

## **The Third Easter Reflection and Music for week of 10 May April 2020: The Easter Hope**

### **Reflection by the Chaplain**

The next two reflections will focus on Rembrandt's paintings 'Judas Repentant Returning Pieces of Silver' (1629)<sup>1</sup> and his painting thirty or so years later, 'The Denial of St Peter' (1660). The narratives that surround each painting invite comparison: both Judas and Peter fail Christ in the final days of his life, yet Judas' remorse leads him to death and despair whereas Peter is restored as the risen Christ reaches out to him with love and forgiveness.

Our reflection today focuses on Rembrandt's painting of Judas and on the tragedy of a penitent, unable to appropriate love and forgiveness that are central to the Easter hope.



The Choir recording of S S Wesley's, 'Blessed be the God and Father', enshrines the Christian hope that Judas was unable to grasp.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ashmolean.org/youngrembrandt>

Rembrandt's painting 'Judas Repentant Returning the Pieces of Silver' captures the despair Judas must have felt as he sees Jesus now condemned to death. By betraying Jesus for thirty pieces of silver, he had gained financially, yet things may well have escalated in ways that he had not anticipated. Judas knows Jesus does not deserve death<sup>2</sup> and so, overcome with remorse, returns the money to the chief priests and elders. The emotional drama of the scene is captured by Rembrandt and picked up on by Constantin Huygens, secretary and artistic advisor to the Prince of Orange. Observing the painting in Rembrandt's studio, Huygens was particularly struck by the depiction of 'A Judas demented, wailing, beseeching forgiveness but not expecting to receive it or displaying any hope in his feature, the awful face, the torn hair, the clothes rent to shreds, the twisted limbs, the hands clenched so hard that they bleed, the knee outstretched in an impulsive surge forward, the entire body contorted in pitiable anguish'.<sup>3</sup> As Rembrandt shows, the Jewish religious leaders appear indifferent as Judas throws the coins to their feet. Tragically Judas cannot live with himself and so he departs and eventually hangs himself.

Judas does not seem to be able to apprehend that forgiveness is a possibility. His sense of condemnation extinguishes any hope: the love of God seems beyond his grasp. The tale is a tragedy, for Judas fails to grasp that by dying, Christ offers hope to those who feel they are beyond the reach of God's love and forgiveness. As the words of Wesley's anthem remind us, because Christ was raised, this *lively hope* can effect real change in our hearts so that we move from despair to hope as we understand the extent of God's love for us.

## Prayer

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew 27 records that he tells the chief priests and the elders 'I have sinned by betraying innocent blood'.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Brown, Camp and Vogelaar, *Young Rembrandt* (Oxford, 2019), 196.

I love the Lord, for [the Lord] has heard  
The cry of my appeal.  
The Lord was attentive to me  
In the day when I called.  
They surrounded me, the snares of death,  
With the anguish of the tomb.  
They caught me in sorrow and distress  
I called on the Lord's name.  
O Lord my God, deliver me.  
I was helpless so God saved me.

(Psalm 16 quoted in Robert Durback (ed.) Henri Nouwen. *A Retreat with Henry Nouwen* (London, 2004), 35.

Poem for reflection: Coleridge 'The Pains of Sleep'

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43995/the-pains-of-sleep>

**Note on the choir anthem S S Wesley, *Blessed be the God and Father* from Professor Edward Higginbottom**

The Choir has been busy this week getting to grips with one of Samuel Sebastian Wesley's great anthems, *Blessed be the God and Father*. This has an Eastertide theme: its opening lines reference the 'lively hope' given to us through 'the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead'. This and other verses from the first epistle of Peter (chapter 1), invite us to consider our responsibility to live our lives always in the sight of God, loving our neighbour, and having confidence in the 'word of the Lord', which 'endureth for ever'.

S. S. Wesley (1820-1876) was the son of an accomplished composer, Samuel Wesley (the father deeply admired Bach and marked his admiration by calling his son Sebastian).

Samuel himself had a distinguished father, John Wesley, the founder of Methodism. If anything of John's character comes out in his grandson's work, it is the confident assurance of the music. Many of the anthems of S.S. Wesley stand in the centuries-old tradition of the verse anthem: they are cast in several 'movements', and they often promote material for

solo voices (here, for soprano). The accompaniment is for keyboard only, written with a real flair for texture and independent interest. A defining feature of *Blessed be the God and Father* are the two recitative sections scored for full tenors and basses. These have a Handelian intensity and sweep.

Given our circumstances, and the technical work required, we are publishing this performance of *Blessed be the God the Father* over three weeks. Below you will find the text of the first section for Week 3, which hangs in the air just as the soprano soloist enters. A cliff-hanger. In Week 4 we will unite the second section of the anthem with the first, adding the third in Week 5. Bit by bit all will be revealed. As it is revealed ('revealed in the last time', as the text has it) you will notice that the accompaniment is provided by piano. This tells its own story about the effects of isolation.

A final word here, but I'm sure not the last on this subject. I would like to record our thanks to John Warner, a recent alumnus of St Peter's and former choral scholar, who has taken on the task of producing our 'isolation anthems'. This is no sinecure, I can assure you. It involves helping me to make my master-track, then collecting and collating all the entries (16 singers in this first episode of Wesley), lining them all up so that they synchronize, followed by a final accompaniment track, and some post-production work on the sound. We are fortunate to have his help, without which this project of recorded anthems from St Peter's would not be possible.

**Text**

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which according to his abundant mercy hath begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.