

The following is a review by David Sinden, the Organist & Director of Music at St. Peter's Episcopal Church in Saint Louis, Missouri. He attended Passion Vespers here on Sunday March 21st.

Vespers - Passion

This evening I had the good fortune to be able to attend the "Passion Vespers: Meditations on the Passion of Christ" at the Church of St. Michael & St. George, St. Louis. It was billed as "service of the spoken word and music featuring readings selected from Scripture, the ancient Church Fathers, and modern-day poets interspersed with seasonal music, sung by the Choir, to illuminate the texts."

There is something compelling about the idea of worship on the Evening of Palm Sunday. The festivity of the morning being ended, Holy Week has entered its dark, preparatory intensity. A service on this day, or early in Holy Week, can draw us further in to the mystery, and simply allow us a place to reflect, pray, and praise.

The service at St. Michael's was splendid and well appointed. It followed a pattern of non-biblical reading, anthem, versicle and response, collect. Two hymns were included.

The only comparison I have for this type of liturgy is the "Meditation on the Passion of Christ" service at St. John's, Cambridge. By comparison, I found this service to be much less noisy (the John's service begins with "All glory, laud, and honor" in procession) and more focused. The procession in and out of the church was done in silence.

I was concerned about the readings being entirely non-biblical, but they were so well chosen, and so compelling, I have to say I didn't mind at all.

Having been to the service, and with my leaflet still in hand, I can amend the published music list with a few more details. Most of the music was new to me, and all of it perfectly chosen for this liturgy. The cumulative effect was one of true meditation.

- * Opening Devotions, including the said Kyrie and Lord's Prayer, collect
- * Choral orison: "The Cross" by A. Fairbairn Barnes (a new name to me, some biographical info here<http://www.hymnary.org/person/Barnes_A1>)
- * Meditation I, from John Chrysostom
- * It is a thing most wonderful — Philip Moore
- * Meditation II, from Julian of Norwich
- * Lamb of God, most holy — Robert Lehman, the Organist & Choirmaster (a lovely piece, listen here<<http://www.canticedistributing.com/lamb-of-god-most-holy.html>>)
- * Hymn, "Alas, and did my Savior bleed!", sung to a haunting American hymn tune, LIBERTY HALL (a version here<<http://harmoniasacra.org/114t.html>>)
- * Meditation III, from St. Bonaventure
- * Drop, drop slow tears — Kenneth Leighton
- * Meditation IV, from George Herbert
- * Author of life divine — Peter Aston, another gorgeous miniature which would serve well as a communion anthem at any time of the year
- * Meditation V, from the Orthodox Liturgy of Holy Saturday ("Today a tomb holds him who holds the creation in the hollow of his hand...")
- * Give me that stranger — Michael McCarthy (a piece so compelling it has appeared on this blog previously<<http://blog.sinden.org/2013/08/mccarthy-michael-give-me-that-stranger.html>>)
- * Meditation VI, from Thomas Traherne
- * Ubi caritas et amor — Ola Gjeilo
- * Hymn, "My song is love unknown"
- * Ride on, ride on in majesty — Grayston Ives (a piece that I've only read through and never heard sung. I was glad that the effect of this piece in performance is as rich as it appears on the page. I think I need to order copies of this now.)
- * Concluding Prayers