

Views from the pews: Historical truths in Evensong

Truth comes in many forms, not just those found in objective science. Believers look for their truths in the common elements of life, in the narratives, key events and circumstances of the past. Those truths have been repeated over generations, and are believable because they remain consistent.

One of the most consistent elements of life is Anglican Evensong. It began with the 1549 publication of Archbishop Thomas Cranmer's *Book of Common Prayer*. By 1560, spoken elements of the liturgy were being accompanied by music, instrumental and choral. It worked so well that Choral Evensong became a long tradition that has had, nay, is still having, a rather better shelf life than the constant change of make-it-up-as-you-go services beloved of many more recent formulations.

On a past Sunday night, five centuries ago, my 103rd great grandparents would have begun their Evensong service with a hymn following the processional entry of the choir and clergy. Then, like us, they participated in the introductory prayer and confessional – which is spoken, *Almighty and most merciful Father. We have erred and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep...* and five centuries later I am using the identical text to offer my confessions for sins - which are probably very little different from those of my forbears...After this, apart from the two readings, the recital of the Apostles' Creed, the sermon, and spoken final prayers, the service becomes fully choral. It is a unique service which has always been viable for congregations with even a tiny choir of three enthusiastic soprs and a bass, but it is always an experience which grows with each repetition.

The *Magnificat*, echoed by the *Nunc Dimittis*, is central to Evensong. In our recent Pentecost evening service, celebrating the descent of the Holy Spirit on Apostles and people alike, the *Nunc Dimittis* was totally compelling in its dignified, gorgeous harmony. It was convincing evidence of the power of music to enthrall listeners, and to enhance and interpret words. With its ageless traditions and style, and the beauty of its music, this Evensong reconnected the congregation with its past, and with expressions of a faith which have remained both compelling and convincing for five centuries. As they did then and do again and again, our wonderful Cathedral Choir provided the most profoundly appealing and satisfying demonstration of the truth of faith, both yours now, and that of your ancestors, who may well have been your 103rd great grandies. Come back to the Cathedral tonight, and be inspired again.

Sam Edwards