

**SERMON
RSCM FESTIVAL**

PETERBOROUGH CATHEDRAL

10th October 2009

One blind Alcetus of Halice is led to the Temple Precincts at Epidauros, and falls asleep and dreams. The god Asclepius comes to him in the form of a snake, and 'licks' his eyes. In the morning Alcetus wakes and is asked by the Temple officials what he can see.

'I can see people but they look like trees'... he says.

He is asked to sleep again and the same thing happens; he is 'touched' and on waking reports that he 'can see everything clearly'.

No coincidence here... for a Markan scholar this is fascinating how one story can be transposed from one setting and find itself Christianised within a central story of Jesus' ministry.

For St Mark, the disciples have been given eight and a half chapters of evidence to help them to 'see clearly' who Jesus actually was, that is, the Messiah. Did they 'see' up to that point...stupid lot, of course not! Even Peter who, in the next chapter blurts out 'You are the Messiah' cannot 'see clearly' enough to recognise what kind of Messiah Jesus is going to be, one who suffers to save the world.

Why on earth is the Canon Precentor of Leicester Cathedral saying this to us. . . and at this festival too?

But a very important and related question...

How is our sight?...

Do we 'see clearly' ourselves as musicians and robed choirs as a potent and immensely valuable part of the whole Church?

How is our sight?...

Or do we 'see' that in some way choirs in churches are under threat and the way forward may not be as clear as we would like it to be?

How is our sight?...

Do we sometimes see ourselves as undervalued and perhaps sometimes misunderstood as to our proper place in the beautifying of worship to the glory of God?

How is our sight?...

Do we feel ourselves assailed when others think that the ability to sing... and what we are doing tonight, is somehow credited as being 'elitist', only for 'the few' and therefore something not quite PC?

How is our sight?...

Do we see our future as rather uncertain, 'strange shadows of trees'... a necessary 'on-going', but one which is rather cloudy?

How is our sight?...

Do we need to be touched by Christ and be healed by his risen power to see again our futures and the future of Church music with a clarity, a freshness of vision and of trust... in God certainly but also in each other. Can we be renewed in confidence in what we offer to the Church?
I very much hope so!

And how does the Church 'see'?

Being an Opera Singer at ENO for eleven years and having been privileged to be and hugely thankful for being an RSCM chorister from the age of a six, in Church and Cathedral, and being the Precentor at Mirfield Theological College I arrived in my first living in a rough tough council estate, where there was a choir of men and boys which was already good and well supported. We built the choir up to something approaching forty strong. After six years the Bishop decided that it would be good if I went to somewhere else with a similar choral tradition, and, trying to be a good and obedient servant, so I did. The down side was that my successor took three months to disband the choir and to 'sack' the Director of Music. So since 1988 they have had no choir and the musical tradition has to say the least become much the poorer. The congregation halved, and the mission of the Church became greatly impaired. This is an isolated example of course, but real in what can actually happen.

How does the Church see?

I say this not to moan in the slightest, but to suggest that we need to be confident, and see clearly enough to explain to those who might question how the world of choral music is an essential part of the life blood of the mission of the Church...

It is a sure and certain fact that the number of clergy who have been spiritually formed at least in part by their experience in Church Choirs is legion. You are looking at one... and I would go as far as to say that I may well not have been a Christian, never mind a priest, had I not been privileged to be part of choral singing from six to 18 in parish church and cathedral.

I believe most strongly the church's own and sometimes unfocussed view of choirs and the part they play in its life needs to be helped to be made much clearer.

We need to help the church see clearly how those who inhabit the choir stalls of our churches week by week up and down the country can offer their unique God given talent for the upbuilding of his Kingdom within the local community...

We need to help the Church to see clearly that 'church music and choirs' is not an 'us and them' scenario, but that choir members and their families are part of the whole church and part of its flourishing...

We need to help the Church not to 'throw babies out with bathwaters', and come alongside the Church in what she is trying to do in mission and outreach with the wonderful and unique contribution that musicians have to offer.

And so to finish... Mark records Jesus as saying to the newly restored Bethsaida citizen.... 'do not go into the village'. There are many biblical-critical opinions surrounding this final phrase of the story... one of the most interesting being that having had his sight restored he was fit and well enough to start out on his own missionary journey for Christ in other places.

But for us, I think we **need** to go into the villages, into the towns and into the cities of our nation and with renewed confidence in the gifts that God has given to us, to proclaim the Good News of Jesus by doing

what we do best... the singing of his glorious praises as part of the wonderful Christian choral tradition of our land.

AMEN