

Hear the Word of God

A reflection that was to have been delivered at St Stephen's Uniting Church, Macquarie Street, Sydney on Sunday 16 January 2011, by David Gill. It would have introduced four readings and four choruses from Handel's "Messiah" sung by the Combined Churches Messiah Choir.

On the Sunday before Christmas, here at St Stephen's we did the service of nine lessons and carols. It was the usual lessons-and-carols format. We listened to the familiar readings, culminating in St John's gospel on the mystery of the incarnation. We sang the old songs, culminating in "Hark! The herald angels sing". And there was no sermon.

On leaving, one of the worshippers remarked to me, rather enigmatically, "David, I'm so glad you didn't try to preach". As I pondered what to make of that, she went on. "Ministers always feel they need to talk," she said. "Today you let the story speak with its own power".

When it comes to talking instead of just listening the clergy may indeed be serial offenders. But we're not the only ones.

Some of you will be familiar with the name of Pier Paolo Pasolini. He was an Italian poet, intellectual, writer and film director. He was also an atheist, a communist, a vociferous critic of the church and Italian society, a drug addict, and gay – all in all, not a very likely pin-up boy for the Vatican.

One day, somehow, he found himself looking at a Bible. Matthew's gospel, specifically its portrayal of Jesus of Nazareth, seized his attention. To the astonishment of everyone, himself I think included, Pasolini made a film about it, which appeared in 1964, won rave reviews including a couple of awards from the Roman Catholic Church and was shown to the bishops during the Second Vatican Council.

Three things about that movie are worth noting. First, at a time when most films were being made in colour, “The Gospel According to St Matthew” was in black and white. Second, Pasolini ignored famous names of the film world and used amateur actors throughout. Third – and note this -- everything spoken in the film was taken word-for-word from Matthew’s gospel. There was no Hollywood spectacle, no ecclesiastical spin, no editorial comment. He let the story speak with its own power.

Today we welcome to St Stephen’s the Combined Churches Messiah Choir, under the baton of Timothy Chung, as they sing for us four choruses from Handel’s “Messiah”. Two come from the prophetic first part of the oratorio, the third is the culmination of the second part about Jesus’ life, death, resurrection and ascension, and the last, from the third part, is the great hymn of thanksgiving for his final victory over sin and death.

One reason why we love this oratorio is that, of course, it is eminently singable -- even for those of us whose singing voices would have reduced Handel to tears. But there is I think another reason for the hold it has upon us.

The libretto – the text with which the composer was working – is drawn entirely from the bible, mostly the now-little-heard but still-much-loved King James version. No spectacle, no sermon, no spin, no editorial comment at all. Just the story, set free to speak with its own power.

Let us, then, prepare ourselves to encounter that story afresh. Yes, attend to the readings and revel in the music. But within and beyond those familiar, much-loved sounds, let us pray that, once again, we may hear ... the Word ... of God.

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