

Sermon 3rd August 2025 (7th after Trinity) EVENSONG

Officiant: Clare Stephenson

Choir: Combined choirs of Great St Mary's and St Botolphs

Director of Music: Richard Widdess

Organist: Jonathan Lilley

Marking 400th anniversary of the death of Orlando Gibbons (June 1625)

The choir have just sung the magnificent anthem known as “Great Lord of Lords: with music dating from 1617 written by Orlando Gibbons. Gibbons wrote the music of this anthem for King James I, “for his being in Scotland” as it was recorded, but the words of hymn of praise to the Holy Trinity which we have just heard have a more recent history, and more about that later.

Today the choice of music for our evensong service, and in particular the Evening Service, the anthem and our hymn and the closing organ voluntary, celebrates the fact that this year marks the 400th anniversary of the death of Orlando Gibbons in 1625 at the young age of 41. It is very fitting that we mark his life here in central Cambridge because his early years of musical formation from boyhood to early adulthood were here, and there is no doubt that as a Cambridge undergraduate he could have attended university sermons (he only missed the period when university sermons were compulsory for undergraduates- that began 9 years after he graduated in 1616) but he certainly would have received his Bachelor of Music degree here in this building because at the time Great St Mary's served as the Senate House for the University.

Gibbons is considered one of the most important English composers of the early 17th-century. Sitting between Byrd and Purcell in terms of chronology, Gibbons is considered a composer who bridges a transition from renaissance to baroque in style. He was a proficient player of keyboard and organ, and wrote many keyboard works, around thirty fantasias for viols, a number of secular works for voices, notably madrigals, but it is his contribution to church music which is being particularly celebrated in our service.

Gibbons was born and baptised in Oxford but by the age of 12 in 1596, he was singing as a chorister in Kings College chapel where his brother was master of the choristers. Gibbons arrived as a boy in Cambridge at the end of the same century in which both Kings College chapel and this present building of Great St Mary's had been erected, both under the oversight of the early 16th century architect Robert Wastell. Both buildings would have been stunning in their newly cut stone, but the High Street running between them (now of course Kings Parade as we know it) unrecognisable to us, because of densely packed public houses and tenements, particularly those directly opposite the West End of Great St Mary's. At the time there were also two large shops leaning either side of the West door of the church, housing the brand-new publishing business of John Legate, the founding father of the University Press. At the time Gibbons arrived in Cambridge in 1597 the GSM new bell tower was still being completed, but the 4 brand new bells had just been installed. These were to be rung by scholar ringers on high days of Protestant England such the anniversary of the accession of Queen Elizabeth (17th November) as well as more regularly calling people to prayer. The GSM bells would have been a familiar aspect of the soundscape of Cambridge for the young Gibbons.

Gibbons began his studies in Cambridge in his mid-teens and graduated at age 25, already a gifted keyboard player. Even before his graduation in 1606 Gibbons had been appointed as musician at the Chapel Royal for the newly crowned King James I, and in all likelihood contributed to the music of the coronation in July 1603. In 1605 he became chapel royal organist, and soon was recognised as a composer of high repute. From 1623 Gibbons was appointed organist in Westminster Abbey, and played at the funeral of King James I in early 1625. During this period his assistant was Thomas Tomkins, the composer of the preces and responses sung by the choir tonight. Sadly, on June 5 1625 Gibbons was taken suddenly unwell and died in Canterbury before he could take part in the music celebrations planned for the arrival of King Charles' I newly wed-by-proxy Queen, Henrietta Maria, from France. Gibbons was 41. It is likely he died of the plague, but that diagnosis was not readily publicised at such a time. He was buried in Canterbury Cathedral

The church the young Gibbons grew up into was post-reformation Elizabethan, and music was not as densely interwoven into the liturgy as it is in choral evensong services of our day. The centrepiece of the church services was the preaching of the word, and in Gibbons time, in keeping with this focus, in GSM there was a pulpit in the centre of the nave, and all

the benches faced inwards towards this. Under the instructions of Henry VIII the church had been stripped of all the devotional décor and the gilded rood screen which had adorned it in the early part of the 16th century. The walls were whitewashed and the glass plain, and the sole decorations were the words of the 10 commandments on painted boards.

Great St Mary's might well have been typical in that at this time it did not possess a functioning organ, so what singing there was in the church of the day was often unaccompanied, and the large part was chanting of psalmody. What choral music had to offer to the reformed church was a presentation of the words of scripture in English (a very new development) and in clearly memorable form. Verse anthems, such as Gibbons "This is the Record of John" powerfully tell a story from the scriptures which would have been inaccessible to the pre-reformation congregations only a couple of generations earlier.

Regarding the anthem we have heard tonight, it is likely the original words were written first for James I and then reused as a wedding anthem for King Charles I, and were a prayer of praise and blessing for the sovereign, entitled Great King of Gods. However, the version we have heard tonight is a 19th text by Henry Bramsden Bramley, more suitable for general use in church worship, a song of praise to the Holy Trinity. I will draw upon these words in our prayers.

We heard in our second reading some passionate words from Paul about the spiritual gifts. For Paul the most preferable Spiritual gifts by far are those which enable the encouragement, building up and consolation of others. There is no doubt that Orlando Gibbons, was one who was blessed with such a gift. His ability to set scriptures to music of such exquisite beauty and restraint in hymns, canticles and verse anthems has for over 400 years enabled the word of God to be sung and heard in worship which lifts the heart and enables praise. And for this we give thanks, and to God be the glory.

Amen

Words to Great Lord of Lords (Revd. Henry Bramsden Bramley)

Great Lord of Lords, supreme immortal King,
O give us grace to sing thy praise,
which makes earth, air and heav'n to ring.

O word of God from ages unbegun,
the Father's only Son, with Him in pow'r, in substance,
with him in pow'r, in substance Thou art One. (Repeat Full)

O Holy Ghost, whose care doth all embrace,
Thy watch is o'er our race, Thou source of life,
Thou spring of peace and grace, Thou source of life,

Readings set for Evensong 7th Sunday after Trinity 2025

Genesis 50.4–26

When the days of weeping for him were past, Joseph addressed the household of Pharaoh, 'If now I have found favour with you, please speak to Pharaoh as follows: My father made me swear an oath; he said, "I am about to die. In the tomb that I hewed out for myself in the land of Canaan, there you shall bury me." Now therefore let me go up, so that I may bury my father; then I will return.' Pharaoh answered, 'Go up, and bury your father, as he made you swear to do.'

So Joseph went up to bury his father. With him went up all the servants of Pharaoh, the elders of his household, and all the elders of the land of Egypt, as well as all the household of Joseph, his brothers, and his father's household. Only their children, their flocks, and their herds were left in the land of Goshen. Both chariots and charioteers went up with him. It was a very great company. When they came to the threshing-floor of Atad, which is beyond the Jordan, they held there a very great and sorrowful lamentation; and he observed a time of mourning for his father for seven days. When the Canaanite inhabitants of the land saw the mourning on the threshing-floor of Atad, they said, 'This is a grievous mourning on the part of the Egyptians.' Therefore the place was named Abel-mizraim; it is beyond the Jordan. Thus his sons did for him as he had instructed them. ¹³They carried him to the land of Canaan and buried him in the cave of the field at Machpelah, the field near Mamre, which Abraham bought as a burial site from Ephron the Hittite. After he had buried his father, Joseph returned to Egypt with his brothers and all who had gone up with him to bury his father.

Realizing that their father was dead, Joseph's brothers said, 'What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong that we did to him?' So they approached Joseph, saying, 'Your father gave this instruction before he died, "Say to Joseph: I beg you, forgive the crime of your brothers and the wrong they did in harming you." Now therefore please forgive the crime of the servants of the God of your father.' Joseph wept when they spoke to him. ¹⁸Then his brothers also wept, fell down before him, and said, 'We are here as your slaves.' But Joseph said to them, 'Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to do harm to me,

God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today. So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones.' In this way he reassured them, speaking kindly to them.

So Joseph remained in Egypt, he and his father's household; and Joseph lived for one hundred and ten years. Joseph saw Ephraim's children of the third generation; the children of Machir son of Manasseh were also born on Joseph's knees.

Then Joseph said to his brothers, 'I am about to die; but God will surely come to you, and bring you up out of this land to the land that he swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.' So Joseph made the Israelites swear, saying, 'When God comes to you, you shall carry up my bones from here.' And Joseph died, being one hundred and ten years old; he was embalmed and placed in a coffin in Egypt.

1 Corinthians 14.1–19

Pursue love and strive for the spiritual gifts, and especially that you may prophesy. For those who speak in a tongue do not speak to other people but to God; for nobody understands them, since they are speaking mysteries in the Spirit. On the other hand, those who prophesy speak to other people for their building up and encouragement and consolation. Those who speak in a tongue build up themselves, but those who prophesy build up the church. Now I would like all of you to speak in tongues, but even more to prophesy. One who prophesies is greater than one who speaks in tongues, unless someone interprets, so that the church may be built up.

Now, brothers and sisters, if I come to you speaking in tongues, how will I benefit you unless I speak to you in some revelation or knowledge or prophecy or teaching? It is the same way with lifeless instruments that produce sound, such as the flute or the harp. If they do not give distinct notes, how will anyone know what is being played? And if the bugle gives an indistinct sound, who will get ready for battle? So with yourselves; if in a tongue you utter speech that is not intelligible, how will anyone know what is being said? For you will be speaking into the air. There are doubtless many different kinds of sounds in the world, and nothing is without sound. ¹¹If then I do not know the meaning of a sound, I will be a foreigner to the speaker and the speaker a foreigner to me. So with yourselves; since you are eager for spiritual gifts, strive to excel in them for building up the church.

Therefore, one who speaks in a tongue should pray for the power to interpret. For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays but my mind is unproductive. What should I do then? I will pray with the spirit, but I will pray with the mind also; I will sing praise with the spirit, but I will sing praise with the mind also. Otherwise, if you say a blessing with the spirit, how can anyone in the position of an outsider say the 'Amen' to your thanksgiving, since the outsider does not know what you are saying? For you may give thanks well enough, but the other person is not built up. I thank God that I speak in

tongues more than all of you; nevertheless, in church I would rather speak five words with my mind, in order to instruct others also, than ten thousand words in a tongue.