

# **Resurrection: From Theology to Music and Back Again**

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## *Beginnings*

The second week of May 1998 was a typical week in the life of Lichfield Cathedral. Worship, preaching, meetings, visits and more meetings. And one of those meetings, on Wednesday 13 May, had effects more far-reaching than we could have imagined.

The meeting was called by Paul Spicer to plan the Lichfield Festival for July 2000. Paul was keen to commission a large-scale work that would simultaneously commemorate the Millennium (so-called; I have made my views on that subject well enough known<sup>[1]</sup>), the 1,300th anniversary of the first founding of Lichfield Cathedral, and the 250th anniversary of the death of Johann Sebastian Bach. We brainstormed the subject for a while with two colleagues (Canon Charles Taylor, the Precentor of Lichfield Cathedral, and Jim Berrow, a member of the Festival Board). As we talked through various options, we soon rejected the idea of a Passion on the lines of Bach's own Matthew and John Passions. They are too well known; the comparison would be too obvious; anyway, the theme hardly fitted a summer festival. For similar reasons a setting of the Christmas story, or a large-scale Mass, seemed inappropriate. But - an Easter Oratorio?

Bach wrote a small piece with that name (BWV 249), but interestingly it wasn't on the scale of his Passions. But there was certainly a potential project in that area, provided we chose the right Gospel. Mark's resurrection narrative (16.1-8) is notoriously curtailed, with the longer ending (vv. 9-20) being almost certainly a later addition, and in any case not providing much to gladden the heart of either a librettist or a composer. Matthew's story (ch. 28) is a bit fuller, but still without the dramatic potential necessary for a musical setting. Luke's narrative (ch.

24) is fuller again, and contains the incomparable Emmaus Road story (24.13-35). But that story itself poses a problem: its very length, and extraordinary power, overshadow the rest of the chapter. Thus all the signs pointed in one direction: John's Gospel. It is John who provides not only the most Easter material but also a succession of vivid personal encounters with sharp characterization and dialogue. John was not only the one possible contender; his two Easter chapters offered splendid possibilities.

The meeting broke up in some excitement as Paul Spicer agreed to search for a composer and librettist to take on the task. I myself, as a *jeu d'esprit*, roughed out that afternoon a fresh translation of John 20 and 21 divided into the relevant parts: Evangelist, Christ, Peter, Mary and so on, with suggestions of where one might add choruses, arias, and so on - for which we would of course need fresh text, that is, a libretto to go with the material from John's Gospel.

We were then overtaken by the summer's events, including that year's Festival itself, and such things (not unconnected in my mind at least) as the Jubilee 2000 meetings which the Cathedral hosted in the run-up to the 1998 Lambeth Conference. Then, in September, Paul wrote to me. He had been unable to find a composer or librettist who was both available and affordable on the Festival's limited budget. He proposed that the two of us do it together: he, of course, to write the music, I the libretto.

I was shocked and excited, realizing both that I was in uncharted territory (scholars and preachers may write poems in private, but they aren't usually invited to make them public and have them set to music), and that if I declined I would kick myself for the rest of my life. But I had the germ of an idea. I had long been fascinated (not least through reading Hans Urs von Balthasar's book on Holy Saturday<sup>[2]</sup>) by the idea that God's Sabbath rest after creation (Gen. 2.2-3) somehow foreshadows Jesus' rest in the tomb on Holy Saturday. The final great chorus of Bach's St John Passion is 'Ruht Wohl', laying the dead Saviour to rest after his work has been completed. That, I thought, was where an Easter Oratorio based on St John ought to begin, picking up the theme where Bach had left it.

So: how to do it? That evening, during Choral Evensong in Lichfield

Cathedral, there flashed into my mind a new twist on an old hymn:

O sabbath rest by Calvary

O calm of tomb below. . .

And before I knew it I had the whole first chorus in my head, then on paper and through Paul's front door. From that point there was no turning back. I took the project with me on a couple of foreign trips and scribbled lines and verses on aeroplanes and in hotel rooms. By early December I had a draft to discuss with friends — and, rather to my alarm, Paul had already begun setting it to music. By the time I came back to him with textual revisions, some of the words I had contemplated changing were already set to music that was gathering pace and power. Paul and I were both nervous of our huge undertaking, but the backing of some generous sponsors and the enthusiasm of friends and colleagues sustained us at every step. I happily record our gratitude to them all, not least *Theology Through the Arts*.<sup>[3]</sup>

*Words, music and ideas*

From then on it was a matter of creative dialogues: between Paul and myself on several matters of detail; between the two of us and Dr Jeremy Begbie, the other member of our 'pod' group; and, most importantly, between the subject-matter of both St John, and the theme of resurrection itself, on the one hand, and the form and substance of the musical work on the other. That, it seems to me, is where the real creativity of such a project lies, and hence also its huge potential for further theological reflection.

I had determined early on that if we were going to write about Easter, it would truly be Easter we would write about — the empty tomb, the astonishing risen body of Jesus, the puzzles of new creation bursting in upon the old — rather than some etiolated version of the Easter message having to do only with the promise of a disembodied heaven after death. The question of how to express that not only in the words of individual poems but in the structure and flow of the whole work was one of my principal concerns. Paul, to my delight, was giving that aim musical substance not least in his through-composing of large sections. He was catching the excitement and drama of John's text and turning it into notes, but also much more than notes: a mood, a response to the

mystery of the text, which in turn made me think, and still makes me think, about the underlying theme and the questions it continues to raise. At the structural level, the obvious division of the two halves, covering John 20 and 21 respectively, lent itself to the over-arching themes: 'The New Day' for Part One, and 'The New Calling' for Part Two. John himself tells the story of Easter in such a way that, though the themes overlap both chapters, chapter 20 highlights the new creation as particularly significant (John repeats 'the first day of the week' in verses 1, 19, and when John does something like that we should take it seriously), and chapter 21 focuses on the puzzlement of the disciples about their new vocation, which is resolved by Jesus' forgiving and recommissioning of Peter.

Paul Spicer has, I think, brought this out not least by the choruses which open both parts. Reflecting on his settings has helped me to see more of what was there in the text itself.

Part One begins with 'On the seventh day God rested', starting low and mysterious in the darkness of the tomb, rising to its climax with 'the brooding of the Spirit' (lovers of Gerard Manley Hopkins will know where that came from) and preparing the way for Mary's visit to the tomb. The 'running' motif in the Evangelist's description of Mary (which Paul marks 'urgently, breathless' — the latter presumably not a literal instruction to the singer!) says it all: the excitement of the new day, the new creation, bursting out, troubling at first, then challenging, then all-embracing as the beloved disciple 'saw and believed'. In listening to Paul's settings here (and only space prevents further appreciative exposition) I find myself not only confirmed in my reading but sensing the mood of John 20 in more dimensions than before.

Part Two begins with the chorus 'Into that strange, unmapped new land'. The marvellous woodwind scoring of the opening, and the haunting theme of the sung entry, set the tone and reinforce John's text: the disciples don't know what to do next, and are stumbling forwards into the new world without understanding God's plan, or the meaning of the strange events they have witnessed. The comedy of the fishing scene ('All night we worked') blends with the music's strange sense of serenity which clothes Jesus' reappearance on the shore and his invitation to breakfast. Breakfast itself, cooked on the charcoal fire

which reminds us of the previous fire in the High Priest's hall, where Peter denied Jesus, sets the scene for the almost unbearably dramatic reconciliation between Peter and Jesus, and Jesus' calm but challenging orders to his wayward lieutenant: feed my lambs, look after my sheep, tend my sheep. All of this, as I now come back to the text two years later, is bathed in new light by Paul's music. He has not only caught the mood I hoped to create with my words, but has enhanced it and given it wings.

One question of content was a concern of mine all through. I wanted to keep the poems tightly Johannine, to prevent them from sprawling into too many wider theological ideas. Hence, in the first twelve lines of the opening chorus, the major themes of the Gospel (word, water, bread, and so on) come together in describing Jesus' death. Where I have departed from John, it has been, so to speak, with his permission: thus, for instance, in the duet and chorus 'I will sing to the Lord', I pick up the parallel between Jesus and Mary in the garden and Moses and Miriam (the Hebrew for 'Mary') by the Red Sea after the Exodus and the defeat of the Egyptians. This is of course a regular Easter motif, highlighted in the hymn which follows. Then, by way of the Exodus, we move to the Thomas scene, where Thomas first expresses his doubts in terms of the children of Israel being afraid to cross the sea (No. 26):

The sea is too deep,  
The heaven's too high,  
I cannot swim,  
I cannot fly;  
I must stay here,  
I must stay here,  
Here where I know  
How I can know,  
Here where I know  
What I can know.

and then moves towards faith in 'The sea has parted' (No. 28):

The sea has parted. Pharaoh's hosts -  
Despair, and doubt, and fear, and pride -  
No longer frighten us. We must  
Cross over to the other side.

The heaven bows down. With wounded hands  
Our exiled God, our Lord of shame  
Before us, living, breathing, stands;  
The Word is near, and calls our name.  
New knowing for the doubting mind,  
New seeing out of blindness grows;  
New trusting may the sceptic find,  
New hope through that which faith now knows.

This draws together two other biblical contexts. In Rom. 10.6-9, Paul quotes Deut. 30.12-14: the promise of ‘the Word being near you’, neither high in heaven nor far away across the abyss, has been fulfilled in Jesus Christ. This, obviously, ties back into John’s controlling theme of the Word made flesh, which, though not explicit in chapters 20 and 21, is clearly intended by the Prologue (1.1-18) to be in mind throughout. Another example of a related point is where, in the new hymn at the end of the first Part, I have used Isaiah’s picture of the Word of God coming down like rain or snow, producing new creation, as a controlling image for celebrating the resurrection itself. In all this, the thematic tightness I was striving for is more than matched, of course, by the same quality in the music.

*From doubt to faith — and beyond*

This leads me to reflect on the two passages which prompted the most dialogue, one of which still engages us, the other of which was completely resolved. The first is the aria just mentioned. No. 28, ‘The sea has parted’. When I wrote this I intended it as a statement of Thomas having already come to faith. In No. 26 (see above) Thomas not only cannot believe that Jesus is risen, but intends to remain *epistemologically* in the same place: he wants to stay where he knows both *what* he can know (e.g., that resurrection is impossible) and *how* he can now (i.e., through ordinary sense-perception). But when Jesus stands before him, and invites him to touch and see, he finds a new mode of knowing, as well knowledge itself: ‘New knowing for the doubting mind,/ New seeing out of blindness grows;/ New trusting may the sceptic find,/ New hope through that which faith now knows.’ This then leads in to Thomas’ actual confession of faith (No. 29).

Paul Spicer, however, read No. 28 (see above) as referring to Thomas

still groping *towards* faith, rather than his arrival. The piece stays in the minor, with an agonized tone that awaits the resolution which now comes in the confession of faith which follows: ‘My Lord and my God!’, one of the most dramatic musical moments in the whole first half. This is so effective that I can hardly grumble; yet — and here is the creative tension of a collaboration like this — I find myself still torn between what I had had in mind and Paul’s very different reading not only of the process whereby Thomas struggles through darkness towards faith but also of my words about it! This has, inevitably, caused me to reflect further on my own understanding of doubt and faith and their respective epistemologies, a process of reflection which continues to this day as I work elsewhere on the theme of the resurrection. It has also caused me to think a bit more about the whole dialogue, which is of course central to cultural studies today, between authorial intent and reader-response.[4]

The second question that occupied us for some while was how to end the whole work. I shall comment presently on the hymns we had decided to employ at strategic points. We had thought, from early on, that the work should finish with one of the great Easter hymns, and we had more or less chosen ‘Ye choirs of new Jerusalem’ for this role. But, as completion and performance drew nearer, Paul raised a question which, though generated (as far as I know) by his thinking through the situation of a live performance, worked backwards from there into the theological understanding of the entire piece. Paul felt — and the two performances so far have surely borne this out — that it would be quite wrong to end the piece simply with that great hymn, with the audience standing up as a congregation, and with a great bang on the final ‘Alleluia! Amen!’. Quite apart from the artificiality of contriving a ‘standing ovation’ at the end of the work,[5] Paul’s musical instinct led him to the theological insight that such an ending would be deeply untrue to the strange, open-ended nature of John 20 and particularly John 21, with the call of Jesus to Peter to follow him into the unknown. John 21 doesn’t offer a triumphant closure with all the loose ends tied up. It points into God’s future, from (to be sure) the secure base of Jesus’ resurrection and God’s new day, but without specifying how precisely everything will be worked out.

I took this point completely, and we discussed various ways of solving it. I remember at one point suggesting a parallel with Dvorak's New World symphony, whose final chord lingers on, pointing into the future. We didn't want to add another chorus or equivalent after the final hymn; but 'Ye choirs of new Jerusalem', fortunately, gave Paul a clue. Since it ends with 'Alleluia, Amen', he requests the audience to sit down again as soon as the hymn is over, while the choir continues with Alleluias, getting fainter and fainter, like the angels disappearing at the end of 'Glory to God' in Handel's *Messiah* (except that, there, they are going back into heaven, whereas here the Alleluias are disappearing into the still-unknown future; perhaps those are two ways of saying the same thing?). The work finally settles back on the great pedal C where it had begun two hours earlier.

Only now with this difference, which catches and expresses the sense of waiting and expectancy with which John's Gospel does indeed close: as the pedal C dies away, the tubular bells play a B flat, resonating against it with an unresolved seventh, pointing into the future. The solid achievement of the cross and resurrection now gives rise, not to the feeling of 'Well, that's all right then', which many of us theologians, left to ourselves, might have been tempted to offer, but to new questions, new opportunities, to a future as yet unknown but beckoning. The whole process of discussion, with Paul's brilliant solution, was for me a matter of rich theological learning as well as musical excitement.

I might highlight one other point which was instructive to me as a collaborator. The climax of No. 20, 'The Price of Peace', had bothered me for a while, because the penultimate line was weaker poetically than I intended ('Jesus is risen from the dead', which doesn't tell us anything new at this point). I actually altered it to 'The master craftsman's costly work is done', which was printed in the programme for the first performance. But by the time I made the alteration Paul had already taken the weakest point of my poem and turned it into its strongest musical moment: the number starts quietly and meditatively, but then builds up to a terrific climax precisely on the 'Jesus'. No question of changing the words after that! That was a lesson about grace — the transformation of the weak point into the moment of glory — which it was good for a theologian to learn by such means.

In each of these different instances a point emerges which may be of interest to the wider project of *Theology Through the Arts*. I shall return to it below but want to flag it up now. Paul Spicer, as the artist in this project, had quite simply a keen sense for what would work. The music must carry its own integrity. But this integrity is not something removed from the theological integrity of a sustained meditation on the gospel story. As Dorothy Sayers argued in *The Mind of the Maker*,<sup>[6]</sup> there is a God-given resonance between the different levels — artistic and theological — because (to put it at its most basic) humans are made in God's image. Though I am not so confident as Sayers that one can argue a kind of natural theology by starting with artistic integrity and going right the way up to the Christian doctrine of God, I am certainly prepared — and the whole experience of working with Paul has enabled me to articulate this — to think in terms of the revelation of God in Jesus and the Spirit moving towards us *and meeting artistic integrity coming the other way*. Without the first, the artist is in danger of producing form without substance, a classic problem of both modernity and post-modernity. But without the second the theologian and preacher, struggling to hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches, might easily fail to speak the full truth.

### *The Easter hymns*

This leads me to some reflections about the hymns in the work. We decided early on that, as J. S. Bach got his audiences to participate by singing chorales which they already knew we would do the same with some of the great Easter hymns. (The 'chorales' in Spicer's work, which are all new, and may go on to become small hymns in their own right, are at the moment designed for choir alone.) But when I set about selecting the hymns, I was surprised, and somewhat depressed, to discover how comparatively few of the well-known Easter hymns really express the subject-matter of the resurrection narratives, not least of John 20 and 21 — in other words. God's new creation, the new day, the new calling. Many of them are content to go along with the view that Easter is simply about 'life after death' the opening of heaven, and so on, rather than the robust new-creation theology of the New Testament. However, we found five which fitted the bill. They are: No. 13, 'Come ye faithful, raise the strain/ Of triumphant gladness'; No. 18,

‘Now the green blade riseth/ From the buried grain’, which at the first performance was sung by choir alone; No. 31, ‘The day of resurrection! / Earth, tell it out abroad’; No. 50, ‘Alleluya! Alleluya! Hearts to heaven and voices raise-’, and No. 67, ‘Ye choirs of new Jerusalem’.[7] We also wrote a completely new hymn to close the first half, based on the triumphant song of new creation in Isaiah 55: ‘You shall go out with joy’. This too, being new, was sung by the choir alone.

These, obviously, provide a chance for the audience to become a congregation for a few minutes, responding in praise and delight to what they have heard. But the way Paul has set the hymns enables them to do two other things as well. In each case, the hymn is introduced without a break from the previous number. Like a traveller turning a corner in the road and suddenly coming upon a beautiful vista, the listeners are swept forward, caught up in the drama, and find themselves on their feet and singing, all in one unbroken sweep of music. Or, to change the image, it is like someone sea-bathing who, while watching waves break at a distance, finds that one comes sweeping towards him and carries him off. The hymns are not bolted on to the outside of the piece. They rise up, like the swelling of the sea, from the great drama, the great turning of the tide, that the story itself and its musical setting is all about. The sense of excitement each time the audience rose to its feet had something of that power.

Once singing, though, Paul again enhanced the experience with added colour, inviting fresh understanding. The spine-tingling descants in Nos. 13 and 50, the winding edification of No. 18, the final-verse harmonies of No. 33, and the sheer magic and power of No. 67, all leave worshipper and theologian more aware of the words and their many-layered meaning than we were before. These things may seem obvious, but should not be overlooked. In a Church which values music and loves to sing, the composer may have as much theological influence as the preacher. Not many eighteenth-century preachers taught the Church as much as Johann Sebastian Bach.

*From Bach to Howells to Spicer*

And yet even J. S. Bach himself did not write an Easter piece of this kind. This leads me to some reflections on the theological significance

of Paul Spicer composing such a work at this time. Paul clearly stands in (one strand at least of) the great traditions of English church music, whose roots go back both to sixteenth-century English choral writing, which itself grew out of its mediaeval and plainchant roots; and, via Bach, Handel and others, to seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Germany, and its Lutheran, pietist and mystical elements. Though I am even more out of my depth here than elsewhere, I would like to suggest that Paul's work represents a turn in a new direction (not, of course, without parallel, but significant in itself for all that) from within these traditions.

Bach's own 'Easter Oratorio' (BWV 249), which I mentioned before, is a short work, without biblical narratives or quotations, and is hardly known today.[8] It may even be the case that Bach himself was not very interested by the message of Easter seen in robust New Testament terms as bodily resurrection, new creation. God's renewal of the whole world. If Albert Schweitzer is to be believed, the centre of Bach's own faith was neither dogmatic Lutheranism (though he possessed a complete edition of Luther's works) nor the fashionable pietism of the day (though many of the poems which he used as librettos in the Cantatas and the Passions were of pietist origin), but 'mysticism'. What precisely Schweitzer meant by this term is itself controversial, not least through his development of it in his classic book on Paul.[9] But in the present case he had this to say:

This robust man . . . was inwardly dead to the world. His whole thought was transfigured by a wonderful, serene, longing for death. Again and again, whenever the text affords the least pretext for it, he gives voice to this longing in his music; and nowhere is his speech so moving as in the cantatas in which he discourses on the release from the body of this death.[10]

If this is indeed the case — and no doubt many would want to contest it — it goes some way to explaining what could be seen as a remarkable lacuna in Bach's work. Perhaps Bach was simply not interested in the possibility of a life *beyond* 'life after death', a resurrection of the body at some future date, to share in the kind of new creation that St John seemed to have in mind. And, if this is the case, the writing of an Easter Oratorio which shares the form of his great Passions may in fact

represent a large step towards a filling out, a rounding out, of his theological vision.

But if the fact of Paul Spicer writing this Oratorio is a step beyond the Bach whom we were aiming to commemorate, something more remarkable again is happening in Spicer's own development from within the tradition represented by his teacher, Herbert Howells, whose biography, written by Paul, was published in 1998, around the time the Oratorio was starting to germinate in our minds.<sup>[11]</sup> Though Howells could and did write some wonderfully uplifting music in various genres, those who have come to know and love his church music will be aware, over and over again, of a melancholy strain (think, for instance, of the wonderful anthem 'Like as the hart', and some of the famous Magnificats where the glory only really emerges in the Gloria at the end). Howells, of course, spent a fair amount of his life grieving for his beloved son Michael, who died of polio in 1935 at the age of 9.

Howells himself seems not to have had a religious faith, certainly nothing in the way of a robust Christian belief in either life after death or an eventual resurrection. That is not to deny the celestial wonders of, for instance, his *Hymnus Paradisi* and other pieces; only to draw attention to his abiding lack of comfort in the face of the loss of one so dear.<sup>[12]</sup>

Paul Spicer's *Easter Oratorio* achieves, I believe, something approaching the redemption of this tradition. Of course, Howells is by no means the only influence on him; like most good students, he has long outgrown his teacher. But — insofar as I understand these things — I think he has sown a new seed in the soil where Howells grew some of his plants. The seed has sprouted, blossomed and borne fruit in something Howells never imagined: the rich and hard-won affirmation that God is sovereign over death itself. Though comfort is not cheap, or necessarily quick (think of our debates about Thomas!), and though questions remain (think of the ending of the piece), it is real and solid, and bursts through the wall of doubt in a blaze of faith and hope.

Indeed, the Thomas sequence may after all reflect precisely this: the long struggle from within a musical tradition to turn despair into faith, inconsolable grief into newborn hope.

All this leads to some further and wider questions about the resurrection and epistemology.

### *Resurrection and how we know things*

I have spent the last few years, on and off, thinking, praying, reading, lecturing, preaching and writing about the resurrection.[13] Within my own field one of the major questions to be faced here is not just *what* we can know but, as with Thomas' question in No. 26, *how* we can know it. Christian thinkers have been divided for some time on this question. Some have moved, with more or less caution, towards saying that the bodily resurrection is, in some sense, historically verifiable.[14] Others have denied this *a priori* for two reasons: either because, they say, it is not in that sense a 'historical' event (i.e., it was an event only in the minds of the disciples);[15] or because, they say, to assess the truth of the resurrection on the basis of post-Enlightenment historical method is to grant the latter a supreme position — *over* the resurrection, whereas the resurrection itself must be the starting-point, epistemologically as well as onto-logically, for everything else.[16] Let me be cautious but clear at this point. I have become convinced that we can and must argue a historical case, to be defended on grounds that people of any faith and none might legitimately recognize, that (a) the tomb of Jesus was empty on Easter morning, and (b) the disciples really did see Jesus alive again in what gave every appearance of being a physical, though transformed, body. Only this will make sense of the fact that the early Christians really did believe Jesus was bodily raised (a point which, though sometimes challenged, is in my view absolutely secure historically). If they had only found an empty tomb, they would have concluded that the body had been stolen; if they had seen Jesus a few times, especially with him coming and going through locked doors and not always being instantly recognized, they would have concluded that they were hallucinating. It was the two together — empty tomb plus appearances — that convinced them that he was truly alive, that he had gone through the valley of death and, after a brief 'rest', was fully and bodily alive again, indeed even more so than before, since now death could never touch him again. Can we move further than that, and if so how? Christian apologists can legitimately challenge their critics to explain how these two things happened on any other supposition except that the early Christians were speaking the truth. It is remarkable how thin, and full of special

pleading, are all the alternative explanations that have been offered over the last two centuries by ingenious apologists for a post-Enlightenment world-view, often masquerading as ‘neutral’ or ‘objective’ observers or historians.[17] Can a Christian apologetic do any better? Can it, on ‘historical’ grounds alone, compel someone to take the final step and declare that they too now believe Jesus was truly raised from the dead on Easter day? I think not. We can point, like an archaeologist, to two pillars which look, by their shaping at the top, as though they were designed to support a now-missing arch. We can show that, despite years of energetic attempts to suggest an alternative, nothing else explains those pillars nearly as well as an arch; that is, that nothing else explains both the empty tomb and the appearances (which themselves explain early Christian belief) nearly as well as the bodily resurrection. For some that has been sufficient; for instance, the well-known Frank Morison, who wrote *Who Moved the Stone* as a result.[18] But to this extent I think Frei and others may have at least a grain of truth: the story and fact of the resurrection itself, rather than a post-Enlightenment positivism, carries the power to lead doubting Thomases to declare that they believe the arch really existed.

I thus cautiously agree with those theologians who have insisted that the resurrection, if true, must become not only the corner-stone of what we now know but also the key to how we know things, the foundation of all our knowing, the starting-point for a Christian epistemology. This is not to say that all other epistemologies are rendered null and void. Precisely because it is the resurrection of the crucified Jesus that might now form the starting-point for our thinking and knowing, it will affirm the proper place and power of other epistemologies, as the resurrection affirms the goodness not only of Jesus but of God’s present creation — however much that present creation is subject to corruption, decay and death. A resurrection-based epistemology, in other words, while being significantly new, might nevertheless affirm the goodness of non-resurrection-based historical knowledge, even while recognizing, as such knowledge itself sometimes insists, that it cannot reach beyond a naturalistic and even reductionistic account such as we find in Troeltsch. This argument is thus parallel to that offered by Oliver O’Donovan, in his famous book, in relation to moral order.[19] To put

it quite sharply: History raises the question, ‘Granted that only an empty tomb and appearances of Jesus will explain the rise of Christian faith, what will in turn explain these two satisfactorily?’ When Christian faith, arising from the whole gospel story, says, ‘the bodily resurrection of Jesus from the dead,’ history may reply, ‘Well, I couldn’t have come up with that myself; but now that you say it, it makes a lot of sense.’ And perhaps at that point history itself — the mode of our knowing — undergoes some kind of redemptive transformation.

Working with Paul Spicer on the Oratorio has caused me to reflect on this from several angles, of which one in particular contributes, I think, to the ongoing discussion. I have said a little, above, of *what* I have learnt from this work; but *how* have I learnt it? Was the source of my new learning Scripture, tradition, reason, or what?

The basis of the project was Scripture; but my reading, translation of and meditation on Scripture had not shown me all that I now think I see there. The work stands in a tradition, but, as I have suggested, it challenges and changes it as it goes forward. Only by a considerable stretch could ‘reason’ be said to have contributed materially to the work, or, through it, to my fresh understanding. Of course, we thought through what we were doing, but what mattered was aesthetic, not (in the eighteenth-century sense) rational, judgment. (A false antithesis, most likely, but I am here deliberately using traditional and over-wooden categories.) At this point some might want to invoke ‘experience’ as our guide, or even ‘feeling’; but neither of those notoriously slippery terms will do justice to what I think was going on. My memory of the process suggests that at the centre of it was the meeting, and dialogue, between the revelation in Scripture on the one hand (telling the story of the ultimate revelation, that of the Word made flesh, in history) and the demands of artistic and aesthetic integrity on the other. There might, of course, be a sense of ‘reason’ which would happily include those, but that isn’t, I think, what most people mean by the word.<sup>[20]</sup>

This is by no means a matter of integrating left-brain and right-brain activity, as it is sometimes simplistically put. In terms of the older and somewhat outdated distinction, reading and understanding Scripture is an art, not just a science; and anyone who has seen a composer at

work knows that there is a huge amount of science and technology required, not just inspiration, if the work is to come to birth! Nor was it a simple matter of Wright bringing scripture to the mixture and Spicer bringing art; far from it. Paul's own faith, and my own feeble struggles after art, were both important as well, and I honour Paul's particular spiritual insights as he has been gracious enough to honour my poetry. Yet he as a professional musician, and I as the professional exegete, met most naturally along the lines where those two disciplines confront one another, as they have done throughout much of church history, certainly in the Western Church for the last half-millennium.

Is this then a reinforcement, from a musical point of view, for Dorothy L. Sayers' thesis in *The Mind of the Maker*, to which I referred earlier? Is there then indeed a Trinitarian pattern to the work of the artist or writer which, reflected back, provides some kind of evidence of who God may be? I am not sure that this thesis can be sustained by itself, or that a natural theology built up by that means without help from elsewhere would arrive at anything approximating to the God and Father of Jesus, the giver of the Spirit. But when the creative and aesthetic project meets the scriptural revelation — mediated, of course, through the thinking of the household of faith — then the two can perhaps at least be complementary. I have explored elsewhere what I have called 'an epistemology of love', in which the sterile opposition between 'objective' and 'subjective' reductions of 'knowing' are transcended.<sup>[21]</sup> I think, and hope, that what Paul Spicer and I discovered in our work on the Oratorio was something like that: a love for the subject-matter, a love worked out in art and scholarship, through which we both learned and grew and grasped afresh some of the central matters of Christian faith. And if this is true it may be a pointer to something else - something which the whole *Theology Through the Arts* project is all about: the non-reducible, and not merely decorative, function of *imagination* within historical work (as Collingwood insisted) and also theological endeavour, as well as in musical composition and performance.

I realize that I have thus arrived, as a non-specialist, at more or less what Aquinas says in his famous formulation: 'As grace does not destroy but perfects nature, it is right that natural reason should serve

faith just as the natural loving tendency of the will serves charity.’ [22] There is of course a dangerous circularity about reaching *that* conclusion about method precisely by engaging in what, I hope, might be an instance of it happening in practice. But I think I have said enough to show that this is a fruitful area for further enquiry and experiment, especially if — though this would be a matter for specialists to enlighten me further — what Aquinas meant by ‘natural reason’ is a large enough category to embrace aesthetic and artistic integrity, the composer’s and conductor’s sense of ‘what works’. Certainly in this case the composer’s — and conductor’s — aesthetic and artistic integrity ‘served faith’ in a way that makes the ordinary jobbing theologian and preacher jealous. If all theology, all sermons, had to be set to music, our teaching and preaching would not only be more mellifluous; it might also approximate more closely to God’s truth, the truth revealed in and as the Word made flesh, crucified and risen.

Related websites:

[Easter Oratorio](#)

[Easter Oratorio libretto \(68K PDF\)](#)

[Paul Spicer](#)

[1] See my *The Myth of the Millennium*, London: SPCK, 1999.

[2] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale: The Mystery of Easter*, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1990 [1970].

[3] I also note my gratitude to my son Julian for his shrewd comments on an early draft of this chapter, particularly its final section, though he should not be held responsible for the use I have made of his advice.

[4] For a recent stimulating treatment of this whole area, see Mark Allan Powell, *Chasing the Eastern Star: Adventures in Biblical Reader-Response Criticism*, Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2001.

[5] American readers may like to know that British audiences are far more sparing with such things than their generous-hearted American cousins.

[6] Dorothy Sayers, *The Mind of the Maker*, London: Methuen, 1941.

[7] ‘Come ye faithful’ and ‘The day of resurrection’ are J. M. Neale’s translations of eighth-century poems by St John of Damascus; ‘Now the green blade’ is by J. M. C. Crum (1872-1958); ‘Alleluya! Alleluya!’ is by Bishop Christopher

Wordsworth (1807-85); 'Ye choirs of new Jerusalem' is Roy Campbell's translation of a poem of St Fulbert of Chartres (d. 1028). There is food for thought in the comparative lack of robust new-creation Easter hymns, Wordsworth excepted, in the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries; and Wordsworth was, of course, a great biblical and patristic scholar.

[8] It is briefly described, along with the little-known resurrection oratorios of Schütz and Handel, by John Bowden, 'Resurrection in Music', in Stephen Barton and Graham Stanton, (eds). *Resurrection: Essays in Honour of Leslie Houlden*, London: SPCK, 1994, pp. 188-97. Bowden wisely concentrates, for his main material, on settings of the resurrection material in the Creeds of some of the great Masses, and on Mahler's Second ('Resurrection') Symphony.

[9] Albert Schweitzer, *The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle*, New York: Seabury Press, 1968; German orig., 1931. On 'mysticism' see, e.g., Richard Woods, (ed.), *Understanding Mysticism*, London: Athlone Press, 1981; Philip Sheldrake, *Spaces for the Sacred*, London: SCM Press, 2001, ch. 5; and the classic studies of, e.g., E. Underhill, *Mysticism: The Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness*, 1911 (repr. Oxford: One World Publications, 1993); F. von Hügel, *The Mystical Element in Religion*, 1923 (repr. London: James Clarke, 1927).

[10] Albert Schweitzer, *J. S. Bach*, London: Black, 1923 (French orig., 1905).

[11] Paul Spicer, *Herbert Howells*, Bridgend: Seren, 1998.

[12] See esp. Spicer, *Herbert Howells*, p. 98, pp. 109-10.

[13] My major work *The Resurrection of the Son of God* is still in preparation at the time of writing. Advance statements of some parts of the argument may be found in *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions* (with Marcus J. Borg), London: SPCK, 1999, ch. 7, and *The Challenge of Jesus*, London: SPCK, 2000, chs. 6-8.

[14] The most impressive case is that of W. Pannenberg, e.g., *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 2, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994 (German orig., 1991), pp. 343-63, with reference to earlier discussions. There is of course a more enthusiastic (in both senses) and almost positivist case regularly made by evangelical apologists.

[15] The best known example is Rudolf Bultmann: e.g., 'The New Testament and Mythology', in H. W. Bartsch (ed.), *Kerygma and Myth: A Theological Debate*, New York: Harper, 1961 [1953], pp.1-44; cf. p. 42: 'The real Easter faith is faith in the word of preaching which brings illumination. If the event of Easter Day is in any sense an historical event additional to the event of the cross, it is nothing else than the rise of faith in the risen Lord . . . The resurrection itself is not an event of past history.'

[16] I think here particularly of the work of Hans W. Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ: The Hermeneutical Bases of Dogmatic Theology*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975.

[17] E.g. G. Lüdemann, *The Resurrection of Jesus: History, Experience, Theology*, London: SCM Press, 1994.

[18] London: Faber & Faber, 1930

[19] Oliver O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics*, Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986.

[20] See the discussion of Aquinas, below.

[21] Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus*, pp. 150-2.

[22] *Summa Theologica*, Iq.Ia. 8 ad.2.