**Southern Choirs Festival, 15th July 2023: Chichester Cathedral**

**The Rev’d Canon Dr Mark Oakley**

**Dean, St John’s College, Cambridge**

Thank you for your kind invitation to preach this morning. It is a great privilege to be here with you. Now, we are living at a time when, we are told, some younger people have started to show some interest in religion again and inevitably clergy get asked a lot of questions. This isn’t new exactly. Pope John XXIII who died in 1963 and was canonised 9 years ago had a distinct twinkle in his eye when being interrogated. Once asked by an earnest man how many priests work in the Vatican, he answered ‘about half of them’. Of course, questions about religion come fast and furious at university where I work. A few weeks ago at dinner at High Table in my college the topic turned to purgatory. One irascible and grumpy old don was perplexed. ‘Purgatory? Purgatory? Well, will I go to purgatory?’ he asked. ‘Oh John’, said the don next to him, ‘it just wouldn’t be purgatory without you’.

We could, I suppose, also ask questions of us here now. What are we doing here, what’s this all about? Is this festival just some quirky event for a bunch of niche interest enthusiasts, the Anglican equivalent of a Star trek Convention? Well, I’m guessing the company here doesn’t lack the exotic, I’m thinking flamingos more than sparrows, and that maybe one or two of us are what the contemporary world would think of as being very Upton Park, which is just two stops off Barking. But no, our reply is simple, this festival is not some Wendy House constructed to act out our homely fantasies. This festival has an urgent and resonant message for a sleepwalking world. This non-negotiable message is clear: the Christian faith is an art of attention in which nothing, no one, may be taken for granted. Whereas there is a lot of ex-carnational Christianity around at the moment, trying to imprison the divine in the head or personal obsessions or in a particular religious tribe, the Christian faith is incarnational, the divine immersed in his creation and living in our midst, God in this world as poetry is in the poem. So attention is our vocation. And it is something that Frank Martin, the composer of the Mass setting at this eucharist, knew very well.

Martin was Swiss and the son of a Calvinist minister and between 1922 and 1926 he composed his Mass for Double Choir. It was not performed, however, until 1963. He had simply placed it in a drawer and there it sat for 40 years. He said later that he had been afraid that performance would be detrimental to “the expression of very intimate feelings”. He was particularly wary of drawing attention to his own person. The only acceptable performance would have been, he said, “in a church, without the author’s name and as part of the liturgy”. He said that he felt the composition was a matter between God and himself. How different this approach is to our twittering world and all the fast food religion on offer. But for Martin this composition was an attention to God. God was not an object of knowledge, but is the cause of our wonder, and as he withdraws to the background in the work, you taste eternity in its searing beauty and luminescence, compositionally free and yet paying homage to the vocal polyphony of the Renaissance. And in the same spirit, this festival calls us to attend to God, not as idea to argue over, some enlargement of our own prejudice, but the presence of the living God in our midst. We live in a world where our language has become thin, prosaic, made for bumper stickers, and much more secular than we actually are. Our hunger for God, our longing for this to be a house of wise beauty and meaning, our ability still, at our best, to feel the resonances of life’s sacred harbour being beyond ourselves, these are alive as ever. The sadness is that a spiritually hungry generation is often finding the church to be too secular, too much like that cruel finger pointing, competitive and shallow life from which it wants to escape. In the hope of Isaiah, oh that the Church would sing a new song. Pope Benedict reminded us that: ‘Music, great music, relaxes the mind, awakens profound sentiments and is, as it were, a natural invitation to raise one's mind and heart to God in every situation of human existence, both joyful and sad. Music can become prayer.’ Music, and sacred music such as we celebrate in this festival, preserves the deep intuition of something more, and at a time when we are trapped in believing that life is just survival of the fittest, but then can’t say fit for what, this is an urgent and transforming truth to convey. This festival serves the art of attention upon God and so refuses to take the world or our life in it for granted.

Martin wrote his setting in 1922 but he returned to it in 1926 to add an Agnus Dei. Similar in scope and design to the Kyrie, with legato plainchant-inspired lines the overriding melodic impulse. And here he has the two choirs as very separate and distinct groups, one with a steady rhythmic tread intoning the text in rich harmonies, the other with the loose-limbed polyphony that began the Kyrie. And then both choirs come together in the final bars in an understated benediction on the words ‘dona nobis pacem’; togetherness is achieved in a rapturous G major. Choral music is the art that reminds us that there is me because there is us. A choir knows that none can be taken for granted when harmony is sought. Pope Benedict again said: ‘I am convinced that music really is the universal language of beauty which can bring together all people of good will on earth’. At that Last Supper of Jesus with his friends, when unity was their only future, they sang. It is another truth of this festival that we are not made to be atomised, singular foghorns, but are created to be attentive to each other for the sake of the whole, listening and attending to each other so we can co-operate, regulating my very breath for our harmony, pointing to the promised land of who we might yet become. Again, this is a crucial truth when, with eyes wide shut and in the busyness of distracted days people just disappear from view, in a world where if you’re not at the table you are probably on the menu, and let’s be honest - the people who often disappear, the people we forget to treasure or even see sometimes, are either those who are most in need of help or safety, or the people we spend our lives with, even the people who do most for us, who love us most, who put themselves out for us, who quietly care for us.

Choral music, then - attending to God, attending to one another, or, if you prefer, love of God and love of my neighbour. There are many definitions of Christianity and, being Christians, we argue about them till we are breathless. But it will always fuse together our loving search for God with God’s searching love for us. And it always was and always will be an art of attention, a commitment to be more present, to see better, to listen better, to beware of so called ‘common sense’, first impressions, or the voice of the crowd and the noise of now, and to be quietly attentive to the real currents and chemistry of our lives and relationships – especially to those you share your life with and those who share their life with you. How long is it since you told the person most dear to you that you love them, how long since your friend heard you say ‘thank you’ and were shown your gratitude for what you share together, how long since that colleague you work with every day was shown a bit more kindness and understanding because, after all, you don’t know what it is like to live their life, to live with their past or present, how long is it that you showed just a bit more attention to who, not what, these people in your life are? Because the secret is this, pay attention and attention will pay you back.

We don’t know what we have until its gone, so cherish what you have, be careful with those alongside you, and where it’s difficult, see if repair might yet be possible, and do it now. A festival such as this is more important, more achingly resonant, than we first realise, perhaps, a chance to allow the better parts of us breathe better in deeper attention to the gifts in our life and to the God who gives them.

Our time is short here, and we all need each other more than we can sometimes say or admit, so perhaps it is time to show it, voice it, be thankful for it, sing in praise to our God for it, starting today, right now, because, as Evelyn Waugh once said, the saddest words in the English language are, ‘too late’.