
William Byrd – Beauty and Community

A sermon by Canon Wallace Marsh

Proper 10 – Year A

Choral Eucharist prior to the Cathedral Choir's pilgrimage to Salisbury and Durham Cathedrals

In the name of the Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Amen.

Welcome to the Mass for Five Voices by William Byrd. Today's Mass is something our choir will sing at their pilgrimage in England, and since they are offering it for us today, I am going to take this opportunity to preach only on it, for better or for worse.

Many year ago, I had the opportunity to study William Byrd in Oxford, England.

I was over there for a summer program, studying Britain in the Age of the Reformation. For one reason or another, I decided to sign up for a class on Reformation church music. Yes, me in a music class...I got kicked out of piano lessons as a child...the last instrument I played was the trumpet in seventh grade...and I signed up for a class where we studied William Byrd (as you have already heard, there is nothing about Byrd that is easy).

Why did I take that class? I decided to take that course because it met three of my summer criteria:

1. I was in England, so when in England take a class from a professor at Oxford. The class on Reformation music was taught by one of the great music professors.
2. It was a summer program, and I wanted a class that didn't have a lot of reading and lectures, because I was old enough to drink some things in England that I wasn't allowed to drink here in the States. I thought I could spend the evening at the pub, then come home and listen to music instead of reading a book. (To any student listening, that was a bad idea).
3. Finally, the most important reason I took that class is because I was discerning a call to the priesthood, and I wanted to be in a class and in a course where I could begin to explore what it might mean to be an Episcopal priest.

Studying the music of William Byrd taught me two things about being an Episcopalian, things I hope you experience in today's music.

The first thing Byrd teaches us about our tradition is the beauty of our Anglican choral tradition. The second thing Byrd's music teaches is the importance of creating a space for many voices.

First, the beauty of the Anglican Choral Tradition.

Byrd was born in London to a Protestant family, under the reign of Edward VI, the teenage son of Henry VIII. Under Edward, England was a very Protestant nation, and it is hard to tell if Byrd's family were

Protestant out of their own volition, or because they wanted their heads to stay on their shoulders.

We know that Byrd's brothers sang at St. Paul's, London, and Byrd likely sang at Chapel Royal. About the time he was singing there, Edward VI died and Mary ascended the throne ("Bloody Mary").

Mary made England Roman Catholic again, so the music William Byrd likely grew up singing was very liturgical.

About the time Byrd set out to begin his professional career at the Cathedral in Lincoln, the monarch changed yet again. Mary died and Elizabeth I took the throne. Remember your English history? Henry VIII starts the Reformation (but still remains Roman Catholic...to some degree). Edward VI's religious leaders make England a very Protestant nation. Then, Mary I burns many of the English Reformers at the stake and makes England Roman Catholic again.

When Mary dies everyone in England wants to rip their hair out! What is going to happen next?

We have these two great voices Protestantism and Roman Catholicism, and Elizabeth's project is holding those together. So, it is at that moment that Byrd leaves London to become the organist and choir master at Lincoln Cathedral, into a very Protestant area in England.

We know this was a Protestant territory because the chapter minutes indicate Byrd's salary was suspended for too much organ improvisation and too many ornate choral anthems.

None of this seemed to bother Byrd because he believed in the beauty of the Anglican choral tradition, even though it violated the laws of the land.

And then something happened. There was a death of a prominent person in Queen Elizabeth's choir. She knew of William Byrd, loved his music, and asked him to join the choir at Chapel Royal.

There, William Byrd and Thomas Tallis (notice the piece from Tallis at communion) were able to create beautiful music. It was music that Elizabeth loved, even though it violated a few of the laws of the land. Elizabeth turned a blind eye, because there was something powerful, something so beautiful in the music. I hope you have already experienced that today's music, and I hope you continue to experience it this service.

No matter where you are in life, whether you are experiencing joy or sorrow, there is something about our music that can draw you nearer to the presence of God. It draws you closer to the Holy in a way that no other music can; it is something unique to our tradition. The beauty of the Anglican tradition is something to celebrate!

Finally, Byrd was also able to create to a church for many voices.

Byrd spent a majority of his time at that Chapel Royale with Thomas Tallis, where he continued to publish and violate the laws of the land. Living this kind of double-life was difficult, so he decided to move into a rural village, and give up his prominent and high profiled position.

In this village outside of Essex, Byrd became more involved with the Roman Catholic communities. He began to continue writing more works. He was fined for breaking the law, and payed the fines, and this process kept repeating over and over again. No major punishment occurred because William Byrd had friends in the inner circle and the Queen appreciated his music.

I think it's at that moment William Byrd began to see what his contribution would be to the Church of England. It was then Byrd began to write these masses (for Three Voices, Four Voices, and Five Voices). I think Byrd wanted The Church of England to see it needed to be a place for many voices.

Actually, when Elizabeth I came to power, she surrounded herself with theologians who made this very point. They said The Church of England was to be Reformed Catholicism, the best of the Protestantism and Roman Catholicism. The Church of England was to be a place that could hold those two voices in harmony.

William Byrd did that through his music. William Byrd created a place where many voices are heard.

As you listen to this music today, I hope you experience the beauty of the Anglican choral tradition, but I also hope this music bounces off the walls, off the ceiling and the floor and into your hearts, and into your minds, and moves you nearer to the presence of God.

But, I also hope you get a sense that this church is a church about creating a community for many voices. As Anglicans,

that is what we are called to do. A southern bishop on The Episcopal Church said it this way, “Opposites need not always oppose, nor contraries necessarily contradict,” because in our tradition opposites and contraries can come together and form perfect harmony.

As Episcopalians, that is our call...to go out and create communities where voices can exist in harmony. Amen.

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