

St Mary-le-Bow, Cheapside, London EC2V 6AU

A Service on the feast of Candlemas for the Grocers' Company

The Revd George Bush, Rector

Monday 3rd February 2020

Tonight and at another church in the City, the Wax Chandlers and the Tallow Chandlers are laying aside any traditional occupational and professional rivalries in praise of the new born Christ at Candlemas. I am glad not to be there -and not just because I prefer your company; but I would be fearful lest a tallow fired wick should be introduced into church – anciently forbidden because the animal fat base could suggest an animal sacrifice.

Which of course is where the Temple comes in. Candlemas denotes the first appearance of Jesus into the Temple – whether for the Purification of the Blessed Virgin or his own Presentation as first born; the Gospel is frankly confused. It involved a modest sacrifice of a pair of birds – not too expensive for a modest couple, but just the sort of offering that would demand the currency transaction that would cause Jesus, in years to come, to turn the tables on those whose exchange rate was designed to fleece the humble.

Of course the religion of Jesus was frankly more tallow than wax. He taught in both synagogue and Temple – institutions which do not sit together like Saint Mary-le-Bow and say Westminster Abbey; the Temple was not just a more splendid site of worship, but the place of cult to which all Hebrews looked for divine favour. But what has given today its real character has been old Simeon's declaration that the little boy, held in the arms of his mother was destined to be the light for the Gentiles – the source of all goodness, the gift of God, the victor over all that is dark, half-hearted, evil and mean. Having seen the infant Jesus Simeon could depart in peace. That Nunc Dimittis has been set to music throughout Christian and especially Anglican history, as we shall hear. What we can be sure is that old Simeon did not attempt to sing a note!

There were two daily services in the Temple, and a third in the afternoons of the Sabbath, the New Moon and festivals. Additionally this was a place of personal and family recourse with offerings for sin and thanksgiving. The smell must have been appalling for animal sacrifice was the hourly norm. The Talmud, the ancient source of legal interpretation, says that at one feast 600,000 pairs of kidneys were immolated; but less convincingly that there were (miraculously) no flies. It was not like Evensong; but it was very rigorously patrolled as to ritual – trumpets would blare (this perhaps the most distinctive sound) and cymbals would crash, the people would prostrate themselves and the Levites would sing the psalm of the day (actually just like Evensong). The officiants were priests chosen daily by lot, and the animals were carefully selected.

Jews have had a chequered history with performed music in worship; traditional orthodox thought insisting that since the destruction of the Temple in AD 70 by Titus, later Emperor (an act that some accounts suggests that Jesus predicted) music should be restricted wholly to lament; but others have felt that after many centuries something of the full musical beauty of the Temple deserved to be recovered. The problems were manifold; Western music of course reads from left to right, whereas Hebrew text goes right to left. Even further from the Temple period, organ music was believed first to be heard in a synagogue in 1810 in Westphalia; an innovation cheerfully (and still) loathed by other Jews.

You might think that here music has always been the backbone of liturgical life; after all at the end of the nineteenth century we were among the first to broadcast – by wire – services to some of the smarter hotels and a number of unplayable records in our archive testify to a lively musical life before the Second World War. Further back we know that there were two organs here before the Reformation; but as perhaps the centre of the most radical stream of the Reformation, everything musical and visual was stripped out in the 1530s and what was known here under Edward (strongly supported by the Grocers at All Hallows' Honey Lane) - and perhaps under Elizabeth - was a pared down and probably rather Genevan worship – my predecessor John Joseph of the 1540s would be made apoplectic by almost everything we do tonight! We could run the lights on him spinning in his grave. (That said nobody knows where his grave is because he wisely hopped over to the Continent when Mary Tudor acceded). For Anglicans worship without music would be as strange as worship without sacrifice would be to ancient Jews. In recent decades there has been a tendency to concertise (as a friend of mine has coined) liturgical music; to treat the music as more, and of more worth, than the actions of the liturgy. Not so here. But music is perhaps a species of sacrifice - as it is of illumination - and wholly the right thing tonight. Music like the lifeblood is ephemeral – it exists as an offering for the moment, the subject of discipline and imagination and then it is no more, except as a memory if we will. And music illuminates words; drawing out their meaning and heightening their associations – a little boy asked here why I sang so much of the liturgy. As St Augustine opined, to sing is to pray three times.

The Temple is believed to be on the site of Mount Moriah where Abraham had been required to offer his son in sacrifice to prove his love and commitment to God. We would call it child abuse. The Temple was preeminently where the lambs for the annual Passover were killed to remind the Jews of God's favour and their freedom from slavery to others. St John – alone of the Gospels – is clear that the lambs were being sacrificed in the Temple just as Jesus was dying on the Cross, excluded from favour and beyond the City walls. The real sacrifice which begins with Jesus' appearing in the Temple which we celebrate tonight and echoed by Abraham's terrifying offering, the countless slaughtered lambs and the effectiveness of music played and sung – the real sacrifice is that God simply offers himself.