

Dear all

I don't know about you, but I sometimes have difficulty refraining from humming the bible readings. This is particularly true over the Advent and Christmas period, when it seems most of the readings have been taken from Handel's Messiah! A good musical version of a bible passage can often enhance and illuminate a passage. For example, the tune Handel wrote for "All we like sheep have gone astray" gambols and meanders all over the place, and ends with an utterly portentous "And the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VnXY7GVNFz4>

See also Henry Purcell's "They that go down to the sea in ships", which certainly plumbs the depths of the seas, as well as rising up on the waves:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tuflLst61Ds>

This last few days at Morning Prayer, we've had a couple of classics. One day, the New Testament reading was the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus. In this, the rich man has enjoyed all that life brings, whereas the beggar Lazarus suffers at his door. Both die. Lazarus finds himself in heaven, while the rich man is in torment. He asks Abraham if he can warn his family, and is told in no uncertain terms that if they have not taken warning from the scriptures, no more will they listen to one who returns from the dead (in contrast to Scrooge – though it did take 4 spirits to convince him!). Ralph Vaughan Williams has a musical reflection on this in his "5 Variants on Dives and Lazarus". To be fair, this is more variants (almost, but not quite variations) on a folk song theme – which, coincidentally is the basis of one of the hymns for Sunday. (Dives, by the way, is not the name of the un-named rich man, it is simply Latin for 'rich').

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FBHgrR6Ft04>

But the reading that particularly struck me was from the Old Testament, from the book of Judges. It is the story of Jephthah – a warrior who prays for victory against much larger forces, and promises to sacrifice to God the first thing he sees on returning home. I'm sure you can see disaster looming... yes... it's his daughter. One of the less exemplary of episodes it must be said! I'm glad to say that this is not what God requires of His people (breathe a sigh of relief, Carys!). Handel wrote an exquisite song in his oratorio Jephtha, sung by the eponymous not-exactly-hero! Talk about inappropriate – after what he has done. *Angels, waft her through the skies, far above yon azure plain. Glorious there like you to rise, there like you forever reign.* Methinks there is a guilty conscience here! I first heard it (this version actually) at a funeral, and fell in love with the piece there and then. I had no idea of the context.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UoC7c_XxLEc

All this is something of a digression from the fact that the end of the gospel reading this Sunday is the passage from Matthews Gospel that has brought comfort to many for centuries. It was once a staple part of the Book of Common Prayer (BCP) Communion Service. Immediately after the confession (which comes later in the service in the BCP than in the modern Common Worship Order 1) we hear *Hear what comfortable words our Saviour Christ saith unto all that truly turn to him: Come unto me, all that travail and are heavy laden, and I will refresh you.* This is followed immediately in the Gospel by *Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.*

Back to Handel again...

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Va2tVRUNXck>

In my mind this chorus encapsulate lightness and joy – especially this recording by John Eliot Gardiner, who takes it at a rapid pace.

I wonder what this passage means to us, particularly in the midst of one of the most difficult periods we have had to live under.

You may wish to play the piece before, or after, the service this Sunday. For those who are following the recorded services in church, the link is:

https://youtu.be/xmOLB_rs88Y

The hymn words and links are in the [attached document](#). One of our regular listeners commented that she often couldn't find the hymn links, and instead was bombarded by adverts. My apologies – I should have warned you of this. I try to find the best version of the hymns I choose. Some websites make money by selling advertising, and so the advert appears before the video you want to see. If that happens, unfortunately it does rather ruin the atmosphere, but usually there is a button at the bottom right of the video which allows you to 'skip ad' after a few seconds. Otherwise they will only last about 10 seconds, and then you will see the video you were after.

Sunday is NHS Sunday – the anniversary of the founding of the NHS on 5th July 1948. The Bishop of Exeter writes:

The National Health Service came into being on 5 July 1948. During post-war reconstruction, improving the healthcare of the nation was seen as crucial to the nation's recovery.

Beveridge, the architect of the NHS, identified "five giants" that had to be slain: want, disease, squalor, ignorance and idleness. The cataclysm of war provided the stimulus for radical reform. It was a momentous achievement and, in spite of early professional resistance to some of the proposals, it was born of a national consensus: everybody wanted the new service to work.

The NHS was based on principles unlike anything that had gone before. It was financed almost entirely from central taxation. That the rich paid more than the poor for comparable benefits was regarded as a crucial part of the scheme. Everyone was eligible for care, even people temporarily resident or visiting the country. People could be referred to any hospital, local or more distant. Care was free at the point of use, although prescription and dental charges were subsequently introduced.

During the current pandemic, there has been immense national and local support for the NHS and its front line workers. The emergence of the Thursday 'Clap for Carers' was a significant experience in the lockdown. Thanksgiving binds communities together, turning 'I' into 'we'. The contribution of carers and key workers who have given of themselves sacrificially needs to be honoured. Sharing stories of people and events during the crisis is likely to form the kernel of any community celebration. Unsung heroes need to be applauded.

+Robert Exon
Chair of the Liturgical Commission

Here is a selection of the prayers provided:

For the NHS

God of healing and compassion, we thank you for the establishment of the National Health Service, and for the dedication of all who work in it: give skill, sympathy and resilience to all who care for the sick, and your wisdom to those engaged in medical research. Strengthen all in their vocation through your Spirit, that through their work many will be restored to health and strength; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Everlasting God, at this time we lift to you those from all nations and backgrounds who work on the front line in healthcare. Give them skill and wisdom in their work. Be their strength and their shield as they give of themselves in the care of others. Amen.

For carers and health professionals

Heavenly Father, whose blessed Son came not to be served but to serve: bless all who, following in his steps, give themselves to the service of others; that with wisdom, patience, and courage, they may minister in his name to the suffering and the needy; for the love of him who laid down his life for us, your Son our Saviour Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Lord Jesus, who healed the sick and gave them new life, be with all carers and health professionals, as they act as agents of your healing touch. In desperate times, keep them strong yet loving; and when their work is done, be with them in their weariness and in their tears. Amen.

From Norfolk and Norwich University Hospitals Chaplaincy, by Althea Hayton – adapted

Prayers in relation to COVID-19

Keep us, good Lord, under the shadow of your mercy in this time of uncertainty and distress. Sustain and support the anxious and fearful, and lift up all who are brought low; that we may rejoice in your comfort knowing that nothing can separate us from your love in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

Lord Jesus Christ, you taught us to love our neighbour, and to care for those in need as if we were caring for you. In this time of anxiety, give us strength to comfort the fearful, to tend the sick, and to assure the isolated of our love, and your love, for your name's sake. Amen.



Stay safe

Blessings and love

Mark