

The Second Sunday after Pentecost
Bruton Parish Church
The Rev. John Maxwell Kerr
June 6, 2010

"There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy." William Shakespeare, in "Hamlet, Prince of Denmark," has some proper humility to teach us. We don't know it all. We don't have all the answers. No-one does. No-one ever can, though they may claim they do. It pays to be open-minded. It pays to be skeptical about our skepticism, to be open to the possibility that we don't even know what's humanly possible, let alone what is divinely possible. There really are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of, than we can even begin to dream of, in our philosophy.

"Hamlet, Prince of Denmark," is a play which assumes there are ghosts, Hamlet's father's ghost for one. "But surely", says the skeptic, "it's merely a play, just literature, only a work of imagination! Everybody knows there are no such thing as ghosts". I don't know whether you believe there are ghosts or not. Having been brought up in Netherhall, my grandfather's famously haunted house in Scotland, I'm still not sure whether the "Grey Lady" seen by so many people was a ghost or not. I'm not absolutely sure there are ghosts but rather think there may be, despite being very un-superstitious. Many members of my family, many servants, many visitors, "saw" the "Grey Lady" (though I did not). Oddly, they were initially startled but later just took her appearances for granted. Somehow it seems arrogant to say there can be no such thing as ghosts.

And it's the same with miracles. Our faith doesn't depend on belief in stories of ancient miracles, even the story of the resurrection. Our faith depends on belief in Jesus Christ, alive today, a lively meeting with our Lord, the Risen Christ. Some people would also say there are and can be no miracles. They would say they know this. That's what wrong with religious faith, they would tell us, is that we blindly believe in miracles and our faith depends on them. No-one can be raised from the dead, they tell us. Again, I don't know that I could prove to a philosopher whether that is true or not but Jesus appears to have been raised from the dead and so very many of us experience and continue to this very day to experience that Risen Presence in prayer and sacrament. Are we superstitious credulous idiots? Surely not all of us are?

The same people tell me there can be no miracles because there is no God, and they know it, no Holy Spirit to inspire in reality the people of God, and therefore no divine miracles. When they say that, they are saying more than they or anyone can possibly know.

There really are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in my philosophy, that I do know, and it is easy to find examples of that outside the Scriptures. All it takes is a little humility.

Today at the 0900 and 1115 services, we shall bathe in the glorious splendour of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's Missa Brevis in C.

Some of us can sing, some can play an instrument or even more than one instrument, and a very few of us can compose music. Most of us, and that would certainly include me, have no idea how to compose even a simple tune. Is musical composition, or theoretical non-Euclidian mathematics, come to that, a miracle which can't possibly happen because I don't know how to do it?

If I hadn't the experience of hearing music freely composed out of the imagination of musicians, I think I'd probably say it was impossible. Or if I did think I knew all about it, when it came to Mozart, I'd quickly be humbled.

Shall we let Mozart speak for himself? There exists an amazing letter this brilliant composer wrote, I think in 1789. What he writes is so far from my experience as to be quite literally, unimaginable. I know several composers. They, even they, feel the same sense of awe, the same sense that this is far from their experience as it is from mine, or I presume, yours.

Mozart wrote this.

"When I am, as it were, completely myself, entirely alone, and of good cheer – say, traveling in a carriage, or walking after a good meal, or during the night when I cannot sleep; it is on such occasions that my ideas flow best and most abundantly. Whence and how they come, I know not; nor can I force them. Those pleasures that please me I retain in memory, and am accustomed, as I have been told, to hum them to myself. If I continue in this way, it soon occurs to me how I may turn this morsel to account, so as to make a good dish of it, that is to say, agreeably to the rules of counterpoint, to the peculiarities of the various instruments, etc.

All this fires my soul, and, provided I am not disturbed, my subject enlarges itself, becomes methodized and defined, and the whole, though it be long, stands almost complete and finished in my mind, so that I can survey it, like a fine picture or a beautiful statue, at a glance. Nor do I hear in my imagination the parts successively, but I hear them, as it were, all at once (*gleich alles zusammen*). What a delight this is, I cannot tell! All this inventing, this producing, takes place in a pleasing, lively dream. Still, the actual hearing of the tout ensemble is after all the best. What has been thus produced I do not easily forget, and this is perhaps the best gift I have my Divine Maker to thank for."

I am no artist, no composer. What Mozart says is true, I believe to be true, for many people watched him write music exactly like that, as if he had a vision and simply wrote down what he saw and heard.

Looking at page after page of the score of Mozart's works, so rich, so many instruments and voices blended to produce such glorious music – and knowing that he just 'saw' the whole work all at once is staggering. It gets worse. Mozart wrote the Missa Brevis in C major, and indeed all his Masses – WHILE HE WAS A TEENAGER. Humbling.

When the great British architect Sir Christopher Wren visited the chapel of King's College, Cambridge, and gazed up at its astonishing fan-vaulted ceiling, he is reported to have said, "Yes, I could do that if only someone would show me where to place the first stone." That is appropriately humble. It might be added that no-one who knew him thought Mozart suffered from any false modesty, nor any other kind of modesty.

With Mozart's music, even if we were shown where and what the first note should be, would any among us know where to put the next note in that stave even successively? Mozart saw it all from first note to the last and saw it and heard it at once in his imagination and did this for many hundreds of operas, symphonies....

Is it a miracle? Is it a miracle because I don't understand it, can't understand it? You come to Church week by week and hear stories of the miraculous. I know that many of you doubt these stories because you've never experienced anything like them. Nor have I. But there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy, or mine. And when we Christians come across stories of miracles, perhaps we should reflect in all humility, on that letter by Mozart about how he composed such marvelous intricate music in the twinkling of eye.

If the Bible doesn't teach us faith, then perhaps Mozart, a true musical genius, and yet a human being as we are, might teach us humility and that would prepare the ground very usefully from which faith could grow.

Amen.

J.M. Kerr