

Comments on Olivier Messiaen's Vision of the Eternal Church and The Message of the Prodigal.

“And I saw a new heaven and a new earth...and I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven...and I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them...and he that sat upon the throne said, Behold, I make all things new...I am the Alpha and the Omega. (Revelation 21:1-6)”

Each week I select a prelude for the liturgy that reflects either in mood or connection the general theme of the lessons or the season. I arrive at my choice after study of the Propers. Nothing that takes place in the liturgy is random or coincidental. Celebration of the Sacred Mysteries is, after all, a participation in real time in the eternal, heavenly liturgy. The prelude, as insignificant it might seem is really part of an important preparatory time for Mass. When we enter the nave, we enter into timeless, sacred space to experience sacred action. In the liturgy we will encounter the Divine in the flesh, the Real Presence, the very author of our salvation.

One of the most profoundly didactic 20th century composers for the organ is Olivier Messiaen. His works are like no others of the repertoire, and for this reason they are often dismissed as overly innovative, wildly esoteric, or highly experimental. They do not conform to the rules and expectations of standard Western music. Conventional musical analysis cannot explain these works or describe their construction. Messiaen, you see, has created his own music theory, devised his own musical language based on tone color to paint musical images onto a canvas of silence. His music does not allow the listener to comprehend it with the ear alone, but challenges him to perceive it with the heart. If the listener is responsive inwardly, this is music that enfolds the soul in sound and leads it to a place of spiritual centering, a place where God dwells, and where we, ultimately hope one day to dwell with Him. For the fourth Sunday of Lent (March 6th) named “Gladness Sunday”, or “Laetare”, I have chosen as the prelude Messiaen’s Apparition de l’Eglise éternelle, “The Vision of the Eternal Church.” It is a tone poem

without any particular melody, constructed with Messiaen's unique colored harmonies, moving slowly along from moderate loudness, gradually broadening until the full resources of the organ are employed to fill the nave with sound. The Vision starts with a distant shimmer, grows more brilliant, expands in scope until finally the soul is enveloped in glorious, streaming light that seems, to the mind's eye, to emanate from around the closed door of the altar's tabernacle. Soon, the door of the tabernacle is flung open to reveal the gleaming face of the Christ, no longer the unseen Deity of our sacramental food, but physically before us, transfigured, both true God and true man. We come to experience at the highpoint of Messiaen's work a likeness of the Beatific Vision: that state of being we hope one day to attain, the place where one stands in the very presence of the Triune God, the place we have lost thanks to the stain of Old Adam's transgression, but which is our restored inheritance, thanks to the cross of Christ. As musical color surrounds us, we are like St. John the Divine, who in his Revelation described the throne of the Lamb; we are like Moses who descended Sinai with the Decalogue, his face shining after having encountered God at the mountaintop Tent of Meeting; we are like Ezekiel whose vision was as an image of the Most High, and we are like the disciples who witnessed their Lord transfigured on the mountain, made dazzling in the Spirit of the Almighty. What a vision this is! Hardly imaginable from artists' renderings, but in music made tangible to body and soul! Beneath the clashing color of Messiaen's exotic harmony, there is a constant pulse upon the deepest tones of the instrument. The giant rhythmic waves persist throughout, first small at the start of Vision then growing ever stronger. What we experience at this moment is the very heart beat of God, his life-essence swirling all around us, passing through us, entering our souls and feeding our Lenten hearts with the pure, embracing love of the Father. "It's good, Lord, to be here!" Would that we always could dwell in such a place! With that thought, the Vision begins to fade, the heart beat remains, but grows quieter. The image that had so enraptured us becomes faint. As the brilliant light dulls, the image of the enthroned Christ blurs, and once again we behold simple bread in place of the Holy Face. The tabernacle closes. The Vision has ended. But, our hearts remember. We have encountered God, we have seen him. We are changed forever, as our forefathers too were changed, when offered merely a glimpse, an aspect of him who dwells in unapproachable light. We

are left with our human faith-yearning to experience this again. St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, explaining that now we see through a glass darkly, yet then, we shall see God face to face. Is this not our Christian hope, to dwell in that most amiable presence forever?

The Gospel lesson for Laetare is that of the Prodigal Son: that upstart youngster who knew what was best for himself, who begged of his father his inheritance early, who took it, and who squandered it. In his state of utter despair, having been reduced to living among the swine and sharing their slop trough for sustenance, he remembered his origin, that the filth in which he found himself was not where he really belonged. He made his way home to his father's house, ashamed and broken, yet what he experienced upon his arrival was far from what he truly deserved and far from what he had ever expected: the outstretched arms of his father and a father's embracing love and joy in finding again a son who had been lost. This famous parable is a snapshot of our salvation. It is a description of our Lenten journey. We, emptied and weary, having lost all of worth and shut out from Grace, make our way slowly back home to our Father's embrace, who does not welcome us with scorn, but with love, to dwell with him forever.

The love of the father for the prodigal is the love that pours forth for all from the eternal church, the Communion of Saints, the Body of Christ whose head is the Son of the Almighty. On Laetare Sunday, arrive a bit early for Mass and prepare for worship. Sit quietly and meditate upon the Gospel lesson printed in your bulletin. Recognize yourself in the story. Marvel in the father's reconciling mercy. Then, set the text aside and sit quietly in your pew to listen to Messiaen's Vision of the Eternal Church. Think of the unusual harmonies not as dissonances, but as music of a different realm – for indeed, it is exactly that. Note the musical colors. Listen for the heart beat, feel it as it grows stronger. Pay close attention how the music broadens, expands and pushes all else out, so that only the Vision exists. As the work draws slowly to a close, continue to watch with your heart's eye as the vision fades, this brief glimpse upon the Face of God. Watch as the liturgy itself which follows takes on the same form of the Vision you have just experienced in Music, how it reaches its glorious culmination with the physical appearance of

our Lord in the Sacrament, present through spiritual eating and drinking. Imagine what it must be like when the Beatific Vision is not only afforded us in glimpses like this, but something we experience at all times and forever. Our Lenten pilgrimage leads us to the Holy Sacrifice, which, in turn, will lead us home, into the outstretched arms of the Father. “For my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.”