

A View from the Pew

by Deacon Greg Kandra

Alleluia: Getting a Handle on Handel

There is a story told about when George Frideric Handel was writing his famous “Messiah,” in the summer of 1741, which helps to explain its powerful hold on the imagination. A servant, the story goes, knocked on Handel’s door one afternoon. When he didn’t answer, the servant knocked again. Again, no answer. Alarmed, the servant broke down the door and found the famous composer at his piano, unable to move. Before him was the music to the “Hallelujah” chorus. Handel looked up from his work. Tears were streaming down his cheeks. “I have seen the face of God,” he said.

Most biographers consider the tale to be colorful hagiography—inspired, perhaps, by the fact that this monumental piece of music was written in just 24 days. What else could account for something so extraordinary being achieved so quickly? It had to be credited to the hand of God—if not, in fact, His face. Certainly, whatever the inspiration, Handel’s devotion and deep Christian faith pervade the piece. At the end of the manuscript, he wrote the letters “SDG”: *Soli Deo Gloria*. To God Alone the Glory.

I have seen the face of God.

Across the centuries, countless people around the world have been moved, inspired, uplifted, roused by that monumental piece of music. They have even been moved to their feet; early tradition holds that King George II was so stirred by the Hallelujah Chorus that he stood up in awe, inspiring his subjects to follow. (However, scholars can find no convincing evidence that this incident actually happened or that the monarch ever even saw the “Messiah” performed. But it makes for another great piece of Handel lore.)

Now here we are, more than three centuries later, and the “Messiah” and its thrilling chorus continue to rouse us to our feet. As we celebrate Easter, we will be hearing that immortal piece of music once again, as “Alleluia” returns to our liturgies and we rejoice in the resurrection. While some of the details about Handel’s composition of this classic may be murky, or fanciful fiction, I do think his reported words to that servant speak to something beautiful about that piece of music, and about Easter itself.

It’s so simple, but so fundamental. It’s this: We yearn, more than anything, to see the face of God.

The miracle of Easter offers us this blessed hope: that we one day will do just that. It offers us the reassurance of a bright morning after the earthquake of Good Friday. It offers us the shock of an empty tomb, the impossible made possible, life restored and renewed.

Handel’s great, enduring work—a perennial not just at Easter, but even more popular, I think, at Christmas—crystallizes all that hope and exultation into something as elusive and mysterious as sound. The composer turned a miracle into music.

We may not know if he actually did see God’s face shining through that sheet music. But I do think something else is certain: The work itself did, as Handel hoped, give glory to God. It’s hard not to hear the Messiah and hear something of the Divine Artist at work.

And, after all, what would Easter celebrations be without a rousing Alleluia?

Alleluia!

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