

# The Persistent Widow and a Persistent God

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 20 October, 2019

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman

Pentecost 19 C

Psalm 121; Luke 18:1-8; Cantata: Benjamin Britten, *Rejoice in the lamb*.

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OaFaPH8GYQE>

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## 'REJOICE IN THE LAMB' CANTATA (OP. 30)

Composer: Benjamin Britten; Based on "Jubilate Agno," a poem by Christopher Smart

### INTRODUCTION

*Rejoice in the Lamb* is a cantata by Benjamin Britten, based on a poem by Christopher Smart. Britten was one of the most remarkable British classical musicians of the 20th century. In 1939, disillusioned by the beginning of World War II, his country's soaring unemployment, and its opposition to homosexuality, Britten left England for the United States with his lover, tenor Peter Pears, who became his lifelong companion.

Rev. Walter Hussey, Vicar of St. Matthew's Church in Northampton, commissioned Britten to compose a piece for the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the consecration of St. Matthew's Church. Britten came to St. Matthew's and conducted the premiere of *Rejoice in the Lamb* in September, 1943.

Hussey had the idea of bringing the Church and the arts back together. "How sad it was," he said, "that the arts had become largely divorced from the Church: Sad because artists think and meditate a lot and are in the broadest sense of the word 'religious.' They create fine expressions of the human spirit, which can symbolize and express worship, as well as conveying the truth of God to humankind in a vivid and memorable way."

Britten accepted Hussey's commission and chose as his text parts of Christopher Smart's long free-verse poem *Jubilate Agno* (*Rejoice in the Lamb* in Latin). One of the main themes of the poem is the worship of God by all beings and things, each in their own way. Smart wanted his poem to be closely parallel to portions of the Order of Morning Prayer and the Psalter and he intended it to function as a responsive reading. *Jubilate Agno* was begun shortly after Smart was admitted to St. Luke's Hospital for the insane in 1757. He was institutionalised several times during the four years that it took to complete the poem.

Benjamin Britten's affection for the beautiful, cryptic text is clear. The power of his music derives from his ability to convey unexplored areas of the text which needed revelation through his imaginative vision.

Today, this piece is offered by the Pitt St Singers and friends in a spirit of awe, gratitude, and celebration.

## I. INTROIT

I'm just going to introduce, very briefly, each of the three movements. The first one, the opening movement: *"Rejoice in God, O ye Tongues,"* starts with a simple bareness. This continues until a dramatic expansion of sound at the text *"magnify his name together,"* a theme of the piece. This moves into a jaunty processional in which various Biblical figures are paired with members of the animal world to celebrate the majesty of God. Following this is a Hallelujah; a slow, quiet hymn in praise of God, cast as *"the artist inimitable."*

### i. Rejoice in God, O ye Tongues

Rejoice in God, O ye Tongues; give the glory to the Lord, and the Lamb.  
Nations, and languages, and every Creature, in which is the breath of Life.  
Let man and beast appear before him, and magnify his name together.  
Let Nimrod, the mighty hunter, bind a leopard to the altar,  
and consecrate his spear to the Lord.  
Let Ishmail dedicate a tyger,  
and give praise for the liberty in which the Lord has let him at large.  
Let Balaam appear with an Ass,  
and bless the Lord his people and his creatures for a reward eternal.  
Let Daniel come forth with a lion,  
and praise God with all his might through faith in Christ Jesus.  
Let Ithamar minister with a Chamois,  
and bless the name of Him that cloatheth the naked.  
Let Jakim with the satyr bless God in the dance,  
Let David bless with the Bear -  
The beginning of victory to the Lord - to the Lord the perfection of excellence.

### ii. Hallelujah from the heart of God

Hallelujah from the heart of God, and from the hand of the artist inimitable,  
and from the echo of the heavenly harp in sweetness magnificent and mighty.

## II. INVOCATION

The next movement introduces the soloists. *"For I will consider my Cat Jeoffry,"* celebrates the cat's qualities. The passage concludes with *"For I am possessed of a cat, surpassing in beauty, from whom I take occasion to bless Almighty God."*

After praising the cat's virtues, Britten merges parts of Smart's poem to make Jeoffry the villain. *"For the mouse is a creature of great personal valour,"* celebrates mice, animals often maligned and despised, not unlike the poet, nor like the composer, whose sexuality was the subject of malicious gossip at the time. Following this is a lyric meditation on flowers, *"There is a language of flowers. For flowers are peculiarly the poetry of Christ."*

### iii. For I will consider my Cat Jeffry

For I will consider my cat Jeffry.  
For he is the servant of the Living God, duly and daily serving him.  
For at the first glance of the glory of God in the East he worships in his way.  
For this is done by wreathing his body seven times round with elegant quickness.  
For he knows that God is his Saviour.  
For God has bless'd him in the variety of his movements.  
For there is nothing sweeter than his peace when at rest.  
For I am possessed of a cat, surpassing in beauty,  
from whom I take occasion to bless Almighty God.

### iv. For the Mouse is a creature of great personal valour

For the Mouse is a creature of great personal valour.  
For - this is a true case - Cat takes female mouse -  
male mouse will not depart, but stands threat'ning and daring. ...  
If you will let her go, I will engage you, as prodigious a creature as you are.  
For the Mouse is a creature of great personal valour.  
For the Mouse is of an hospitable disposition.

### v. For the flowers are great blessings

For the flowers are great blessings.  
For the flowers have their angels even the words of God's creation.  
For the flower glorifies God and the root parries the adversary.  
For there is a language of flowers.  
For flowers are peculiarly the poetry of Christ.

## III. ANTHEM

In the arresting song: *"For I am under the same accusation as my Saviour,"* we finally hear the anguish of the poet. Today, as then, people who suffer from mental illness are often stigmatized, and part of Mental Health Month in October, is paying attention to reducing the stigma as well as caring for our own mental health. Today, as then, people who are different are often isolated and vilified. In our context, when institutional violence against people suffering mental illness, homeless people, and Aboriginal people is not uncommon, these words ring powerfully: *"For the officers of the peace are at variance with me and the watchman smites me."* In the song, Smart identifies with accusations made against another outsider, Jesus. And he does this just as Christians who experience suffering and injustice, such as African American slaves, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Liberation Theologians and many others have done over the centuries.

The next section which creates a bridge to the final part of the cantata is based on alliteration and alphabetical symbolism. It leads to a joyful section in which all the singers celebrate *"all the instruments in Heaven,"* which are all *"a blessed intelligence."*

After the celebration follows a time of calm awareness: *“For at that time malignity ceases and the devils themselves are at peace. For this time is perceptible...by a remarkable stillness and serenity of the soul.”* The piece closes with a simple and luminous repetition of the Hallelujah: *“Hallelujah from the heart of God.”*

#### **vi. For I am under the same accusation with my Saviour**

For I am under the same accusation with my Saviour—  
For they said, he is beside himself.  
For the officers of the peace are at variance with me, and the watchman  
smites me with his staff. For Silly fellow! Silly fellow! is against me  
and belongeth neither to me nor to my family.  
For I am in twelve hardships,  
but he that was born of a virgin shall deliver me out of all.

#### **vii. For H is a spirit and therefore he is God**

For H is a spirit and therefore he is God. For K is king and therefore he is God.  
For L is love and therefore he is God. For M is musick and therefore he is God.

#### **viii. For the instruments are by their rhimes**

For the instruments are by their rhimes,  
For the Shawm rhimes are lawn fawn moon boon and the like.  
For the harp rhimes are sing ring string and the like.  
For the cymbal rhimes are bell well toll soul and the like.  
For the flute rhimes are tooth youth suit mute and the like.  
For the Bassoon rhimes are pass class and the like.  
For the dulcimer rhimes are grace place beat heat and the like.  
For the Clarinet rhimes are clean seen and the like.  
For the trumpet rhimes are sound bound soar more and the like.  
For the trumpet of God is a blessed intelligence  
and so are all the instruments in Heaven.  
For GOD the father Almighty plays upon the harp  
of stupendous magnitude and melody.

#### **ix. For at that time malignity ceases**

For at that time malignity ceases and the devils themselves are at peace.  
For this time is perceptible to man by a remarkable stillness and serenity of soul.

#### **x. Hallelujah from the heart of God**

Hallelujah from the heart of God, and from the hand of the artist inimitable,  
and from the echo of the heavenly harp in sweetness magnificent and mighty.

## REFLECTION

*Who is crying out for justice?*

A persistent widow insisting that an uncaring judge rule in her favour against the one who has done her wrong.

*Who is crying out for justice?*

Benjamin Britten, a gay man in a time when to be gay was illegal; living in fear of exposure and prosecution that could result in imprisonment or chemical castration. Where his beautiful gift of musical composition would count for nothing if he was found out. Just as Alan Turing's beautiful mind, nation saving code-breaking, and invention of computer science meant nothing when he was prosecuted for gross indecency, castrated and driven to the despair that led him to take his own life at 42 years of age.

*Who is crying out for justice?*

Christopher Smart, revolutionary poet, husband, father, essayist, spendthrift, drunk; religious ecstatic whose practice of 'praying without ceasing' in public was one of the factors that led his father in law to forcibly commit him to St Luke's Hospital for Lunatics, for behaviour which scholars now consider to be evidence of bipolar disorder.

Where many saw madness, Britten saw the visionary power of an outsider – an outsider giving voice to anguished suffering, and paradoxically to the gratitude of the whole of creation to its creator.

The parable of the persistent widow is a confrontational story. Its purpose is to get us to think differently. It invites us into a world where the values of the world are turned upside down and the values of God, the values of love and justice, reign.

Where persisting for justice is not seen as nagging but recast as a glimpse of the nature of God. Where advocating for your own rights is not self-centred but honouring of a God who has created each person with intrinsic worth and dignity.

Prayer is not about approaching the sacred with a list of things that we want. The issue is justice. The parable tells us to persist until justice is done, for ourselves and for our world.

Embedded in the story is a real sense of sacred energy at work in the world, resisting and persisting for justice. The biblical sense of justice is always much broader than the justice of the judicial system. It's not simply about getting our due. It is a vision of a world renewed. It is a source of hope in a hopeless world.

The widow kept coming to the judge, hoping against all odds, persistent, determined, and relentless. The followers of Jesus – the way of Jesus - keep praying and acting, hoping against all the odds, persistent, determined, relentless. The Spirit gives us the courage to pray without ceasing in a fearful and broken world.

The courage that we find in community with one another, and with the Spirit, leads not only to a meditative and reflective life, but to a life of prayer-in-action which is engaged and outward facing.

We trust God's love as we journey on, for God is very different from the unjust judge. Jesus uses the judge not to show what God is like, but to show what God is not. Jesus uses the widow to show what God is like.

The one who is powerless, who has no authority, who is not permitted to speak for herself in public, reveals a God who is deeply concerned with justice and who is quick to act.

Jesus does not portray a God who is powerful or authoritative, controlling or ruling over us... but a persistent outsider, widow-like God; a gay composer God who loved Peter Pears despite the risk; a mad poet God who wrote imaginative, God-praising, power-resisting poetry, no matter what.

In Christ, God gives up power and authority and might, in order to persist with the excluded and the marginalised. God meets the systems and structures of human power in solidarity with the weak and with an unrelenting demand for justice. God stands up to the powers of the world and exposes their exploitation. God in Christ ushers in reconciliation, forgiveness, mercy, and grace.

God is in the One who is arrested, tried and executed on the cross; and it is with this suffering Christ that Christopher Smart identifies. Smart knows that God knows him, and that God knows what he endures.

God is not just listening to our cries, but crying out to us, calling us to see that the Reign of God right here and right now. That God is the one who meets us in the powerless Christ, yet who turns injustice to justice, brokenness into healing, transgression into forgiveness and death into life.

The claims that we make as Christians about resurrection are not about Jesus's warmed up body. Resurrection reveals God's powerful resistance against unjust powers.

Resurrection is an act of resistance that has already changed the world even though it is sometimes hard to see.

As people of faith we are called to join God's resistance, empowered by the Spirit, present in community, present in resisting and persisting prayer, of which the stubborn and hopeful widow is an inspiring example.

We are called to be a resurrection community where people denied justice, people discriminated against, people labelled as mentally ill, do not lose heart. A community where we do not tune out, but where we live in hope and with a sense of trust that does not make us feel we have to carry the whole world on our shoulders...where we live with the assurance that we are not alone.

Where we may access the power of God's presence, coming not from the hills, but from God among us in this community; and wherever there are communities of justice-seeking, compassion-sharing, friends.