

HOLY TRINITY CHURCH, GUILDFORD
SUNG EUCHARIST

A sermon preached by Rev Robert Cotton
As part of the Guildford International Music Festival
And on the occasion of the Baptism of William Rozier

23 MARCH 2003

It took John Tavener 4 minutes to write this anthem *The Lamb*. It takes a lifetime to live its truth.

Apparently that's all. 4 minutes. The simple theme, and how it could be used, came to him unbidden. It must have just flowed out of his pen, this simple beautiful, complex anthem that we'll hear in a moment. It was a moment of inspiration. And I am sure that was partly because the words and the music fit so well together.

I have two examples that I want to tell you about. The first is this. Martin Neary, the previous organist of Westminster Abbey, has explained how he rehearses this piece, because it is not a straightforward anthem at all. The main tune goes all over the place and the parts that the choir sing clash with one another. But, he says, provided everyone remembers this note – a G – provided everyone remembers it whatever music they are singing, wherever they are going, provided that they all remember to come back to that note, all will be well.

And the approach to the music matches the sentiment of William Blake's words. There is a haunting question that comes to us all some time in our lives at crucial moments. "Who are we?" We can be distracted, as Blake says, by clothing, by food, by outside cares, but there are moments in our lives when we are addressed by that question "Who are we?" And if we pursue that question, or maybe, if we allow that question to pursue us, the answer emerges not only that we are created by God, not only that we are created by a gentle, loving, knowing God, but that somehow 'who we are' matches who God is. The poem says 'We are a little lamb.' We are, at the depth of our being, weak and vulnerable and timid. When we find God, we find that God is *The Little Lamb*, not overbearing, not domineering, not judgmental, but He, God, is also the little lamb, the sacrificial lamb, the one who gently goes out of his way for the sake of our love.

So our identity is found, is founded, on God's identity. That is the root of everything. That is our 'G'. Remember that note, remember that truth, and wherever we go in our lives in all our crooked, winding ways, remember that note, and we will come back to our home. What the words say, the music does.

Let's pause for a moment, because I want to say what a wonderful day it is to have a baptism. Jane phoned me saying, "Could I have a baptism, and it's got to be before Easter?". I looked at the calendar with concern - it's so full! Even forgetting the Iraqi

conflict, I thought when on earth can we schedule this baptism. Then suddenly in a moment of inspiration I thought today is the right day. It was nearly a year ago that, when speaking to the people planning the Music Festival, I chose the title of this sermon, 'Called by name', and I chose this music to be sung. That was a year ago. I wanted the occasion to be suitable for everyone, which is when I suddenly realised that it would be doubly suitable for William Hugo for whom today's baptism reveals the foundation of his identity. It reveals in some way his name. A bit of baptism is giving his name, but a lot more is revealing who he is, founded on God's love. Just in the same way, Alastair and Jane and the godparents and the family all love William - and all that love is given, but it is also a revealing of God's love, the foundation stone for all William's future and life.

But I said there were two ways that the music and the words fit one another. In this anthem, Tavener, having written some of the melody, then plays it backwards. The choir sings it, and then, if you listen carefully, the choir sings it backwards. Musically and theologically the message comes across that there is a journey that can be travelled both ways.

To illustrate this, I chose the second anthem, that I wanted sung today. I wanted Tavener's anthem *The Lamb* to be partnered by an anthem written some 400 years earlier, Tallis' *If ye love me*, both of which are simple, haunting, complex anthems. The words for Tallis are very familiar – they are words from Jesus, "If ye love me, keep my commandments, and I will give you a Counsellor who will be with you for ever". Straightforward enough! Jesus says, "If you love me, make it honest and real love; and that means you must be obedient, but obedience is difficult, so I will help you. Not the sort of standing at a distance and helping you, but helping by being with you for ever". That is some people's experience of life and God.

But the journey can go the other way as well. For these people, they simply know the lasting, abiding presence of God. It is with them when they get up in the morning and with them through the day to the evening. But it is not a static unfeeling presence. God is dynamic. God's grace is nourishing. God's grace makes us become the sort of people we can be which is, obedient, helpful, trusting and courageous people. If we are this, then that is the greatest love we can give, not only to God, but to others too. God's presence leads to God's help, to obedience, to love.

Who was it that said "We live life forwards, but we understand it backwards"? So I am saying there are two journeys to make, just as there are two journeys in the music. The same journey but can be approached from different ends:

- from the secure base of knowing God's love that allows us to give and to live, that takes us to obedience and beyond;
- or the journey of living life to the full, being out there, engaging with the world, but as we do that, discerning what is right and important and good and true and lasting, and therefore godly.

I think it is little wonder that when Tavener and Tallis took these truths and set them to music that they came up with simple, beautiful and complex anthems.

4 minutes it took John Tavener to write *The Lamb*. To find, and to live its truth, a lifetime.

Amen.