

Sermon for Candlemas, 28th January 2018

[Hebrews 2:14-end]; Luke 2:22-40 Nunc dimittis

Nunc Dimittis. ‘Cav’: ‘Cav and Pag’? No, ‘Mag and Nunc’. Do those words ring a bell? ‘Cav and Pag’ is the rather basic way that opera fans refer to two operas, Mascagni’s *Cavalleria rusticana* (Rustic Chivalry) and Leoncavallo’s *Pagliacci* (The Players), operas which are always performed together, and which the Royal Opera House’s website calls ‘Italian opera’s most famous double act’.

‘Mag and Nunc’ is a similar irreverent abbreviation, this time for the two great canticles, or sacred songs from Scripture, that form the heart of the Evensong service all over the world in the Anglican Church. The second one, ‘Nunc’, Nunc Dimittis, which, if you would like to come back here at 6, you will hear sung by our Choral Scholars, in a beautiful setting by Henry Purcell, is our Gospel reading this morning,

‘... now you are dismissing your servant..’ That’s what the Latin words, nunc dimittis, mean. In the Evensong service, in a better translation, Simeon says,

‘Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace: according to thy word. For mine eyes have seen: thy salvation;
Which thou hast prepared: before the face of all people;
To be a light to lighten the Gentiles: and to be the glory of thy people Israel.’

The old man Simeon. He had seen the one who was going to save, to be the Saviour. Both to save the Gentiles, the non-Jews, to be a ‘light’ to them, and to be ‘the glory’ of God’s chosen people, the Jews. So, to be the saviour of all of us.

And just in case you're wondering, the other great canticle, the other half of the great Evensong vehicle's chassis, its frame, is 'Mag', Magnificat, Latin for 'magnifies'. 'My soul doth magnify the Lord: and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour.' It's the Blessed Virgin Mary's song.

The service is built up on the frame, on the chassis, of these two Canticles. Around them there are hymns, three set prayers called collects, (with the first one unique to each day), Bible readings, according to the Lectionary, so that in three years you will have read your way all through the Bible; a Psalm, which is usually sung to an old plainsong chant, the Creed; a sermon, and some intercessory prayers, prayers asking God for things.

And as I hinted earlier, it's very beautiful. You can pretty well sit it out in the congregation and just watch and listen to it. But it's a mistake to think that it's just a form of entertainment. Indeed, you might not especially like the music in Evensong. Purcell, or Victoria, or other Baroque masters like Vivaldi, might leave you cold, craving for worship songs and rousing guitars. Actually you can have modern Evensong settings too. The point is that it's not a concert. It is worship. It is an encounter with God. The music is one way how we try to bring the best we have to God in worship. Whatever you consider best - that's what you must offer.

Mag and Nunc are the bones of the service, the backbone of it, precisely because they are the testimony of witnesses. Simeon says, 'Mine eyes have seen: ... Mine eyes have seen: thy salvation.' He is a witness, a witness to the presence of the Lord. And Mag is even more striking, not only as witness evidence, but as evidence of the revolutionary impact of the Messiah.

'He hath regarded': he has looked at, he hasn't averted his gaze, from 'the lowliness of his hand-maiden'. Even though He is God, He hasn't looked down on and dismissed as too humble, this

hand-maiden, this ordinary girl, the ‘lowliness of his hand-maiden’.

Then the purple passage, which Revd Dr Giles Fraser has called one of the most revolutionary texts in all literature.

‘He hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He hath put down the mighty from their seat: and exalted the humble and meek.

He hath filled the hungry with good things: and the rich he hath sent empty away.’

It’s all witness evidence. Mary the mother of Jesus has witnessed this. But this is worship, not a show, not a documentary. In coming to God in prayer and praise, as worshippers we sing the hymns, we chant the familiar psalms - ‘O sing unto the Lord a new song’; we recite the Creed, we hear Scripture explained and related to our lives in the sermon: but maybe we’re still a bit detached, a bit sealed off, still just in a beautiful concert space, hearing beautiful music and resonant words.

But then, when you add in the Mag and Nunc, we’re confronted, confronted by witnesses. Strange witnesses. A young girl without any educational or philosophical achievement. An old man who went to all the services; he didn’t say much, but there he was, regular as clockwork.

Nunc dimittis. How did he know? How did Simeon know that this little baby, born a week or so before, was so vitally important? ‘Mine eyes have seen’, he said. Simeon was a witness.

But not any normal kind of witness. He had ‘seen thy salvation’. Not seen a feat of athleticism, not a sudden burst of erudition, from the week-old baby. What was this ‘salvation’ that Simeon saw in the baby Jesus? How did he know that he’d seen it all, he

could take his leave of life, secure in the knowledge that the Messiah had come?

Because, however he justified it in his own mind, it was true. When the whole Gospel story became known, everyone realised that Simeon's vision was staggering, cataclysmic in importance for all the world. Barely three sentences. God is here. With salvation for all of us, Jews and Christians - or rather, Jews and non-Jews; really for us.

Again, there's humility. Just some little old man. A teenage girl barely able to read a road sign. But still, chosen by God.

You can let it all wash over you. The Evensong service has been going on, in exactly these words, since 1549. If you don't pay attention, it's not going to stop. But what is it that keeps this old form of worship going? Perhaps God is pleased with it. Of course we do hope, that God does think, that it is worthy. Who knows? But if He doesn't approve, surely it would have died years ago. Instead of which, Evensong is the fastest growing service in the C of E. Why?

Of course I can't explain it. But I just wonder whether it's the sheer genuineness of the service, its simple straightness. And at its heart, there are these two great bits of testimony, these live confrontations between two very ordinary people, Mary and Simeon, and the divine. They could have been any one of us. No special qualifications. But Mary and Simeon got it, got the whole thing. Just think about what that means, what that means for all of us.

Cav and Pag. Mag and Nunc. Where we came in. Not two jolly operas with a picture of Italian country village life, but the two great canticles at the heart of one of the church's oldest services. But maybe they're not so separate in concept, after all, these

operas and our evening service. Cav - Cavalleria Rusticana, 'rustic chivalry' in a humble Italian village - and these two simple, humble people, picked out to tell us their story, how they met the Lord himself, in the form of a little baby. Mag, Mary, magnifying, magnifying the humble and meek: and Nunc, the faithful old man, signing off. They could be scenes from opera too.

Now that we've celebrated the Nunc Dimittis, which is the last of the baby stories of Jesus, we can put our crib scenes away for another year. We can bless our candles, as a symbol of Jesus, the light shining in the darkness. Because it's Candlemas. 'Mag and Nunc'. Nunc Dimittis Day. Come and hear it again tonight. Let Simeon speak to you.

Amen.

Hugh Bryant