

Tales of an itinerant church musician

by Martin Holford – 18 October 2018

This is an account of a remarkable few days that a combination of work and a day off produced. It resulted in visiting seven religious buildings in five hectic days.

Saturday. Up early and I go to Westminster Abbey it is the feast day of St Edward the confessor. I do not have any particular affinity with him nor am I a descendent as far as I know. The chief reason is that on this day alone the abbey has free entrance. I arrive as it opens and the entire building is deserted save for a few stewards. The shrine to St Edward and its surroundings are remarkable and one is lucky to get to see it at all as it is usually closed off: it escaped medieval desecration and has probably changed little since. Its west wall (behind the high altar) in particular is battered and worn down but clearly original with intricate carving. Incense is burning. Further on is the Abbey's jewel - Henry VII's lady chapel. On display is that most catholic of symbols - a monstrance with the exposition of the blessed sacrament. In a side chapel are joint tombs of the queens - Catholic Mary Tudor and the Protestant Elizabeth I - "two sisters in the hope of one resurrection". I detect the hand of the current Dean - John Hall - in all this ceremony today and reflect that only in Westminster abbey where the whole religious history of England is encapsulated in one building could all this come together so well. I walk down Victoria street and into Westminster Cathedral and high mass for St Edward is in progress. Incense is again rising to the blackened bare ceiling, the famous choir sings Bruckner, the priest celebrates at the high altar in Latin and the unseasonably sunny weather shining through the few windows all makes for a dazzling sensory experience. The similarities with what I have just seen in the Protestant abbey are striking. I leave and hop on a bike and cycle to Kings Cross for a fast train to Cambridge. The reason is to hear a former pupil give an organ recital in Kings College chapel. This is not an every-day occurrence, she plays brilliantly and I am proud of her. But before the recital I join the queue for evensong, which is absolutely packed. I am struck that the waiting queue is longer than ever. I would estimate that some 700 people enter the chapel. Some criticise the services at Kings for being too much like a concert. The choir and architecture are out of this world, the book of common prayer is followed to the letter and I ponder the dilemma of what to do with a liturgical choir that is just so good. Would it help to reduce the concert atmosphere (if, indeed, there is one which I don't accept) if they deliberately sung badly? It is clear that many in the congregation are tourists and some are of other faiths, of little faith or none. But they get to see the Christian liturgy live with children involved, hear the whole of psalm 69 sung and two readings from the bible. Running these theatrical shows of liturgy cost money. Why should Kings, the Abbey and Westminster Cathedral bother to provide all this? Kings is a university college. But they do. Kings is sensitive to its nomadic congregation, and clergy and stewards do what they can to help all to participate. Kings is clearly aware of its potential to show something of the Christian story even if just for a moment. What do the visitors think and say as they leave? I hope one of the sentiments might be that the college clearly cares about what they are trying to do. The director of music is 70 and about to retire after over 35 years in the post - spanning my whole career in church music from when I had my first organ lesson. What can it have been like to have had charge of the 'Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols' for so many years which is surely one of the most listened to Christian services in the world?

Sunday morning and I am back at Holy Trinity. I never tire of the place or the people. I am very lucky - not all church musicians have what I have. The loyal adults in the choir help with the humour that is needed to keep things moving. It is an exciting time at the moment as we currently have eight new boy choristers who are slowly being trained to sing and conduct themselves appropriately. Some get

it quicker than others. We sing Bruckner and Rachmaninov. One of our head choristers - Thomas - startles them by coming in with the famous solo descant. He sings it brilliantly and effortlessly. I hope that some of the new boys may already be thinking that they would like to do this when they are twelve or thirteen - that aspirational attitude is what has kept the whole show running all these years. Our two current head choristers are superb, but also cheerful, committed and helpful - a great bonus. They are partly this because of the example previous head choristers have set them in years past, and it is touching to see that six such teenagers are currently in the choir in the back rows. Like our youngest trebles, they all have their own issues, but in learning to sing tenor or bass. One recently retired head chorister (Henry) remarks 'it's like starting all over again'. I am moved to see them help the youngest boys get robed before the service. They all have their talents too. One, Ben, will play the trumpet on Remembrance Day in the anthem. Matthew will sing a tenor solo in the Faure Requiem in a few weeks and is serious about his singing. Another, Tim, is entrusted with an organ solo in communion, freeing me up to keep an eye on the new trebles' hazardous assault course (clutching music) to the nave via the altar in a way that does not distract or entertain the congregation whose thoughts should be elsewhere. The choir has sung these pieces countless times before and I have conducted them many times but I remember that some of the boys are getting to know these great pieces for the first time. That keeps the music fresh, if a little raw at times. The new boys will be inducted next month and I recall the time we had a chorister of the Hindu faith. His parents were quite happy for him to be inducted with the Christian promises each chorister makes. Their only request was that he should receive a Hindu blessing, and only someone like our current rector could do this in a discrete way that gets the job done and causes nothing but goodwill on all sides. I reflect that there are only two other people alive who really know what one goes through each week with a boys choir like ours - and they are my dear predecessors Clive Stroud and John McElroy. It is a privilege to be the third and I envy the fourth already.

At 11.15 I am taken to school to take 32 girls aged 10-13 to Manchester. We are to sing evensong at Blackburn Cathedral (few know that Blackburn even has a cathedral) and then we are to sing live on Radio 4 for the Daily Service on Tuesday. I do not look too closely at the religious background of the girls we are taking. We are not a church school and I know at least one girl is a Muslim but I have no doubt she will recite the Lord's Prayer and the Apostles' Creed with the conviction needed - for I have told them the choir is there to lead all aspects of the service irrespective of what they might be feeling or believing. How does that compare with a girl with no faith who also does the same? Blackburn is a rundown city, as so much of the north west is now. Crime is high and there are signs of inner-city decay everywhere. Our coach driver gets lost and we see parts of Blackburn that the tourist office would probably prefer we didn't. But the cathedral offers a warm welcome and are glad that we are come to sing on a Monday. The congregation totals five and they tell me it is the choirs at Blackburn that keep the cathedral community going.

Tuesday. we journey to Emmanuel church in Didsbury for the broadcast. It is a church with an evangelical tradition that the BBC use for this service, and the drum kit is stationed next to the organ. 'Never work with children or animals' they say but it all goes without a hitch and the girls rise to the occasion. There is no congregation present but we remind the girls there are a quarter of a million who listen. It is prisons week. The girls sing the hymn 'To God be the glory' that has the line 'the vilest offender who truly believes' and I audition the oldest girls to read a passage from St Luke. This contains the lines about having the faith as small as a mustard seed and being thrown into the sea with a millstone around one's neck, which the girls initially pronounce as 'mile stone' - an interesting concept. I use an old psychological trick from Sir David Willcocks at Kings College - which is not to select the reader until the last possible moment to prevent nerves falling on one chosen person. The gamble pays off and she reads well. Imogen has been chosen because she was the best and calmest reader, but I wonder if she understands or believes what she is reading? Could I have read so calmly and clearly live on the radio at their age?

Wednesday. We take our senior school choir to sing evensong at Southwark Cathedral. I notice how many clergy are in the congregation and I suspect some of these come for some quiet time from their parishes in the diocese that must be tough and lonely. The reality of parish life here reminds one of the TV comedy 'Rev'. The congregation in Southwark is always one of the most diverse and all states of humankind are represented. We are close to Brixton, Peckham and Bermondsey, but also the city and its banks. Evensong is punctuated by the relentless sounds of the trains outside traveling between those destinations.

It's been an incredible few days. I'm lucky to have two jobs I love - and get paid for doing it. I've heard some amazing and uplifting music from professionals, amateurs, children and adults. I've seen the church attempting to touch those with little or no faith. I've seen the Anglican Choral tradition alive and well doing what it does best - bringing buildings to life in a way that one does not see on the continent. Much has been poignant, and some of it funny. I hope that everyone one of the people I have seen has been touched and enriched by something they have heard and seen. Nearly all of it only happens because of the Church of England. For all its faults, thank God it is there. God bless the C of E and all who sail in her.