

The Rev. Chalmers Coe preached this sermon at The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, on June 1, 2003, being G. Dene Barnard's recognition as retiring organist and choirmaster.

Exodus 15:1 "Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song to the Lord, `I shall sing to the Lord, for he has risen up in triumph, horse and rider he has hurled into the sea."

(Exodus 15: 1)

It can be excruciatingly cold in central Germany in mid-winter. Summer visitors are unlikely to be aware of this stark fact. They bustle into a church dressed in shorts, tee-shirts, and sandals, peering up at the stained glass, or down the long center aisle to the altar and the choir stalls and then ease gratefully into the nearest chairs, relishing the cool interior after the blaze and glare of the August sun; and they take it for granted, naturally enough, that this is how it always is.

But they are wrong. Once, not very many years ago, two of us sat in our places on Christmas Day in the Lorenzkirche in Nuremberg, a city which is now chiefly noted for bratwurst, the art of Albrecht Dürer, and its local soccer team, but not long since was associated with the sordid activities of the Nazi party and its enormous rallies. The church itself is huge, and beautiful, and features a splendid woodcarving called the "Angelic Greeting," fashioned by one Veit Stoss in 1517. And on the Christmas morning of which I speak it was very, very cold. Immense gothic churches are unlikely to have central heating. It turned out that we were seated not far from the pastor's mother-in-law. I am sure that everyone present, clad in Sunday best, wore layers of padding to give protection against the bone-chilling frigidity. The sermon was eloquent, although the state of my German hardly qualified me as a competent critic.

Cold, cold. And so it must have been in Leipzig, more than a hundred miles northeast of Nuremberg, at the Thomaskirche, where almost three hundred years ago the great Johann Sebastian Bach was headmaster of the choir school, and organist and choirmaster, as well as what we today would probably call composer-in-residence. Very cold indeed; so that, as Professor Jaroslav Pelikan of Yale tells it, the choirboys, who sang the soprano part, were excused from the icy gallery after they had sung in the cantata for the day. But they were not at liberty to go home or adjourn to the churchyard to play at this and that. No, they were ushered into a nearby warmed room where some respected clerical dignitary's sermon was read to them for their edification. Lutherans, like us Calvinists, believe firmly in the absolute necessity of the preached word - even on an uncomfortably chilly Sunday morning in December. The Word and music are inseparable; they complement each other.

So when you consider a text like this one from Exodus, "I shall sing to the Lord for he has risen up in triumph, horse and its rider he has hurled into the sea," it will not escape you that the song is a response to what God has accomplished for his people, and a response also to the Word of God, which tells of what He has accomplished.

Such is the discipline to which Dene Barnard, like other musicians whose entire working life is committed to the Church, has devoted his remarkable gifts - devoted them for thirty years in this place, and with this people, and has done so with unswerving fidelity, with exquisite taste, and with incomparable skill. I say no more in outright blatant praise of him for the moment, for fear that such praise might turn his head. And we surely do not want to be guilty of that, do we?

- not at his time of life.

Two facts about this song of Moses call for special notice.

I

The first is this; the men and women of Israel have just been ushered into *a new land*. They've been made to cross a sea, the Red Sea, a body of water which is close to a part of the world tragically in the news today. The territory ahead of them is a totally unfamiliar wilderness; no reference is made, in the story, to any map of the rugged terrain that confronts them - although there must be some vague idea in the minds of their leaders, perhaps coming from Moses' own travels through the countryside, or from the reports of itinerant merchants, or even from legends that had been passed down to them by word of mouth from the years of famine which had once compelled Jacob and his family, in desperation, to seek help from Egypt's riches and food from Egypt's granaries. For the most part, it is entirely foreign territory they face, a new land. The familiar stew-pots of Goshen - their Egyptian ghetto - are forever behind them.

Not that Ohio was a new land to Dene, a Canton product, when he came here. Columbus, however, was. And his introduction to our city was odd, to say the least. We met, he and I, at the airport. Frank Hussey, the search committee chairman, had arranged the details of the visit with exemplary efficiency. I was to drive Dene to the house in Pickaway County where we were then living, and where he was to spend the nights of his stay. It was raining heavily during the ride, and some drops of water fell on him from time to time through a few unsuspected cracks in the roof of my recently acquired Austin Healey Bug-eyed Sprite, a vehicle of uncertain vintage. When we arrived, Pamela greeted him with her customary cordiality, but then - remembering that our water supply could, at times, be somewhat problematic - she remarked graciously to him that, of course, he might make use of our bathroom facilities as often as he pleased, but that he would be permitted to activate the flushing mechanism only once a day. An atmosphere of easy friendship was immediately created by this off-hand and unusual prohibition.

Remarkably, Dene was not daunted. He was chosen over three other superb aspirants for the post, all of whom had been given interviews and auditions. (Many more had applied for the position, attracted, of course, by the Beckerath.) He left New York and never turned back. He did once return to give a dedicatory recital on the new Holtkamp organ at his former church, and is the only organist, to my almost certain knowledge, ever to have received a review - and an unreservedly favorable one, at that - in the august columns, not of any newspaper, but of *The New Yorker*.

Now it must be said, however, and in all candor, that we had much to offer him, not least the instrument over which he has presided with such distinction. Recent comments in the local press to the effect that this organ is the pride of central Ohio are welcome as far as they go.

But Joan Lippincott, the retired organist of Princeton University, and one of the pre-eminent players of our day - and one, I may add, who always comes to morning worship when she is going to give an organ recital in the same place that afternoon - stated from the gallery, during the latest of her three recitals in this place, that the Beckerath is one of the finest instruments in the United States. Many of those within the sound of my voice may not know that Rudolf von Beckerath, than whom there was no greater *orgelbaumeister* of his time, categorically refused to

create an instrument for Stanford University because the authorities there would not improve the acoustics of their chapel. We could. We did. We were forced to. Although the land may have been new to Dene, it had been assiduously cultivated before his arrival.

II

"I will sing to the Lord, for he has risen up in triumph, horse and rider he has hurled into the sea." Not only so, but in the second place, the song of Moses tells also of a *new deliverance*. The people of Israel had to be rescued from a condition before they could be guided to a land. That condition, to put it bluntly, was bondage, slavery. It should hardly be necessary for me to spell out the humiliating details of that servitude, but a single instance will suffice. The command of the Egyptian authorities that they make bricks without straw was not only impossible to obey, like making bread without flour; it expressed as well the fierce contempt of the master for his slave. It illustrated all too clearly the repugnance of a ruling oligarchy for a minority that had been looked upon for many generations as alien, and therefore profoundly inferior. It was savagely insulting. Small wonder that, when Moses did appear, the Israelites enlisted enthusiastically as his followers and rallied to his cause. And the fact that they knew him to be a murderer may have added relish to their defiance and their fury. For the man whom he had killed long before had been a slavemaster, a hated symbol of Pharaoh's oppression.

We Christians take our cue from that tale of Hebrew deliverance. For, in due time, One appeared Who, in His own person, embodied - I who, by dying, put death to rout, and, by rising, opened the way to everlasting life. And so the chant goes on: "I shall sing to the Lord for he has risen in triumph, his right hand and his holy arm have won him the victory."

Nearly a century ago, an astute and learned German theologian, Ernst Troeltsch, remarked that the Protestant genius has expressed itself, so far as the arts are concerned, not primarily in painting, or in sculpture, or in architecture, but in music. If a Protestant parish church exists which silently challenges the negative parts of that verdict, the place where you are now sitting is it. This magnificent building, designed by one of the most distinguished architects of the first half of the twentieth century, a man of whom Paul Goldberger once wrote in *The New York Times*, that his National Gallery of Art, in Washington, is superior to I. M. Pei's wonderful addition to it, both as a work of art in itself and as a place for the exhibition of paintings; the stained glass, representative of several styles and periods and all of it quite glorious; the Belgian tapestries in the transepts, stolen from a warehouse in Antwerp by Spanish soldiers within three decades after the arrival on these shores of the now-much-maligned Christopher Columbus; the very cross in the chancel, created by the sculptor, now dead, of that powerful and moving statue which stands at the entrance of Andersonville cemetery in Georgia; the banners commissioned for occasional use and produced by a gifted artist who is a member of this congregation: all are exceptions to Troeltsch's rule. Nevertheless, and if you are considering Protestantism as a whole, it is hard to disagree with him. Apart from situations like this one, the Roman Catholic Church is artistically far ahead of us, *except in music*.

Only a few days ago, someone told the amusing story, about a former administrator either of the Vienna State Opera or of the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra, who remarked to a friend that, as a Catholic Christian, he adored the *Requiem* of Johannes Brahms; that a fine performance of it invariably brought tears to his eyes; but that he could not help feeling saddened, each time, by the thought that Brahms was, after all, a Protestant.

A little history, and we are nearly done. When my revered predecessor, Boynton Merrill, began his labors here in 1943, it was not long before he persuaded a noted Presbyterian musician, who was himself ordained, to be the organist and choirmaster of this church. Donald Kettring arrived from Lincoln, Nebraska, and began an emphasis on choirs and congregational singing at a time when the modern choral movement was in its earliest stages. He wrote a well-known book called, *Steps Toward a Singing Church*, and the title faithfully represented his goal. Since his day that emphasis has continued here. We have had brilliant leadership in the persons of Edward Johe (for many years) and John Schaefer. But it is surely not an exaggeration to claim that in Dene Barnard the tradition has reached its full flowering.

Is someone whispering to himself, "We are not going to be saved by beauty in general and by music in particular?" If so, the only possible answer to him is, "Of course we're not!" We are not saved by *anything we do*, but by the gracious action of God who, in Christ, rescues us from the consequences of our perpetual follies and absurdities, and restores us to Himself. But surely that does not prevent us from acknowledging His gift with the best we have, in hymn, in anthem, in prelude, in fugue, in voluntary, in jubilant passacaglia. The music we offer Him doubles back on us, and creates in us an even deeper faith.

John Dryden wrote his, *Ode for St. Cecilia's Day* in honor of the patron saint of music. And this is the end of it:

As from the power of sacred lays

The spheres began to move;

And sung the great Creator's praise

To all the blessed above;

So when the last and dreadful hour,

This crumbling pageant shall devour,

The trumpet shall be heard on high,

The dead shall live, the living die,

And music shall untune the sky.

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