

WORSHIP THE LORD IN THE BEAUTY OF HOLINESS¹

A sermon preached by Associate Professor Michael Horsburgh AM in St James' Church, King Street, Sydney, on the Second Sunday after the Epiphany, 20 January 2019, being the occasion of the performance of *An English Mass* by Herbert Howells, when the Eucharist was celebrated according to the 1928 revision of the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer*

O worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness: let the whole earth stand in awe of him.²

Paul Spicer begins his biography of Herbert Howells with these words:

Herbert Howells was a great musician, a complex man, a devoted and devastated father, a loyal but weak and unfaithful husband, a sensualist though not a hedonist, a teacher, adjudicator, examiner, writer and speaker, and almost last of all, a composer. And yet it is because he was a composer that we most celebrate him.³

Spicer, who was one of Howells' students, goes on to ask why we so celebrate composers. After some reflections on the nature of music, he says

The real answer can only lie in that highly personal area of emotional and intellectual response to given stimuli. ... The beauty in Howells ... lies in his inheritance ...⁴

In October 2011, Cambridge University held a weekend celebrating Charles Villiers Stanford and Herbert Howells. In a sermon in King's College Chapel on 16 October 2011, when *An English Mass* was the setting for the Eucharist,⁵ the Rev'd Dr Paul Andrews, whose doctorate was on Howells,⁶ said:

[Howells wrote] music that distracts and engages the senses, that at its best, helps to elevate the meditative and contemplative spirit to newer, higher levels of engagement with the infinite. Yet although we know it to be true, we are still sometimes surprised to remember that this music, so sublimely religious in mood, was composed by a man who had himself firmly rejected the Christian faith.

Yet although Howells had turned his back on the church's teaching and dogma, he was absolutely steeped in its aesthetic.⁷

I want to speak to you about beauty.

Andrews said that, for Howells, beauty lay in:

The interactions of architectural space, the play of light refracted through coloured glass onto stonework, the majesty of the language of Cranmer and the King James Bible and perhaps most of all, the sound of voices in resonant spaces—all of these and more were the influences that had shaped his artistic creed—this if anything, was his religion.

¹ Readings: 1 Corinthians 12:1-11; John 2:1-11, read in the 1611 King James (Authorised) Version

² Psalm 96:9 (1662 Book of Common Prayer text)

³ Paul Spicer, *Herbert Howells*, Bridgend, Wales, Seren, 2013, p. 7

⁴ Spicer, p. 8

⁵ <http://www.kings.cam.ac.uk/files/chapel/services-2011-michaelmas.pdf>

⁶ <http://stneots.org/contact-us/fr-paul/>

⁷ Paul Andrews, <http://www.kings.cam.ac.uk/files/services/sermon-20111016.pdf>

The fact is, however, that Christian theology and practice has been ambivalent about beauty, despite the biblical injunction with which I began.

The church has often regarded beauty as a “wayward impulse” that can lead us astray from God. If we want an example from our own tradition, we need only remember, from the Reformation, the destruction of medieval art that transformed English churches from colourful spaces with murals and multi-faceted glass to sterile white halls presaging contemporary minimalism. Religion that relies too much on intellectual assent to doctrines will rapidly find itself rejecting the beauty of art and music in favour of text, from where it is a short step to fundamentalism. With an “unimaginative and aesthetically starved faith”, we diminish both God and ourselves.⁸

That, however, did not appear to be Howells’ problem. From what we know, he had the aesthetic without the dogma, a view that many of us today might feel sympathy for. Spicer says that Howells used the term “fitness” to underline

... his fundamental feeling for taste and dignity. His style in his music has often been described as successful because it marries spirituality with sensuality ... [by which is meant] spiritual ecstasy, the building-up of emotional tension in the music which acts like an electrical charge and, when well performed, imprints itself on the mind of the hearer with searing intensity.⁹

We might the better understand the intersection of belief and beauty for Howells when we know that, in 1935, his son, Michael, aged nine years, died of a virulent form of poliomyelitis. Howells never fully recovered from Michael’s death. His daughter, Ursula, dated his loss of faith from this event. As Spicer says,

... he could not reconcile what had happened to Michael with a merciful God acting in his own wisdom.¹⁰

As late as 1961, Howells wrote, for St John’s College, Cambridge, *A Sequence for St Michael*. This stark work begins with “two agonised cries of ‘Michael!’”¹¹

Howells is far from the only person to have undergone such an experience with such a result. No matter how much we might talk about beauty and so easily associate it with all that is uplifting in our faith, how do we deal with the ugly?

Spicer comments that, despite Howells’ lack of faith, the music he wrote after Michael’s death “found a wellspring of inspiration which had hitherto been missing in much of his work.”¹² It is facile, and fundamentally wrong to justify devastating events because they will, or may have, positive outcomes. It is appropriate, however, to acknowledge those outcomes when they happen. It appears that what we have in Howells is beauty crafted out of ugly devastation. For that reason, if for no other, his music can speak to the deepest parts of our human experience.

The Jesuit scholar, John Sachs, writing about the theology of beauty, comments that it is not primarily a concept, but something that “we meet in the concrete things of our experience”, something that fascinates us. That fascination arises from the “harmony, proportion and

⁸ <https://reflections.yale.edu/article/divine-radiance-keeping-faith-beauty/necessity-beauty>

⁹ Spicer, p. 134

¹⁰ Spicer, p. 110

¹¹ https://www.hyperion-records.co.uk/dw.asp?dc=W1625_GBAJY0764316

¹² Spicer, p. 110

integrity” of what we hear or see.¹³ As St Thomas Aquinas said, beauty has integrity, harmony and splendour.¹⁴ It can sometimes be disturbing. It may not simply waft us along, it can carry us violently away.¹⁵

Sachs further comments that beauty somehow breaks out upon us. “It is something of a gift.” This is why my text is appropriate for today’s Eucharist. In its deepest sense, “holiness” means the harmony, proportion and integrity of our spiritual experience. Holiness is not an achievement, it is a gift, something that breaks upon us. Indeed, the holiness with which we worship is not ours but God’s, which is why we can call it beautiful.

At this point, Howells’ lack of faith is irrelevant to our understanding and appreciation of his music and its beauty. It speaks through him and breaks upon us as we listen and worship.

I give the final words first to Paul Spicer:

What we value in Howells is his understanding of the deep things of the mind; that he can put a voice to our spirituality, our very sense of being, and in a way almost too human, to that deepest of all senses, longing.¹⁶

Then to Dr Andrews’ conclusion of his King’s College sermon:

The apostle Paul writing to the church in Ephesus, exhorted his hearers: ‘walk worthy of the vocation wherewith you are called’. Of course, Paul wasn’t thinking about music at all, and he would hardly thank me for applying his words to a non-believer. But I believe that it was Herbert Howells’ God-given vocation to beautify and elevate our liturgy with his music ...¹⁷

O worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness: let the whole earth stand in awe of him.



¹³ John R Sachs SJ, “Beauty”, in Joseph A Komonchak et al, *The New Dictionary of Theology*, Dublin, Gill and Macmillan, 1990, pp. 83-85

¹⁴ “a certain clarity (*claritate*) and due proportion (*debita proportione*),” <https://ndpr.nd.edu/news/aquinas-on-beauty/> See also: <https://jonathansmcintosh.wordpress.com/2012/09/22/the-three-properties-of-thomistic-beauty/>

¹⁵ Daniel Rice, “Toward an orthodox theology of beauty”, <http://www.emmanuelseattle.com/blog/post/toward-an-orthodox-theology-of-beauty>

¹⁶ Spicer, pp. 165-166

¹⁷ Andrews