

The Very Rev. Cynthia Byers Walter

## SINGING IN PARTS

*Sermon for Easter 5A-Acts 7:55-60, 1Pet 31:1-5, 15-16, Jn 14:1-14*

LPC, 5/18/14

When I was in first grade, I was selected to be part of something called “All-Elementary Chorus.” We learned that the best singers from all the elementary schools in town would be gathered together to prepare a choral performance. Initially, however, all us designees would just rehearse at our own schools.

There were about 20 from my school and we met in the Cafeteria after lunch for a couple of weeks to learn a song in unison. The song sounded a little weird at first, but after we learned it well, it sounded pretty enough.

The time came to join with the designees from the other elementary schools for a Saturday rehearsal. The director first coached us in how to follow his motions to stay together in rhythm. Then we all began to sing. The sound was no longer just pretty – it was magical. It turns out that the groups at each school had been taught a different part in the same polyphonic piece.

The piece was a fairly complicated piece by JS Bach, with lots of baroque counterpoint and intricate rhythms. If we had tried to learn it as a combined chorus it might have been quite a bit more difficult. We were, after all, very youthful and inexperienced singers who got easily distracted by hearing somebody next to us singing something different. So the organizers had hit upon the idea of training each part completely separately until we knew it too well to get distracted.

We had had no idea we were part of something larger. That “something larger” turned out to be more marvelous than we could possibly have dreamed. Together we were producing something magnificent, of which none of us individually thought we were capable. But each of us knew that we were part of this magnificence... that our part, however small, was necessary and contributed to the whole splendid effect. There is nothing like that feeling.

To this day, that experience has been for me a metaphor for heaven. Each of us has a part to play, or sing, whose full beauty cannot be heard until combined with other parts. We have no idea, during rehearsal, what the final, glorious result will be.

I am talking about heaven today, because our lessons talk about heaven. In the Book of Acts, Stephen has a vision of the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God. In the Gospel John, Jesus talks about the Father’s house, where there are many dwelling places, and to which Jesus himself goes ahead to prepare a place for his disciples.

This latter is often read at funerals, where survivors find comfort in the assurance that there is room for their loved one with Jesus in heaven. The King James Version is especially comforting. It says, “In my Father’s house are many *mansions*.” This conveys that there is not only accommodation for each of us in heaven, but luxury and space: in

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other words, abundance. Jesus is all about abundance. Remember how often he speaks of abundant life?

The First Letter of Peter today also has insight into the nature of heaven, especially if we understand heaven as something we don't have to die to experience. Peter provides many metaphors for followers of Jesus. One is that of living stones which make up the construction of a house, of which Jesus is the cornerstone.

We are all stones in this house. Jesus is the most important stone without which the house cannot stand. We all depend on him. But we also depend on each other. It takes many stones to build a house. A stone by itself is not especially impressive. While in the ground all it does is impede cultivation. But joined to other stones it becomes part of a great edifice. Sort of like the separate parts in that Bach piece I performed with All-Elementary Chorus.

The point I am trying to make is that salvation is not an individual affair. We each have a part to play, or to sing, in God's great plan to redeem the universe.

The perfection of the world, heaven, is but the ultimate and continuing performance of a great and marvelous piece, in which we are already participating. None of us can do it alone. We need each other. We all have a part to play, which we need to learn to perform as well as we possibly can, through much practice. We join with others to practice, but we won't know the fullness of our part until it is combined with other parts, rehearsing separately elsewhere. When it all comes together it will be absolutely glorious. Until then, things may sound a little funny, but if we are faithful in doing our part, the combined effort will be greater than our dreams.

What this means in practical terms is that our faith is not our own private affair. Our individual faith is part of a much larger phenomenon. We need to cultivate our individual faith: that would be the equivalent of taking care of our own voice, our own health. But then we need to join with others in faith to practice our part. That is the equivalent of separate rehearsals. We here at Lawrencefield have our part to play and we have come together in this small group to learn it and support each other.

Yes, we are small. Yes, we're a bit off the beaten track here on the hill. Yes, it seems we're always strapped for cash. But our part is important. We have been selected to sing in a mighty chorus and we need to do our very best to learn and perform our part.

But that's not all. We need to realize that there are other people out there learning different parts. I'm not just talking about other Episcopal Churches either. I'm talking about other Christians, possibly persons of other faiths, other countries even. How those other parts relate to ours we cannot, at this point, know. The director, the composer, the planner alone knows.

All we know is that, the performance, when it finally comes, will be glorious, and that we have a part in it.