

David Wilbourne's sermon for Trinity 1

Panting harts

'You'll need to speak up, Archbishop,
the agnostics in this church are terrible,'
a Wolds churchwarden tipped off Donald Coggan.

'I don't come to your Sung Eucharist,'
someone hectored me when I first came here,

'My chest just can't take the incest!'

'A doctor put a megaphone down my throat
to check out my insides,'
an old lady informed me in Malton Hospital.

People not quite getting the right words
can brighten our day,

can even make the dullest
and most implausible excuses bearable.

Our gradual hymn,

As pants the heart,

Rachel sings every Monday morning
as she processes the washing.

Wrong sort of pants.

The hymn itself came to birth
because of a problem with the all new Church of England.

The 16th century had seen a heady move away
from Latin services to worship in modern English,
with the puzzling and inaccessible
Hebrew and Greek of the Scriptures
translated into our mother tongue.

The problem came with the Psalms,
Hebrew poetry set to music
composed by King David,
the Andrew Lloyd Webber of his day,
just didn't translate easily
into a singable form.
Catchy verses like
Sihon, king of the Amorites
and Og the king of Basan
infuriatingly doesn't fit to the tune Greensleeves.
Yet Psalms were songs,
that's what Psalm means in Greek,
and were meant to be sung.
Say them and it's as boring as saying a Beatles lyric:
I want to hold your hand,
I want to hold your ha-ha-ha-hand,

I want to hold your hand.
Something is lost.
True, the psalms could be sung to plainsong,
but plainsong is tricky,
and the monks and nuns who were expert at it
had gone to ground,
hounded by anti-catholic regimes,
understandably non too keen on being hung, drawn and quartered.
Whistling a spot of plainsong
would be a bit of a give away,
the ecclesiastical equivalent
of sporting a hoody
in the Bransholme shopping centre in darkest Hull.
'These new-fangled Psalms,
you just can't sing them,'

they complained,
as they stopped away from Evensong in droves.

And so various people
re-translated the Psalms
so that they scanned and rhymed
and could be easily sung to familiar ditties.

Crimond, the Lord's my shepherd,
is one obvious example.

Slightly less well known,
despite Rachel's crooning it every Monday of our married life,

is this morning's gradual hymn,
'As pants the heart for cooling streams
when heated in the chase,'

a metrical version of Psalm 42:

'As a deer longs for the water brooks,

so longs my soul for you, O God.'

The hymn was included

in Tate and Brady's

1696 best-seller

A new version of the Psalms of David,

which pipped the previous chart-topper,

Sternhold and Hopkin's 1562 classic

The Whole Booke of Psalms

to the no 1 spot

in a world which must have been very bored.

Tate and Brady's genius

was to move the sentiments of Psalm 42

to a new level.

No longer is the thirsty deer

just a metaphor for our thirst for God.

The picture is now a dynamic one,
where the deer is being hunted,
fleeing for its very life,
pulse 200 beats per minute,
carbon dioxide levels in the blood stream dangerously high,
adrenalin and blood pressure surging through the roof:
details wisely passed over by Tate and Brady.

Yet the image is a strong one.

The deer wide-eyed with terror,
sinews aching,
gasping for a drink,
dogs baying just yards behind it,
fearing that it is about to be torn apart.

A marvellous image which Tate and Brady brought out
in a no longer popular fifth verse:

*God of my strength, how long shall I
Like one forgotten, mourn –
Forlorn, forsaken and exposed
to my oppressor's scorn.*

All of a sudden it's not the deer,
it's us who are being pursued,
by terrors real and imaginary,
by enemies within and without,
and we long for it all to end,
we long for refreshment,
to slake our thirst at the coolest brook.
God is that brook,
the hymn maintains,
drawing out the force of Psalm 42.

It's a striking picture which,
like most hymns,
often passes us by.

Thomas Hardy wrote a poem,
Afternoon Service at Melstock,
about singing his very hymn:

On afternoons of drowsy calm
We stood in the panelled pew,
Singing one-voiced a Tate-and-Brady psalm
To the tune of Cambridge New.

We watched the elms, we watched the rooks,
The clouds upon the breeze,
Between the whiles of glancing at our books
And swaying like the trees.

So mindless were those outpourings! –
Though I am not aware
That I have gained by subtle thought on things
Since we stood psalming there.

What's Hardy saying?
That hymn singing is mindless,
but as mindless experiences go...
Reminiscent of Woody Allen,
Sex without love is a hollow experience.
But as hollow experiences go...

I must be one of the few clergy in the country
who goes for a cycle ride before his 8 am service,
and almost unique
in that when I ride up a hill

usually I have a deer running ahead of me,
fleeing for its life,
with me its strange dog-collared hunter
pedalling his cycle.

As pants the hart for cooling streams
when heated in the chase.

Actually, it's my heart that's panting,
to coin another pun.

The deer seems to glide effortless away.

Sometimes the hunter

doesn't feel like a hunter at all,

but can feel like the hunted one.

'When you pant for cooling streams

when heated in life's chase,'

Christ says to us,

'I am here to cool you,
to refresh you,
to harbour you.'

But Christ also says in our Gospel for today,

'When you're being hunted,
hounded,

turn around and face your hunter,

and present him with your humanity,

in all its vulnerability.

Maybe it'll give him the nerve

to descend from his macho pedestal,

to match your humanity with his humanity,

your vulnerability with his vulnerability.

If the deer running ahead of me

as I puffed and panted up the hill

stopped and met me face to face,
now that would be an encounter,
a piece of Sunday worship worthy of the name.

As pants the vicar's heart for a cooling deer
when heated in the chase,
so longs my soul to meet you, me terrible enemy,
and be surprised by your refreshing grace.

No
perhaps we'll stay with
Tate and Brady,
patron saints of washerwomen the world over.