

I recently came across a parody of a well-known hymn, and this is how it began,

“Oft in danger, oft in woe,  
Church musicians come and go,  
Undismayed by petty strife,  
Guardians of a way of life.”

The poem went on, in 20 verses! to describe the strange ways of organists and clergy, but ended with this couplet,

“Organists and clergy must  
Live in harmony and trust.”

Today, is a very sad day for St. Peter’s as it is the day when our church musician for the last 38 years, Graham, has decided to retire. And what’s more (to add insult to injury) he is taking Marilyn with him!

In spite of the fact that everyone has their own favourite hymns, I hope that he has not been “oft in danger, oft in woe”, though no doubt he has experienced the latter having worked with five vicars! I can only speak for myself when I say that Graham and I have lived “in harmony and trust.”

Graham has served St. Peter’s magnificently since the time he succeeded Dennis Tinsley in 1979.

Over that time he has not only retained St. Peter's fine musical tradition but he has greatly enhanced it, giving to our worship both dignity and accessibility for all.

My sponsoring bishop in Ireland used to say that "music is the bicycle of the liturgy", in the sense that good church music carries the service along. We may not always be in a holy and peaceful state of mind when we come to church. We may be preoccupied with worries and concerns, or have had a bit of a rush, or have had to badger the rest of the family to get ready on time, but it is above all the music that can transport us into God's presence and help put things in a proper perspective.

Right from the beginning as we heard in today's epistle God has been praised in music and song. In New Testament times, Paul told his readers in Ephesus and Colossae to "sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, making melody to the Lord in your hearts."

And it is striking that both Matthew and Mark record that at the end of the Last Supper, when so many dread thoughts must have been on Jesus' mind, that he and the disciples sang a hymn before they made their way to the Garden of Gethsemane where he would be betrayed and deserted. To lift their spirits and to affirm their trust in God, Paul and Silas sang hymns when they were in prison for their faith.

And, according to the Book of Revelation, heaven is a place of praise and much singing, with massive choirs. In Revelation chapter 5 we read of “many angels surrounding the throne of God...they numbered myriads of myriads and thousands and thousands, singing with full voice, Worthy is the Lamb that was slain To receive power and wealth, wisdom and might And honour and blessing”

A vision that puts the Last Night of the Proms in the halfpenny place!

I don't know what the language of heaven is but the earliest singing in church was in Latin. It wasn't until, the Reformation that what was sung was translated into the vernacular. But even then most of what was sung were metrical psalms.

It wasn't until the late 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> century that hymns of what was described as “human composure” were allowed to be sung in churches, thus heralding in congregational singing.

Here in St. Peter's the Formby's who were vicars were of a conservative stamp, and there wasn't much innovation in services or singing. Lonsdale Formby was vicar in St. Peter's for nearly 50 years, for the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. He died in 1896. He it was who built the Victorian sanctuary and also the Formby chapel.

But he was a bit of a fuddy duddy. He much preferred metrical psalms to hymns. He once complained that Formby was becoming too modern. The railway had linked Formby to Liverpool and Southport and it was being populated with new people who needed new facilities like houses, shops and hotels. And new sporting opportunities like cricket and tennis. He complained about all this progress declaring that he would have much preferred it if Formby had remained “a quiet village of farmers and fisher folk.”

But liturgical change did come when in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Charles Wright became vicar and services became more ceremonial in the Anglo-Catholic tradition.

No doubt as a result, the organist – and the Vicar – were “oft in danger, oft in woe” for we know from Neville Carrick’s history that many left to join Holy Trinity whose services were much lower.

But that Catholic tradition continued when Michael Barsley succeeded Charles Wright. Barsley had been precentor of Liverpool Cathedral and so responsible for Cathedral services and music and he brought that tradition to St. Peter’s where he stayed for over 20 years.

When Kevin Eastell became vicar in in 1976, his attempts to move St. Peter’s further “up the candle” were not fully successful, but the moderate Catholic tradition of St. Peter’s was maintained, giving an order and dignity to the services that so many of us appreciate, including Bishop Richard with us 2 wks ago.

And of course Keven Eastell had great taste in organists for he was vicar when Graham began.

Graham has embraced that tradition with enthusiasm and skill, with commitment and imagination (Graham not bad for a Methodist!!).

And it is with heavy hearts that as we say goodbye today we also say a huge thank-you for all that Graham & Marilyn have done for and in St. Peter's over the last 38 years. The quiet ways they have touched so many of our lives.

If I haven't already I know that it will embarrass Graham but 2 verses from Scripture come to mind.

The first is St. Luke's description of Barnabas in Acts – "a good man, full of the Holy Spirit" and secondly, from Jesus' parable of the talents, "Well done, good and faithful servant."

I started with part of a poem, so I'll finish with part of a poem – written by Oliver Wendell Jones. But what he says in praise of the organ blower could well be said of the organ player.

"Not all the preaching, O my friend,  
Comes from the church's pulpit end.  
Not all that bend the knee and bow  
Yield service half as true as thou."

We give thanks for the music that we appreciate here in St Peter's and how it draws us closer to God for in drawing us closer to God we are given strength to truly serve in all the many ways that we have to offer.