

Corpus Christi College Chapel

Alumni Chapel & Choir Reunion

24 June 2023

Psalm 150; Genesis 28.11-18; Colossians 3.12-17

Surely the Lord is in this place; and I knew it not ... this is none other but the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.

Our Psalm and Lessons bring together two important themes for our service tonight: place and worship – and of course, the music which is integral to the *worship* we make in this *place*. For Bishop Fox our Founder – there will be a lot of Corpus ‘namechecking’ in this sermon – *this* ‘sacred space’ is joined at the hip with the Library. This is an unusual arrangement amongst Oxford colleges linking the two: physically, intellectually, spiritually, and that is key to understanding Fox’s radical vision of education for young people based on Christian Humanist principles which the *avant-garde* foundation of Corpus represented in 1517. Yes, Corpuscles, we were trendy once!

Our first lesson brings us Jacob’s vision at the place that came to be known as Bethel – his vision of angels ascending and descending – a vision of the connection of the temporal world and the eternal. This glimpse beyond the material world is to Jacob evidence that this site, this *place*, must be a gateway to God – a place where an altar must be built. That’s what Jacob is doing in that rather curious verse about pouring oil on the stone he has used for a pillow while he slept and had this vision. He is making an altar; an altar in the Jewish and Christian tradition is a place where earth and heaven ‘connect’.

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Fast forward some thousands of years to 1569. A young teenager – he was only about 14 – called Richard Hooker came up to Corpus from Devon due to the patronage of another Corpuscle, John Jewel, a former Fellow but by then Bishop of Salisbury. He benefited here from the intellectual engagement with President Rainolds to my right, although they had major theological differences, there was great respect between them.

Hooker wrote a book: a very, very, very *long* book, called *The Lawes of Ecclesiastical Polity* – seven volumes of it in the current modern edition. Not only did President Spenser (on my left) edit Hooker shortly after his death, but another Corpuscle, John Keble, produced another edition in the mid-19th century. Hooker’s popular reputation (that is, if you can imagine the author of seven volumes called *The Lawes of Ecclesiastical Polity*, **having** a ‘popular reputation’), is that of ‘the judicious Mr Hooker’, a moderate man in immoderate times, the canonizer of the ‘*via media*’ of Anglicanism in all its reasonableness and capacious tolerance, sailing majestically between the ‘*extremes*’ of Geneva and Rome.

Such a view does not stand up to even a little bit of historical rigour. Hooker, like pretty much everyone else who wrote on religion in the period of whatever church or tradition, engaged in polemics. But I bring him up tonight as this is probably my last opportunity to talk about him in the very chapel where he sat, knelt, stood, prayed and sang where we are sitting, kneeling, standing, praying and singing. Over my nearly 30 years here, I confess from time to time when conducting services here, I have thought about Hooker, the young student and Fellow, doing the very same things that we are doing.

And this Corpuscle wrote powerfully about ‘sacred space’ and also about the place of music in worship – our two themes. He knew this chapel and he knew it in a way that would resonant with Jacob. A church, a chapel like this little early Tudor gem which he knew was in fact ‘none other but the house of God and ... and ... the gate of heaven’. Hooker writes (admittedly *at length*) about the importance of ‘sacred’ space giving us a glimpse of the eternal:

The ancient Fathers [he means the earliest Christian theologians] seriously were persuaded, and do oftentimes plainly teach, affirming that the house of prayer is a Court beautified with the presence of celestial powers; that there we stand, we pray, we sound forth hymns unto God, having his Angels intermingled as our associates.¹

And music we make in this place, is part of that too. To the modern mind angels are a concept that it is hard to know what to do with, but I think what Hooker is getting at is that when we worship God, it isn’t all up to us – indeed, note, it isn’t *all about us* either. We are assisted by something outside ourselves; let’s call it the members of that heavenly court he describes. Hooker says, for example, that when he looks at the choir sitting in the chapel stalls facing each other, he is put in mind of the angelic choirs of Cherubim and Seraphim, singing gloriously in the heavenly Court. So, there you are, Choir: Seraphim and Cherubim – or maybe that’s Cherubim and Seraphim.

The Book of Common Prayer, which Mr Hooker wrote *at length* to defend, with what could charitably be called a microscopic attention to detail, created a demand for new musical compositions for services such as Evensong – Archbishop Cranmer’s exquisite cut and paste job of the monastic offices of Vespers and Compline. The Prayer Book was no less than a job creation scheme for musicians and composers. As my Oxford colleague, Diarmaid MacCulloch has written, the continuation of choral and organ music, with new compositions needed for the new vernacular liturgy, was one of the most significant reasons that the Church in England did not develop the more atheistically restrained Calvinist form of Christianity as in Geneva, Zurich or Scotland. Like all truly insightful statements by great historians, we can’t prove it, but it would make a great exam question: ‘discuss’.

And the music we make in these sacred places, is part of the history of our college too. Hooker was at odds with the puritans in the Church of England, like President Rainolds who thought the more stripped-down worship was, the more authentic it was. Rainolds, by the way, also wrote a ferocious tract against stage plays – another thing I’ve reflected on when sitting here watching a student production of *Everyman* or *As You Like It*. (Poor Rainolds – he’s put up with a lot – and I did wonder when we dedicated the wonderful new altar frontal in 2021 and the incense set the smoke alarm off, whether he was finally having his revenge on me – we’ve been eyeballing each other for nearly 30 years.) The ups and downs of England’s history of religion since the college was founded in 1517 were played out here. We had an organ, then we didn’t,

¹ *Laves*, Book V.xxv.2 (p. 147 in *Everyman* edition).

and then we did and then the puritans removed it in the 1650s, and then we got another one and then, in 1880, we got the instrument we have now built by the leading organ builders of the day.

On singing, some in this period maintained that if you do have singing, the words should be absolutely distinguishable, a note for each syllable so that you can be educated by the text – because in fact, only the words matter – the music doesn't. Hooker saw it differently. Church music should not be what he called 'wanton or light' or have 'unsuitable harmony, such as *only* pleaseth the ear'. Church music isn't only about the intellect – what Hooker calls 'the understanding', it is also about the emotions. It is striking for someone that even his friends found a bit 'dry', Hooker emphasises that church music isn't all about the intellect but also about what he calls 'the affection' – what we would call the emotions, the passions, or feelings.

... these faults prevented [such as unsuitable harmonies] sounding to the praise of God, is in truth most admirable, and doth much edify if not the understanding because it teacheth not, yet surely the affection, because therein it worketh [moveth] much.²

In fact, Hooker thought that people drawn into church only by the music, who wouldn't come otherwise, by the work of the Holy Spirit have by 'the wisdom of the same Spirit to borrow from melody that pleasure [of music], which mingled with heavenly mysteries ... [conveys] as it were *by stealth* the treasure of good things into man's mind'.³ This sneaky evangelistic insight is one that generations of college chaplains have taken strength from, myself included.

And note church music, is in fact, one of the great ecumenical success stories. Who would have guessed when Hooker died in 1600 that Protestant Nonconformity, the roots of which are in the puritan tradition, would become the creative powerhouse of wonderful hymnody or that congregational singing would become a regular aspect of modern Roman Catholic worship. This is because music isn't simply something 'pleasant' – it is healing, takes us out of ourselves – it is powerfully transformative of both individuals and communities; it can heal divisions, as St Paul says in Colossians. We *study* music like we study any academic subject in a university – with the 'understanding' – and that is right. But we *make* music because in our 'affections', our feelings, our passions, our emotional lives, it is transformative, because in Hooker's phrase '*worketh* much'. So, we give thanks for this place and the music we make here.

'Surely the Lord is in this place ... this is none other but the house of God and this is the gate of heaven'.

² *The Lawes* V.xxxviii.3 (pp. 147-8 in Everyman edition).

³ *Lawes* V.xxx.viii.3 (p. 148 in Everyman edition). Hooker is citing St Basil. BL, Royal 18.B.XIX, fo 4v.