable of the Prodigal Son, doesn't it? “Everything I have is yours.”

Here, once again, is the deep wisdom, the theme of this anthem: God has been surpassingly generous and kind to us—and will be again. Because he loves us. Or he wouldn't die for us, much less forgive us for messing with his inhabited world.

A **cantus firmus** (lit., strong song) is a theme or melody around which a polyphonic piece of music is built. I learned a song when I was young, that taught me how important a cantus firmus is. It is a bit of fluff composed, I think, by a young organist who went on to become one of the great organists in America, John Weaver.

(To the tune of Bach's chorale prelude, *Wachet auf, ruf't uns die Stimme*)



We all can play the organ, organ,
Ever so clear and brightly.
We play the six sonatas, -natas,
Ever so clean and lightly.
We do not employ the swell expression shades.
To manipulate them is, of course, forbidden.
We use the foundations,
With flutes and mutations,
And this we heed, we heed,
To play the **cantus firmus** on a reed, a reed,
And then the other voices smoothly flow along their way,
And that's the way we play.

We play the **cantus firmus** on a reed, a voice that stands out. [Jim]

And there is no better **cantus firmus** for our lives than that of this anthem. That the God who created us to be his delight, did not and does not despise us when we disappoint him but gave his Son for us out of the same love, and continues to give us his Holy Spirit to infuse us with the life that is his desire for us, for all time.

Sing it, in whatever voice you have. Dance it, as our hymn of the day encouraged us. Play it on a reed.

Amen.