

## St Cecilia Vespers

Last Sunday, in the middle of the 11 o'clock Mass, my thoughts turned to Sunday lunch. Not an unusual thing you may think to look at me, and you wouldn't be wrong; but this was not just any Sunday lunch. It was as if the whole experience of the Sunday mornings of my childhood all came back to me in a single moment: driving home from church; dropping my dad off at the Nag's Head; stopping at the off-licence: beer for him and lemonade for me; the smell of roasting meat as we opened the back door. But this was not only a physical memory. It was to relive, just for a moment, an experience of contentment and security, knowing it now for what it was, in a way I would never have understood at the time.

Marcel Proust managed to get whole chapters of his novel out of experiences like that. A taste of tea and a sponge finger brought back to the old French novelist a world of youthful experience. People of a literary bent sometimes call such experiences "Proustian Moments". I searched in my mind for the trigger for my own "Proustian Moment" and I found it soon enough. It was the particular smell of this church, St Wilfrid's Church, where we came to Mass when I was a child. I don't know if it's the stone, or the rubber floor in the porch, or the kind of polish that was used then and is still used now; but a whiff of that smell last Sunday morning was enough to transport me back in time to another place and to a feeling of deep gratitude for everything that I have been given in life, both then and now.

I say all this to give an example of the power of non-verbal communication. Sunsets, mountain scenery, stormy seas: people often mention these triggers for thoughts about the majesty of God without a word being spoken. For the Prophet Elijah it was the opposite. The Lord was not in the thunder but in the sound of the gentle breeze, the "still, small voice of calm." The experience may be quiet or loud, dramatic or peaceful; it can come through any of our five senses; the important thing about non-verbal communication is that it is deeper than reason, prior to all argument, all conflict. It does not do away with the need for reason and discussion. But it touches something more profound: it touches the heart and the soul.

The Church is good at this kind of communication. Icons, statues and stained glass told the stories of Our Lord and the Saints in a memorable way to people unable to read or write; incense and candles, beginning as practical measures soon took on a symbolic value: prayer rising before God like incense, and light that became a sign of the glory of God's people.

Today, on the Feast of St Cecilia, we celebrate the most powerful and the most beautiful example of this kind of communication. We give thanks for the gift of music. I would like to thank Tim Harrison and the Middlesbrough Diocesan Choir for being here tonight to give us an experience of the beauty of the music of the Church and to provide an occasion for a formal act of thanksgiving to God for this treasure. More than anything else, music has the power to move us. Try watching a film with the music track switched off to see what a difference music makes. Of course, this power, like all power, can be abused. Music can be used to inspire war, and not only just wars; it can be sentimental and seductive; it can make us feel emotions that are not real.

But when good music is combined with the truth and the goodness of the teaching and the prayer of the Church, then its beauty acquires a power to move us that is irresistible. Philosophers have a name for these qualities of goodness, truth and beauty. They call them "transcendentals". That's because they make God - who is transcendent (invisible, untouchable, beyond the power of our reason to know) - they make God, even if fleetingly, recognisable and knowable.

The ancients also described these qualities as "convertible". They meant that where you find a real example of one of these qualities, you will always find the others present too. If there is real goodness then it will also be true and beautiful; if something is true, it will also be beautiful and good. When we think about it, there is great wisdom in this, true balance or equanimity. Goodness (in the sense of upright moral action, say) without truth or beauty could come across as a cold and heartless morality; truth, without the attraction of goodness and beauty can be unattractively dogmatic; beauty, without truth or goodness, can be superficial or shallow. The genuine article always comes with its two friends.

This, in turn, tells us something about how God draws us to himself, and something about why He became a man like us so as to show us, in a human form like ours, what perfect goodness, truth and beauty look like. We are made in the image and likeness of God. Part of that means that we are made to recognise God. And we recognise Him through the powers we have that are closest to God's own nature, our spiritual powers - we might say that the *mind* recognises the truth, the *conscience* recognises the good and the *heart* recognises beauty. All of us are made quite differently - some are conscientious; others sensitive to beauty; still others have good minds. Each of us will find that we are drawn to God more by one than by another of these qualities of goodness, truth and beauty. But we *will* be drawn, because, as St Augustine said in his Confessions, *You made us for yourself O Lord and our hearts are restless until they come to rest in you.*

In the same Book, St Augustine wrote: *Late have I loved you, O Beauty ever ancient, ever new, late have I loved you! You were within me, but I was outside, and it was there that I searched for you. In my unloveliness I plunged into the lovely things which you created. You were with me, but I was not with you. Created things kept me from you; yet if they had not been in you they would have not been at all. You called, you shouted, and you broke through my deafness. You flashed, you shone, and you dispelled my blindness. You breathed your fragrance on me; I drew in breath and now I pant for you. I have tasted you, now I hunger and thirst for more. You touched me, and I burned for your peace.*

Tonight we have listened to the words of the Psalms and Canticles of Holy Scripture, speaking of goodness, communicating truth and sung, as they were always meant to be sung, as if accompanied by King David himself on the harp. May these words and this music be an inspiration to us as we listen here this evening. In today's liturgy for St Cecilia, the Patron Saint of Music, the Church offers us more words of St Augustine. They will make a fitting conclusion to these words: *All our love now aspires to sing a new song to the Lord. Let us sing that new song, not only with our lips but with our lives.*