

May God give us faith to sing always: Alleluia!

I'm afraid it's been a good week for weeping. I had intended to spend last Saturday morning writing the first draft of this sermon, at least until I switched on Radio 4 and heard the shocking and horrific news about the vast incursion by Hamas into southern Israel and the indiscriminate slaughter of more Jews in one single day since the Holocaust. I couldn't settle as such awful news was breaking, and as the facts slowly began to emerge, our TV screens were filled with scenes of evil, and faces of the bereaved and traumatized crying in anguish.

And as the week has developed, we are beginning to supplant the anguish of Israeli Jews with equal scenes of anguish from the thousands upon thousands of non-combatant, non-Hamas Palestinians who live – or who lived – in Gaza City. More bereaved and traumatized people, also crying in anguish at the loss of loved ones. Whether voiced by a Gazan or an Israeli, in these past few days we have seen far too many people with tears in their eyes. And one thing of which we are reminded this afternoon is that – sadly – there is nothing new in this.

My recollection, from the eighteen years I spent as a member of the choir of this church, very much in the Nield era, was that we sang the Bainton anthem we have just heard, at a significant number of major occasions. Its impact on me was such that, just under a year ago when I was installed in York Minster, I requested it to be sung at that service, and its presence in this afternoon's liturgy reinforces my memory of it being especially dear to David.

The music, of course, is exquisite. But it is not just the music that is exquisite. The Revelation to John is, without doubt, the most misunderstood book in the entire Bible. In all too many eras of the last 2000 years, literal understandings of its mystical or mumbo-jumbo-like text have brought religion a bad name, perhaps most especially its significance with fundamentalist Christians whose influence on US (and thus world) politics can be alarming.

But, at its simplest, the apocryphal imagery of Revelation was simply morale-boosting, spiritual propaganda for a network of churches facing harsh persecution from the Roman occupiers in what is now modern-day Turkey. While we may think that many of the allusions and images are incomprehensible and hallucinogenic in their feel, they were simply coded messages of encouragement in a very real and very difficult era – in an era which, as now, knew too much about weeping and crying.

And the beautiful conclusion of this not really so complex book is that not only is God present in the suffering of the world, but that an era will come when 'God shall wipe away all tears'. All of which makes it not just fitting that we have heard this anthem in this great tribute to David's life and work, but it also is why, in a few minutes' time, we will also say: **may God give us faith to sing always: Alleluia!**

Not, of course, that this text from Revelation is the only text we have heard this afternoon that relates to the extraordinary person that was David Nield. This is not the only church around the country which will have heard those verses from Proverbs 3 – it is simply the passage from the Hebrew Scriptures set for an Evensong-like service in the Church of

England lectionary for today. Were David still the Director of Music here at All Saints, and if this was simply the normal, week-by-week Choral Evensong that, partly due to David's own legacy is so important here, that's the Old Testament reading he and we would have heard. A reading, which, in his modesty, David would never have thought might speak *about* him, even if it might have spoken *to* him. But it speaks to us about David very aptly!

It was over twenty years ago, in the early years of the Blair government, that a huge advertising campaign was launched to boost recruitment to the teaching profession. In posters, newspaper adverts and even TV commercials, it proclaimed simply and clearly, 'Nobody forgets a good teacher'. Simply and clearly - and correctly.

But David was not just a 'good' teacher – he was an extraordinary one. In my own small way, I think I'm probably proof of that. I arrived at Tiffin in the last term of what was once called the 'second year' (Year 8 for those who need a translation), having made the leap from a rather third-rate prep school. As David put it himself in a conversation about me with my parents, I 'could only strum a few chords on the guitar' when I arrived at the school. But when I left it nearly six years later, not only had I acquired A grades in music at both O and A level, but – following David's footsteps – I headed to Durham to read for a degree in music, and indeed, it is not without considerable emotion that I put on the academic hood which signifies that degree for this afternoon, for it was a privilege to have acquired the same qualification that he possessed.

But Proverbs is not just talking about what, in our era, we would call the classroom. That's why the anonymous author goes on to speak about 'loyalty and faithfulness', and the need to 'bind them around your neck [and] write them on the tablet of your heart'. And David modeled for me values such as these, every bit as much as he taught me about music. Indeed, it was in such values that David's ability and instinct as a teacher found its identity.

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But teaching was only one of David's abilities – it was only one element of his vocation. His work here in this church – while most certainly having an educative aspect, especially for the many children and young people for whom the choir functioned as a kind of unofficial extension of life at Tiffin – his work here embedded his commitment, his loyalty, and his very considerable talent as both a composer and a performer, visibly in the heart of Christian mission and ministry.

Simon and the others who put this afternoon's service together have allowed us five different compositions or arrangements by David... and I don't envy them the heart-searching which went into making those choices, given the rich and substantial legacy of compositions David left the world.

We have heard the vast, expansive work written for his final Founders' Day service at Tiffin, and his exquisite arrangement of that lovely Praetorius carol. We have also heard arrangements and descants for the hymns that have been chosen. And both speak to David's musical vocation. Later today in the Rose Theatre we will have another, more sustained opportunity to relish David's ability to compose on a vast canvas, but it is significant that

alongside major compositions, he constantly created music to enhance the church's liturgy. Sometimes in brief, quite 'functional' liturgical moments, David would produce little more than a snippet of music, created simply to make what was happening in the worship of God that bit more full and more wonderful. And I have to say that his 'last verse' accompaniments of many, many hymns are genuinely unsurpassed in my experience, decades after I moved onwards from here, despite my having worked alongside some leading church musicians over the years. David's ability to 'seize the moment' – whether a small or a vast 'moment' – was remarkable – a true example of how, by making music, 'we have found a new dimension in the world of sound'...

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But, ultimately, while David was an extraordinary teacher and an extraordinary musician, and it is a privilege to have a few moments in this pulpit to pay tribute to those wonderful talents he possessed and shared so ably and generously, there is more to be said. More to be said, to which David himself pointed us in life and in death.

I was studying abroad when David stepped down from his role here at All Saints and thus missed his farewell moment as the Director of Music at this church. But I was privileged to be at that Founders Day service in 2002, when we heard David's 'last word' to the Tiffin community. Now that was, of course, over twenty years ago, and David was very far from idle during that time. But the moment of one's retirement – especially when it is retirement from a post held for the best part of forty years – has a particular valedictory quality, and it was in that spirit that he composed 'Light'.

And it was, in many ways, the epitome of the man. For someone given to grandiloquent gestures in all sorts of ways, it is certainly musical grandiloquence. But it is more than that, with its inclusive, inter-faith rejoicing in the joy, the energy, the power, the inspiration, the love... the very being of God. And while this multi-faceted scriptural concoction does not quote from the famous passage that was our second reading (a passage which I did choose especially for today), it is a good reminder that, as the author says, 'There was a man sent from God...'

A man sent from God... whose name was David. Now, I grant you, that's not the version of the text from the Fourth Gospel we just heard read. The text in which the author introduces us to the notion of the Incarnation by making it clear that real light – divine light – is both 'the light of all people', and that 'the darkness did not overcome it'.

And, in that context, while the passage speaks, of course, of John the Baptist, and his particular role in 'testifying to the light', it is a reminder that such a vocation was not and is not unique to John. David Nield's 'last word', albeit composed and assembled more than twenty years before his death, was a reminder not just of the light that truly is 'the light of all people', it is also a reminder of the implications and demands of that light.

For we heard from texts holy to those who are Hindu, to those who are Jewish, to those who are Muslim, and to those who are Christian. David drew them all together, in a grand 'assembly' that stands as a clarion call to anyone and everyone, irrespective of the ties or

claims of any particular religious outlook. In a manner that really can only be called 'Niieldian', David offered those gathered for Founders' Day in July 2002, and all who have followed them, a celebration of the divine that is broad, grand, deep and high.

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But even that was not quite his last word. For that extraordinary piece brings us the Rig Veda and the Upanishads, it brings us the Qu'ran, it brings us the psalms and the prophets, and it brings us the Sermon on the Mount. And it brought us one more little text...

When I was, I think, in the Third Year – but allow me to be approximate at such a distance – let's say I was in the Third Year, I remember one O level music class when David burst into the Range, in a mood that was a cross between anger and triumph. The details are now a little hazy, but he made it clear to us that there had been some kind of row in the Tiffin staff room concerning the future of the Tiffin Fair.

Now I'm not sure if this once great event still exists. The quickest of searches of the school website suggests to me it may not, and I apologize to those of you who may not know what on earth I am talking about. But, once upon a time, a very major source of income for the school was its annual fair on the late May bank holiday. Every single pupil was involved both in selling 'programmes' around their local neighbourhood for weeks in advance, as well as helping on a stall on the day, let alone giving up the Tuesday morning which followed to clear up – and all of this happening on a pair of days that for anyone in a 'normal' school was merely part of half term. And the sum of money the fair could make was, as I say, substantial.

Well, on the morning in question, David strode into the Range, keen to offload to the nearest audience he could find, which happened to be my O level music class. Expostulating loudly, he explained that those whom he often called 'the grey men' had announced that they would not be organizing the Fair any longer – thus imperiling this major fund-raiser. Now, until this point, David's contribution to the Fair had consisted simply of him conducting the school brass band (for you could take the man out of Lancashire, but you could not, in David's case, take Lancashire out of the man). But other than this, the fair was not, in any sense, a musical event, and certainly had not been a major topic of conversation in and around the Range.

"But I told them they can't be so ridiculous," blustered David with a sense of communal indignation on behalf of the entire school community – "so I said 'If you can't be bothered, then I'll run the fair.'"

And so he did, and did so for several years. And, inevitably, that summer saw the largest and grandest fair – complete with a camel in attendance – and, most importantly, it was the most successful Tiffin Fair in the history of the school. Because David knew that light shines in all sorts of places and in all sorts of ways, transcending our own petty beliefs of what we think we can do, or what we think we know about. And the Niieldian incarnation of the Tiffin Fair is, for me, a reminder of how all-encompassing can be the call to let light shine forth.

Which is simply to illustrate and reinforce David's real last word, which comes at the end of that great composition, when in the briefest of four-word sentences, in words unattributed to any recognized holy text, and stemming, I think we must assume, from his own pen – in that distinctive hand-writing always manifested in permanent black ink – David says to **us** and to all who encountered him across so many, extraordinary years at Tiffin, in this church, at the NYMT, and in many other contexts, David says to us: 'Shine forth **your** light.'

So, let us give thanks today, and for many years to come, for David Nield – teacher, composer, performer, entrepreneur, motivator, friend, spouse, parent, grandparent, and so much more. And let's do what the man said, and make sure we don't forget to shine forth our own share of the light God has given us, that light which is nothing less than the light which enlightens the world, and which the darkness did not, has not, and will not, ever, overcome. And, in thanksgiving for David and in celebration of our own call to shine that light, **may God give us faith to sing always: Alleluia!**

Rt Rev Dominic Barrington
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