

Requiem Mass on Remembrance Sunday

St Thomas, Salisbury, 2023

Judges 7:2-22

John 15:9-17

Rest eternal grant unto them, O Lord.

And let light perpetual shine upon them.

There is an extraordinary tradition and history to Requiem masses. The earliest musical settings were mostly set to chant, Gregorian chant and the like, and then over time polyphony got in on the act and the Requiem has really attained status as a genre of music in its own right.

As I noted in the inside cover of the order of service, basically the text is drawn from the communion service for the dead, and then composers pick from here and there to draw other texts in. John Rutter, in his rather lovely 20th century setting, draws in a couple of psalms to plug the gaps, one of which of course we plugged tonight with our congregational setting of Psalm 23. Faure pretty much sticks to the script, until the very end when he pulls a text from the service of the burial of a body, the exquisite *In paradisum*, with which our service will end tonight.

Some of the most famous settings, perhaps Verdi's Requiem in particular, were never designed to be used for their proper purpose, a communion service with a focus on the departed. That undoubtedly splendid piece is really a concert composition. But Faure composed his Requiem to be prayed. Indeed many sources believe that he composed it in response to the death of his own parents. It was the setting sung at his own funeral in 1924.

Critics of Faure's Requiem, theological critics I mean, note that it doesn't contain much of penitence and the pleading for God's mercy which some of the other compositions, perhaps Mozart most obviously, does. Other theologians find something rather profound in the way that Faure composes, and indeed he himself said that his Requiem, "is dominated from beginning to end by a very human feeling of faith in eternal rest." A very human feeling of faith in eternal rest.

Faure's Requiem is optimistic. And that is a good thing, because so is the funeral service. Think about the words that we use as we bury a body or commit a coffin to be cremated: "Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust, in sure and certain hope in the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ from the dead." It's the same reason why although the traditional colour worn for a Requiem is black, as I am wearing tonight, it is black with a big silver cross shining through. Grief, for the Christian, is always grief with hope, because it is grief in the presence of Christ. Sure and certain hope are the markers of the Christian funeral, and very human feeling of faith in eternal rest inspired Faure to compose the music through which we worship tonight.

We gather of course on Remembrance Sunday, and so our intention in particular is to pray for all those who died as a result of war and conflict, in the two world wars and in all the conflicts since including those ongoing, and of course to pray for combatants and noncombatants alike. But at every Requiem we can bring our own names too, perhaps names you submitted to be read out this time last week, and very importantly we can pray for all those for whose souls no one else prays, those forgotten by the world, but never by God.

Death in war is a distinctly difficult thing to process. And our first reading from Judges doesn't really avoid the triumphalism

that can be so unhelpful when we consider the reasons for human beings to kill other human beings. Our gospel is perhaps more helpful, and actually very Faure. That line, “you have not chosen me, but I have chosen you” puts us in our proper relationship with the divine. Whatever action we might make towards God, we need to be quite clear that God was already moving towards us. And the marker that God would have us bear when we realise that, is love for one another.

And if God has chosen us, then why should not our final movement towards him be “a very human feeling of faith in eternal rest”? Here is Faure again, talking to an interviewer:

“It has been said that my Requiem does not express the fear of death and someone has called it a lullaby of death. But it is thus that I see death: as a happy deliverance, an aspiration towards happiness above.”

Thus we commend our loved ones, those fallen in war and conflict through the ages, and all the faithful departed known and unknown: to a happy deliverance, and in an aspiration towards happiness above.

May they rest in peace.
And rise in glory.