

## Sermon to St James' Church, King Street, Sydney

**The Reverend Andrew Sempell**

*Rector of St James*

**Second Sunday after Epiphany**

(b-os02)

**14<sup>th</sup> January 2018**

**Orchestral Mass No 1:**

**Francisco Valls 'Missa Scala Aretina'**

**Readings:** 1 Samuel 3: 1-10; Psalm 139: 1-5, 12-18;  
1 Corinthians 6: 12-20; John 1: 43-51.

***"Creativity, Calling and God"***

In 1696, the year that Francesco Valls became Choir Master at Barcelona Cathedral in Catalonia, Europe was at war. This was unsurprising, because during most of the seventeenth century different European countries were at war with one another – ranging from the religious wars of the early part of the century to the dynastic conflicts later.

Mind you, it was not much better in subsequent or previous centuries. As the ancient prophet Samuel said, 'If you have kings you will have wars, and they will tax you to pay for them' (1 Sam 8: 10-18). Unfortunately, humanity has a propensity for conflict, the only thing that changes is its justification.

Catalonia, in the north-eastern sector of Spain, stands at the ancient crossroads of empires. While having its own ethnic identity, it is nevertheless sandwiched between the more historically belligerent empires of Spain and France. Its fortunes have therefore swayed back and forth between the various victors of war, coupled with the Catalan's own good fortune (or otherwise) in supporting the winners or losers at the time. As we are aware, such tensions continue today.

### **Conflict and Creativity**

Valls wrote *Missa Scala Aretina* during the War of Spanish Succession (1701-14). This was a proto world-war fought upon the lands of Spain, France, Italy, Germany, Holland, and at sea. It involved the usual suspects of the day; the Hapsburg, Bourbon and Wittesbach dynasties and included military leaders from further afield such as the Duke of Marlborough (ancestor of Winston Churchill) and Prince Eugene of Savoy from Vienna.

In the midst of this political turmoil Francesco Valls, (along with his contemporaries, such as J S Bach, Handel, Vivaldi and Rameau), composed music of great elegance and transcendence for both church and state.

It may seem difficult for us, in this modern age, to appreciate the creative urge for beauty in the face of conflict and destruction. War and violence would seem to be expressive of the opposite desire to that of creativity and beauty. Rather than seeking the transcendent, twentieth century Modernism focussed more on the real (or mundane) and therefore confronted people with the emotional reality of conflict. This can be heard in some of the works of Benjamin Britten and Dimitri Shostakovich, for example; but I digress.

The Baroque era sought transcendence and awe, and it also proved to be a time of great innovation. Yet at the time, there were some who were critical of such novelty. The Frenchman Rousseau, for example, described Baroque music as *‘that in which the harmony is confused, and loaded with modulations and dissonances. The singing is harsh and unnatural, the intonation difficult, and the movement limited’*. Indeed, today’s composer Valls was especially criticised for daring to use ‘dissonance’ in the wrong way, which to our ears is hardly perceptible!

For most people living in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as in earlier times, there was little possibility of changing one’s social circumstances. Life remained precarious because of the primitiveness of medicine and the associated dangers of child-birth, as well as the deprivations created by war, poverty and natural disaster. Nevertheless, art, and especially music, could lift a person out of the muck and fears of every-day life and generate a sense of transcendence and hope for a better life in the future. This is what Valls and his contemporaries gave us - a special communication with the spiritual that changed the human perspective on life. It was a reflection of their ‘calling’ as musicians.

### **Vocation and Creativity**

A vocation, or calling, is described as an occupation to which a person is specially drawn or for which they are uniquely suited, trained, or qualified. Up to the sixteenth century this was principally directed toward those activities that drew people closer to God or were expressive of Christian service; such as priesthood, religious orders or marriage. The Reformations changed that.

Today, we say that all people are called by God into a network of relationships through which we are to serve and care for one another. To this end, people are given skills, gifts and talents to be used both for the greater benefit of humanity as well as the glory of God.

Our musicians do this through their music, health care professionals do it through the healing and care of the sick, business people do it by producing goods and services to help communities live more effectively, teachers do it by nurturing the minds of their students, even lawyers exercise a vocation when they seek justice and fair dealing. And so, the list goes on.

We can discern a calling from God when we discover an urge to do good, which is beyond our control. Through this activity we gain purpose and even identity, but more importantly society is blessed. Such a vocation can extend beyond a person's lifetime to subsequent generations (for example, composers whose music continues to be heard, or politicians such as William Wilberforce who worked for the abolition of slavery) – this is the effect of seeking a greater good, even when surrounded by the effects of conflict and destruction.

Vocation is a feature in today's scripture readings; where we heard of the calling of the ancient Hebrew prophet, Samuel and of the beginning of Jesus' ministry and the calling of his disciples. There are a couple of interesting features to be found in both these readings. First is the description of the era in which Samuel was called as being one in which "the word of the Lord was rare", indicating that the ministry of the prophets had ceased to be exercised in any meaningful way. Secondly is Jesus' description of his ministry as being one where "you will see the heavens opened". Both narratives have an air of expectation that something new is about to happen.

Calling has a creative and transformational aspect to it. The ministry of a prophet (be it Samuel, Jeremiah, Ezekiel or even Jesus) was to provide a means by which God could engage with humanity. For most prophets this included both speaking and acting for truth and justice, without counting the personal cost.

This is similar to the 'dream' of that great twentieth century prophet Dr Martin Luther King, in which he said "...that one day this nation [the United States of America] will rise up, live out the true meaning of its creed: we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal." It was a vision born out of conflict but was a transforming one. Sadly, we know that racism continues, and that equality is yet to be fully understood or realised in some quarters; but we must nevertheless keep our eyes on the goal.

There are, of course, many other modern prophets who have acted for peace and justice; Dietrich Bonhoeffer in Nazi Germany, Dom Hélder Câmara in Brazil, Nelson Mandela in South Africa, Janani Luwum in Uganda, Óscar Romero in El Salvador and so the list goes on. The prophets are still with us exercising their vocations.

The example of Jesus was that, even in the face of violence, he nevertheless remained focussed on his calling to the cross. For him it was a matter of exemplifying the 'greater good' of peace, love and justice that could enter humanity by overcoming the

dread of violence and the fear of meaningless and death. While humanity cried out for 'sacrifice' God responded by ending the need for sacrifice and bringing new life. We can now transcend the need for a scapegoat to take away the sins of the community – we can rise above the violence.

The 'angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man', of which he spoke, was therefore the encounter between heaven and earth on the cross. It revealed that salvation is not to be found in ideas, or rules, or the fortunes of birth or class, but rather through the relationship we have with God and how this is worked out in our relationships with each other – the spiritual edge to our lives.

### **Being Attuned with God**

Spirituality (in all the best senses) is the divine song in which our human spirits engage with the spirit of God. It is present in our creative acts by which we share in the 'image of God'; it is present when we seek peace and justice as a recognition of the presence of God's Spirit in all humanity; it is present when we choose to be a blessing to others rather than a curse; and we seek its presence in our worship today.

In all of this we need discernment. Not all activity is Godly, even when it is claimed to be by religious professionals and others who seek to use the activities of the church for the exercise of power and control over others. As we have seen in recent times, religious justifications for war and oppression, the abuse of the weak and vulnerable, and the exercise of injustice upon minorities is unconscionable and a denial of the gospel.

St Paul suggested that these behaviours are manifestations of the ways of the world and they will ultimately destroy us. Instead, we are to be 'temples of the Holy Spirit', which is to say that we are to be a living presence of God in the world creating, nurturing, transforming and being a means of grace, justice and peace – which is our calling and our salvation.