

EASTER DAY 2018: ST GEORGE'S CHAPEL, WINDSOR.

During April 1919, the poet Siegfried Sassoon wrote a poem called **Everyone Sang**. I think it will be familiar to many of you, if only because it is one of his most anthologised poems. It is obviously written in light of the outbreak of peace at the end of the First World War, but it is not simply a war poem. Sassoon himself understood that it could not be linked to only one historic episode, even though it was bound to be 'an expression of release, and signified a thankfulness for liberation from the war'. Let me read it to you.

**Everyone suddenly burst out singing;
And I was filled with such delight
As prisoned birds must find in freedom,
Winging wildly across the white
Orchards and dark-green fields; on – on – and out of
sight.**

**Everyone's voice was suddenly lifted;
And beauty came like the setting sun:
My heart was shaken with tears; and horror
Drifted away ... O, but Everyone
Was a bird; and the song was wordless; the singing will
never be done.**

In what Sassoon imagines or remembers as the joyful singing of a host of people after all the darkness of the First World War and so much more, he seems to find hope and assurance; a kind of faith. The final words of his poem, **the singing will never be done**, suggest that the promise of peace and harmony, ingredients in what we would call 'love', implicit in our joyful singing together, will always persist, and will one day triumph. Sassoon, at this stage in his life, was not an especially religious person, and he certainly had little time for conventional religious practice. Nevertheless, it does seem that he touches at least the fringe of what we might recognise as Christian faith, and, through the prism of this spontaneous choir, he appears to have caught sight of a kind of heaven – albeit, for him, the heaven of a perfected earthly, human society.

**O, but Everyone
Was a bird; and the song was wordless; the singing will
never be done.**

When, at a later stage in his life, Sassoon told the story of how he had come to write his poem, he described the April evening during 1919 when he was feeling 'dull-minded and depressed'. Having sat, as he put it, 'lethargically' for hours after dinner,

he decided to go to bed. Between the armchair and the door, he stopped by his writing desk. Suddenly, the words of the poem, words of such hope, assurance, inspiration and faith, simply came to him. Without even sitting down, he wrote them out as if he were remembering them. He then went to bed, and slept well. The next morning, nothing needed to be changed.

Certainly, Sassoon would not have thought of those words of profound assurance as coming from God. I think, however, that he might have understood that they came to him as an unearned gift; by some kind of grace. Had he thought about it, he might have concluded that such faith in the victory of love as he possessed was not self-generated or deserved, but arose unexpectedly, from some profound and hitherto unacknowledged intuition.

When Mary came to the tomb on that first Easter Sunday morning, according to the account in St John's Gospel, she came, like Siegfried Sassoon no doubt on that April evening, feeling 'dull-minded and depressed', with no reason to believe in the triumph of love, but rather expecting to do no more than to see, and to grieve over, a corpse. But, through her tears, she was to see angels sitting where the body had been, and was to speak with the one she thought she had lost for ever. Faith in the future, faith in the inevitable victory of love, came to her, not as something self-generated or deserved, but as an entirely unexpected gift.

**My heart was shaken with tears; and horror
Drifted away The singing will
never be done.**

So it is with us. We also are often dull-minded and depressed by the seemingly intransigent world around us. We cannot manufacture faith in the triumph of love. But seeing the fruits of that faith in other people, and remembering how, from the days of Mary and the other earliest witnesses of Christ's resurrection until now, such faith has been rooted in the hearts of those whom we could consider to be the most courageous, humane and compelling, we sometimes feel the need to pray for it, asking that, by some grace, some miracle almost, our hearts might be opened to receive such a gift, and to know that:

the singing will never be done.

If we should receive the gift of course, while in so many ways identifying with Sassoon, we should take our stand with Mary. Our 'Christian Faith', our 'Easter Faith' in the final triumph of love, would go far beyond Sassoon's hope for and belief in the perfectibility of earthly, human society, though it would be bound to include that possibility, and such faith itself would be a great gift. Yet it is to a point *beyond the grave* that Jesus's victory would draw our attention. It is after a great mystery that our hearts and minds would be drawn. It was the *Risen* Lord whom Mary met;

one whom even death had not been able to claim. It is for such faith as was awakened in her that many of us long.

Should the gift of such faith come our way, our first and foremost response would be one of thanksgiving and praise.

**(I was filled with such delight
As prisoned birds must find in freedom)**

If Sassoon remembered that **Everyone suddenly burst out singing**, and saw through the prism of this spontaneous choir some intimation of his heaven, George Herbert, the author of the words of our anthem today, one who understood faith to be a priceless gift, called the whole world and the whole creation to unite in one great act of praise, and thereby celebrate, through singing, the triumph of peace and harmony and love which, in spite of all the crucifying moments of this life, can be believed, through Jesus Christ, to be our destiny; our heaven.

Let all the world in ev'ry corner sing. *My God and King!*

May the singing of our final Easter hymn this morning, this little act of praise, be a miniature of what Herbert hoped for, and prove once more that:

the singing will never be done.