

## Handel's *Messiah*

*A reflection delivered at St Stephen's Uniting Church, Macquarie Street, Sydney on Sunday 19 January 2014, by David Gill. It introduced four readings and four choruses from Handel's "Messiah" sung by the Combined Churches Messiah Choir.*

On behalf of the people of St Stephen's, I welcome all who are visitors this morning. Welcome especially the members of the Combined Churches Messiah Choir, under the baton of Timothy Chung.

Each year, here at St Stephen's, in the run up to Christmas, we like many local congregations do the service of nine lessons and carols. It has the usual format. The familiar readings, culminating in St John's gospel on the mystery of the incarnation. The old songs, culminating in "Hark! The herald angels sing". Several years ago I happened to be presiding and, because of the time factor, the sermon was omitted.

As the congregation filed out, one of the worshippers remarked to me, rather enigmatically, "David, I'm so glad you didn't try to preach today". As I wondered exactly what to make of that, she went on. "Ministers always feel they need to talk. But today you let the story speak with its own power".

When it comes to excessive talk we clergy may indeed be serial offenders. But we're not alone. In his novel *A Passage to India*, E M Forster refers to "poor little talkative Christianity". We know what he meant. If only the gospel were able to speak afresh with its own power, without the Church getting in the way. If only the good news could be heard with its integrity intact, without the distractions and clutter of religion. If only.

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 and won rave reviews including a couple of awards from the Roman Catholic Church. It 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.

Handel did not make a film. He made an oratorio. But his production too is remarkable for the way it allows the story to speak with integrity. With a power that is itself, for us, empowering.

Fifteen years ago Indonesia was a country in crisis. The currency had crashed. Unemployment soared. The social fabric threatened to unravel. Christian/Muslim relations had deteriorated, churches were being attacked and there was violence aimed at the ethnic Chinese minority. Large parts of northern Jakarta were burned to the ground. The World Council of Churches and the Christian Conference of Asia asked some of us to go in, as a pastoral team, to find out what was going on and to offer what support we could.

One Sunday we worshipped with a Chinese congregation in Jakarta. A few weeks earlier, their church had been gutted. People had been massacred on the front steps. Our team stood silently in the blackened ruins, still smelling the smoke, wondering what on earth we could say to bring hope to these people.

Suddenly from an undamaged room nearby came the strains of, yes, Handel’s “Messiah”. It was the choir, revving up for the morning service. “O thou that tellest good tidings to Zion,” sang those voices joyfully. “Arise, say unto the cities of Judah: Behold your God, behold, the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee”. It was faith, strong and enduring, even amidst the ashes.

We didn't have to bring hope to those people. Handel was doing the job for us. More precisely, the faith of the Church, speaking powerfully and empoweringly through Handel, was doing the job.

Today we hear four choruses from "Messiah". Two come from the prophetic first part of the oratorio, the third is the culmination of the part about Jesus' life, death, resurrection and ascension, and the last is the great hymn of thanksgiving for his final victory over sin and death. All in the familiar words of the biblical story itself.

Let us, then, prepare ourselves to receive that story afresh. Listen to the readings. Revel in the music. But within and beyond those much-loved sounds, let us hear ... the Word ... of God.

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