

Sermon to St James' Church, King Street, Sydney

The Reverend Andrew Sempell

Rector of St James

Orchestral Mass I – Schubert Mass in G

Epiphany 2

(a-os02)

15th January 2017

Readings: Isaiah 49: 1-7; Psalm 40:1-14;1
Corinthians 1: 1-9; John 1: 29-42.

'Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi, miserere nobis'

From Classicalism to Romanticism

Last year, while on tour with the Choir, we were in Stephansdom (that great Cathedral of Vienna) where the Choir had sung a Palestrina setting for the Sunday mass. There was well over one thousand people in the Cathedral and the Choir, although small for the building, had done an admirable job.

Straight after mass, the Dean came and thanked Warren and me for bringing the Choir to Vienna. He was especially thankful for the music, saying: "We in the sanctuary particularly enjoyed the Palestrina, as we hardly ever hear Italian Baroque music here." I expressed my surprise at this, but he answered: "Well this is Vienna, and we must have Mozart, and Schubert, and Haydn all the time!" What a problem to have, but then this is St James' and we can have it all.

In about three weeks' time, Franz Schubert's Mass in G will celebrate its 202nd anniversary. In 1815, the year of its composition, St James' Church had not yet been built. To the west of Sydney, the settlement of Bathurst had just been proclaimed by Governor Macquarie who, with his wife Elizabeth, was first to travel across the Blue Mountains by carriage on the new Cox's Road.

Internationally, the western world was at war (which was the usual thing in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries) – America vs Britain, Britain vs France, the Serbs vs the Ottomans, Austria vs Naples. It was also the year that the Duke of Wellington defeated Napoleon Bonaparte at Waterloo and that Louis XVIII was 'restored' as King of France.

1815 was also a most productive time for Schubert, who composed over 20,000 bars of music that year, including the Mass we hear today. He was one of the great Austrian composers coming out of the classical school and on the leading edge of romanticism.

Schubert wrote much sacred music, however modern historians often claim that he was agnostic. There has been a good deal of speculation about the changes he made to the text of the Mass, especially the omission of the words ‘one holy catholic and apostolic church’ and ‘we look for the resurrection’ from the Creed; as well as the words ‘is seated at the right hand of the Father’ from the Gloria. Nevertheless, a conclusive view on his beliefs has not been established; suffice it to say that he was not happy with the institutional church and held an idiosyncratic position toward religion. In all likelihood, he was a Christian humanist, which was a popular approach to faith at that time.

Disillusionment with the church is nothing new and it is understood that Schubert struggled with the dogmatism and authoritarianism of the religious authorities of his day – and there is nothing new in that. In modern parlance, he might possibly be described as one who was ‘spiritual but not religious’. Yet faith would seem to have been important to him, as an 1824 diary note suggests:

‘It is with faith that man first enters the world. It comes long before reason and knowledge, for to understand something one must first believe something ... Reason is nothing other than analysed faith’.

The Lamb and the Mass

But what of the music? There is part of the Mass text that features in today’s liturgy. A verse of the Gospel reading appears, just before the reception of Communion. I refer, of course to the *Agnus Dei*, which echoes the words of John the Baptist: *‘Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world’*.

The *Agnus Dei* is a common inclusion in the Eucharistic liturgies of the Roman Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran and several Western Orthodox churches. It is a prayer to Christ, who is the ‘Lamb of God’, and it has been part of the liturgy since the seventh century. But what exactly is this ‘Lamb of God’?

Clearly it is a linking of the Hebrew sacrificial system with the death of Jesus for the sins of all people. The Old Testament sacrificial system is intricate and multi-faceted, and there are many different types of sacrifices described. A short excursion into the Book of Leviticus will demonstrate this complexity; but John’s gospel gives us some clues as to where we should look.

Initially, the sacrifice of a lamb might be linked with the Passover and the Exodus, as the three other Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke do. But this is John's Gospel and it often has a different emphasis and purpose to the other three. John's Gospel begins with creation (*In the beginning was the Word...*), and its first two chapters are set in a time-period of seven days, mirroring the seven days of creation in Genesis. Today's gospel reading covers two of these days.

John's perspective is cosmic. Jesus is understood to be more than a Passover sacrifice that brings protection to a select group of people. For John, Jesus is the one who reverses the effect of human brokenness and sin that caused Adam and Eve to be cast out of the Garden of Eden. The Lamb of God is therefore aligned with the scapegoat sacrificed on the Day of Atonement that takes away the sin of the community. This sacrifice is principally a corporate one and its purpose is to restore relationships between God and humanity as well as between each other.

John's description of the sacrifice of Christ argues that the human condition has changed and that we have been metaphorically allowed back into the Garden of Eden where we can participate with God in the goodness of creation. This worship (or Mass) in which we share today, with all its beauty and ceremony, is a reminder of our being welcomed back into God's presence – it is meant to be a little bit of heaven here on earth. And so, at Communion we acknowledge the sacrifice of Christ with the words:

Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world, have mercy upon us;
Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world, have mercy upon us;
Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world, grant us your peace.

Universalism vs Exclusivism

The Hebrew sacrificial system came to an end soon after the death of Jesus, with the destruction of the Temple by the Romans in 70AD. The Romans could be ruthless and the brutal execution of Jesus came to be seen as an act of unjust religious violence inflicted upon an innocent man. It caused some at the time to see it for what it was – a manifestation of the destructive heart of humanity.

This is part of our human problem – we are violent; and we often inflict that violence on innocent people such as the poor, the weak, the refugee, and others who are understood to be different from ourselves. Moreover, as the death of Jesus demonstrated, religion has often been part of the cause of such violence. In an attempt to win God's favour, humans have sought sacrifice; but God's response has often been rejection of such sacrifices (as in today's Psalm). Instead of being destructive, we are called to be signs of God's grace.

Nevertheless, one may sometimes wonder about the effectiveness of this message when one hears bombastic and hateful words, and claims of exclusivity and self-referential ‘truth’, made by parts of the church. The salvation of the world may be high on God’s agenda, but it is sometimes missing from the activities of his people.

The creation stories describe a world without human distinctions in which all people come before God as equals. Here there are no divisions and humanity lives in harmony with God and nature, but it is broken by human selfishness, which in turn gives rise to an emphasis on identity, distinction and hierarchy. This creates the world of the tribe from which also came the idea of a ‘chosen race’ that had a greater entitlement to God’s blessings than others.

In response, God sent messengers, called prophets, to call people back to acting for justice and the good of all. They required that the ‘chosen ones’ should become ‘light to the nations’ - existing for the benefit of others rather than themselves. And in response the people returned for a time, only for the religious pendulum to swing back again to self-interest, exclusivity and control. Thus, it has continued until our own day; it is the tension between the universal and exclusive perspectives on faith.

Receiving the Gift of God

So, what does all this mean? Is this just another exercise in religious obscurantism? Are we worrying about how many angels can dance on the end of a pin? Well no, there are some serious ethical dimensions to consider if we accept that life is a gift, that violence has no justification, and that we are meant to live lives that manifest God’s grace and creativity.

How we understand ourselves and how we treat one another in this world matters, and we need a good basis for acting for the common good. The spiritual journey opens up to us the mystery of faith, and part of this mystery is the gift of God’s Holy Spirit that transforms us and makes us into God’s sons and daughters. This experience is not so much based on what we do for God but rather what God does for us. So, the gate to the garden of God’s presence is open to us; but we need to step through it in faith.

When the words, the activities, and the ideas of religion give up we are still left with the mystery, and part of that mystery is the capacity of God to come to us and bless us when we don’t expect it or deserve it. We come seeking that mystery in our worship today; and through the music we have an opportunity of receiving another dimension of God’s grace and peace.

Recognising the mystery of faith Schubert himself noted:

'It is with faith that man first enters the world. It comes long before reason and knowledge, for to understand something one must first believe something...'