

A moving and dramatic Passion

On Palm Sunday a large congregation at St Leonard's, Streatham, experienced a powerful introduction to Holy Week in the form of a fine liturgical performance of Bach's St John Passion. Not surprisingly, this vividly dramatic work has been performed as an opera; but those present were privileged to hear the work as it was first performed in 1724 at St Nicholas's, Leipzig, on the first Good Friday after Bach was appointed Cantor there and at St Thomas's. The City Fathers did not deserve the greatness with which they were blessed: we read that one Councillor Platz observed that since they could not get the best man (Telemann) they would have to make do with a mediocrity.

There is nothing mediocre about this great work, which in recent years has emerged from the shadow of its great, and longer, successor based on Matthew's Gospel. Nor was there anything mediocre about the heartfelt performance, which drew the congregation into the violent and the meditative moods of the piece, and not only the five congregational chorales in which we all joined.

Passionate impetus was provided by Ben Johnson's outstanding Evangelist, whose rendering of the story included every nuance which the text offers. Michael Bundy's rich bass gave us a massively dignified and authoritative Christ. The demands of each part are great indeed; yet without any loss of form these fine soloists moved across the stage to deliver the tenor and bass arias, which form a vital part of the meditations on the drama as it unfolds. The soprano and alto arias were effectively delivered by Pamela Hall, a member of St Leonard's choir, and Simon Baker. St Leonard's choir was further represented among the soloists. Tony Nunn (bass) as Peter did not buckle under cross-examination by Sarah Parry's Maid and Andrew Johnson's Servant; and he was equal also to the considerable demands of the role of Pilate, whose weakness under pressure is most fully exposed in this Gospel.

Michael Emery, who in a short time has enriched the musical contribution to the worship at St Leonard's, had assembled a fine orchestra led by Caroline Tait. Jonathan Bloxham (cello) and Bernard Robertson (chamber organ) provided a polished and secure continuo; Peter Jones (lute) and Liam Byrne (viola da gamba) made telling contributions to two of the arias; and Martin Wolf commuted between the basses in the chorus and the organ gallery to provide weight to the congregational chorales. The chorus included members of the regular St Leonard's choir, including those mentioned, and also a number of occasional singers, who to this ear at least were equal throughout to the considerable demands which Bach makes on the chorus.

At the centre of this liturgical performance was a short homily from the Rector, the Revd Mandy Hodgson, who succinctly illuminated the contrast, in the Passion and in our lives, between gross injustice and violence and beauty and goodness.

This moving act of worship ended appropriately without applause; but Michael Emery and all those who contributed to it under his leadership must know that there was silent and grateful applause in our hearts for their achievement.

Charles Gibson