

Word

A sequence of meditations on the Gospel in the 21st Century
for mixed chorus and organ,
setting verses from St John's Prologue in the New Revised Standard Version
and five poems of R. S. Thomas

Word was commissioned by The Revd Dr Nicholas Fisher in 2011 and completed in December 2012. The commission was conceived as part of the *Merton Choirbook* project, bringing together a series of newly-composed works to mark the 750th anniversary of the Foundation of Merton College, Oxford, in 1264. In the event, the wealth of other new works chronologically ahead of *Word* deferred its première performance until 7 February 2015.

Unusually, Nicholas Fisher presented his commission idea with a complete collated text already in mind. His intention was to enable and illumine contemplation of the Gospel's significance specifically in our postmodern cultural epoch. That lay behind his prescription of the New Revised Standard Version of St John's Prologue, and also prompted his choice of R.S. Thomas, whose thorny demotic language and idiosyncratic rhythms operate in the service of a 'poetry of ideas' and present a formidable challenge to any composer.

For decades a devoted adherent myself to Thomas's verse, I was under no illusions as to the hurdles facing me, which may as well be summarised by acknowledging the sheer daunting self-sufficiency of such writing. At the same time, for the restless humanist-agnostic composer a large part of Thomas's lure lies in the chance to reflect his tenacious grappling with the problems of a faith continually beset by doubt or dark outbreaks of 'the wrong kind of belief'. There is nothing of comfortable certainty here, nothing of sensual self-indulgence or the decorative-for-its-own-sake. There are difficult, counterintuitive meters which mirror the sometimes beleaguered sense of instinctive faith as a square peg in the round hole of a scientifically-based rationalism; and there are colloquialisms which might be thought to reflect the mundane failure of collective humanity to apprehend anything numinous or mystical in the beauty of the natural order around it (a natural order which, moreover, it is forever despoiling and eroding). Thomas is light years away from Blake's '*...World in a Grain of Sand / And a Heaven in a Wild Flower*'.

Above all, Thomas appears not so much to address the individual as to commune only with himself, the hermit seemingly of cave or mountain top. The unsparing introspection of his uncompromising lone voice therefore threatened to defy articulation through the collective utterance of a chorus. In particular, it seemed to forbid any polyphonically imitative approach, whereby each thread within the tapestry is intrinsically part of some greater, composite whole. Having composed after that fashion in a great many works, I found myself having to reinvent or, if not that, replace certain fundamentals of the technical way in which my musical ideas found expression. That is not to say that counterpoint recedes entirely, that a hymn-like uniformity imposes itself or that the sung element begins to conform almost to the monodic unanimity of an Ancient Greek tragic chorus. However, I did experience a definite sense of confronting a poetic Rosetta Stone and having to find my own key to its code before the hermetic difficulties of its flinty, resistant inner 'music' could be unlocked. In the event, the general type and style of word-setting now seem to me to resemble, say, those of Benjamin Britten in *Rejoice in the Lamb* [Christopher Smart] or the *Hymn to St Cecilia* [W.H. Auden].

Word alternates verses from St John's Prologue with four complete short poems by Thomas and an extract from a somewhat longer one. It features a demanding and important part for the organ, which not only frames or 'book-ends' the work with its own Prologue and Epilogue, but also contributes a crucial climactic solo section before the final choral passage. I decided to delineate distinction between the prose of St John and the verse of R.S. Thomas by omitting the organ entirely from the Biblical passages, which I aimed to keep simple and unvarnished in effect. Lateral thought instructively suggested Tippett's example in his oratorio *A Child of our Time*, where the interpolation of contemplative Lutheran chorales conventional in Bach's St John and St Matthew Passion settings is tellingly mirrored by spirituals from the Afro-American tradition.

As arranged here, the Thomas poems embody and interrogate respectively [i] restless, scurrying humanity's blindness to divine mystery; [ii] gritty intimations of some distant, hard-won but redemptive radiance; [iii] celebration of the divine through the symmetries, geometric perfections and mathematical intricacies of the natural and elemental world (but voiced by a shaping deity himself, not celebrated by humanity); [iv] an approach to some celestial kingdom from afar, tinged with anticipatory intimations of what it may prove to be; and [v] the pathos of several humanity, levelled by mortality and pursuing its uncertain, individual paths towards whatever final destiny awaits it.

I decided to unite the two contiguous strands of poetry and prose in the final choral section, whose subdued opening emerges from the dying fall of the organ's solo passage. Accordingly, here the chorus returns to the text forming the very opening of St John's Prologue and heard previously at the beginning of *Word*, while two solo voices (soprano and tenor) intone the final Thomas poem in octaves, seemingly as one but, as female and male, embodying all of humanity. The preceding interpolations from St John have been so devised that their uppermost lines can now be laid end to end to form the contour of the chorale-like material sung by the chorus. Other thematic links operate between and across sections throughout the work. These are too numerous to mention here, though certain of them recur fleetingly but obviously within the closing passage for organ solo.

With the generous permission of Nicholas Fisher, beyond its proper inscription to Merton College *Word* carries a secondary dedication to the memory of my friend Martin Read (1959-2012), a fine composer and a tireless, selfless inspirer of informed compositional creativity in the young through his work as Director of Music at Alton College, Hampshire. He died suddenly three months before *Word* was completed. He subscribed to no conventional religious belief, but – rather – to that 'uncontrollable mystery' of music itself as the living token of fractured humanity's healing attempts to make a kind of sense of its existence. As such, in his own way he must surely have affirmed and understood Thomas's second poem:

*I have seen the sun break through
to illuminate a small field
for a while, and gone my way
and forgotten it. But that was the pearl
of great price, the one field that had
the treasure in it. I realize now
that I must give all that I have
to possess it.*

Francis Pott, 2014