

16th September 2022

Wonderful

"Too wonderful and excellent for me: I cannot attain unto it."

Bible, *Psalms* 139:7

A performance of Edward Elgar's *The Dream of Gerontius* at the recent Edinburgh Festival took me to the poem which inspired the piece and gave us one of our best-loved hymns, "Praise to the holiest in the height". Written in 1865, the poem (the original, with introduction and footnotes, runs to almost 100 pages) traces the journey of an ancient monk ("Gerontius", from the Greek *geron*, meaning 'old man') through death and into the presence of God. We're told that the author, the Roman Catholic convert, Cardinal John Henry Newman, thought so little of the poem that he confined it to his wastebasket, from whence it was retrieved by a friend. Indeed, some in the Protestant tradition who would have liked the text to stay in the bin. Yet Elgar's work and Newman's text offer us insights into profound questions in the face of death, "What have I done with my life?" and "How will I face the scrutiny of God?", questions we might wrestle with this week as death and mourning are the nation's focus.

"Praise to the holiest in the height" is from Newman's text. The familiar melody by John Bacchus Dykes is given the title *Gerontius* as a tribute to the poem. As I sing this, with the first stanza repeated at the end, my heart echoes the Psalmist's words above. For it is, like *The Dream of Gerontius* as a whole, almost too wonderful and excellent for me ...

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| 1. <i>Praise to the Holiest in the height,
and in the depth be praise:
in all his words most wonderful,
most sure in all his ways.</i> | 4. <i>And that a higher gift than grace
should flesh and blood refine,
God's presence and his very self,
and essence all-divine.</i> |
| 2. <i>O loving wisdom of our God!
When all was sin and shame,
a second Adam to the fight
and to the rescue came.</i> | 5. <i>O generous love! that he, who smote
in Man for man the foe,
the double agony in Man
for man should undergo;</i> |
| 3. <i>O wisest love! that flesh and blood,
which did in Adam fail,
should strive afresh against the foe,
should strive and should prevail;</i> | 6. <i>And in the garden secretly,
and on the cross on high,
should teach his brethren, and inspire
to suffer and to die.</i> |

A prayer for today

Wonderful ... Excellent ... Goodness, I needed that! Amen