

**Sunday 3 March 2024, 3rd Sunday in Lent, Choral Matins
on the anthem 'Nolo mortem peccatoris' by Thomas Morley
The Revd Dr Evan McWilliams**

*Nolo mortem peccatoris;
Haec sunt verba Salvatoris.*

*I desire not the death of a sinner;
These are the words of the Saviour.*

It is rare for me to preach on a text other than one of the scripture readings appointed for the day, however I find this morning's anthem so profound and so rooted in ancient Christian theology and piety that I think it warrants further consideration. Thomas Morley's 'Nolo mortem peccatoris' is a musical setting of part of a much longer poem written sometime between 1540 and 1590 and attributed to John Redford, organist at St Paul's Cathedral. It is macaronic, comprising both English and Latin phrases, and written in the first person, as Jesus speaks to God the Father. Over twenty-three verses, Jesus presents his life and his accomplishments to the Father, particularly the events of His suffering and death, as an offering placatory, to put aside God's wrath and the punishment due to mankind for sin. Only in the final verse does Jesus turn, as it were, to speak directly to us, his hearers, saying,

*Oh man, for thy love have I died!
I ask no more of thee therefore,
But love for love in thy deeds tried;
Forsake thy sin and keep my lore,
And then to thee I say e'en this:
Nolo mortem peccatoris.*

I use the language of Jesus turning to us who have been listening in all along because we are meant to experience this poem- and this anthem- in our imaginations. We are meant to see Jesus and every painful event he recalls, be drawn deeper into contemplation of his life and death, and, as things draw to a close, be confronted by Jesus himself facing us boldly, presenting his bloody achievements, and demanding we make a choice whether to serve God or reject his sacrifice made on our behalf.

This kind of imaginative poetic exercise which is meant to provoke us to respose was common in the late middle ages, and was often set to music. 'A Prayer Upon the Cross' by John Lydgate who died in 1451 was set to music by a composer known only as Sheryngham. In it we hear Jesus speaking to us directly,

*Upon the cros naylled I was ffor the,
Suffred deth to paye thy raunsoun;
Forsake thy sennel for the love of me,
Be repentaunt, make pleyne confessioun,
To contrit hertis I do remyssioun:
Be nat dyspeyred, for I am nat vengable;
Geyn goostly enemyes thynk on my passioun;
Why artow froward, sith I am mercyable?*

It was also not uncommon for writers to depict Jesus in dialogue with the reader as in the anonymous poem set by John Browne in the 1490s,

*Lo, man, for thee, that were unkind,
Gladly suffered I all this.
And why, good Lord? Express thy mind!
Thee to purchase both joy and bliss.
Jesu, mercy, how may this be?*

How may this be, indeed? I'm not preaching merely to give a summary a particular type of late-medieval devotional poetry, or to draw your attention to today's anthem (beautiful as it is). What I want you to consider are the ideas these poems present. How do you 'see' Jesus? What role does he play, if any, in your relationship to God the Father? In one of the lessons read out at Evensong last week he heard St Paul writing to the church in Galatia. He said, *O foolish Galatians, who hath bewitched you, that ye should not obey the truth, before whose eyes Jesus Christ hath been evidently set forth, crucified among you?* This 'set forth' actually means 'having been put on public display'; we might say placarded, billboarded, or advertised even. Look! There right in front of your eyes is Jesus crucified. Look on him and make a choice between obedience and disobedience, between life and death, between punishment and preservation. That is what the devotional tradition of which we've been speaking believes: that Jesus the crucified Saviour stands placarded between us and judgment.

It is not a palatable thought for some, that God should judge, that we should deserve to be on the receiving end of judgment, that Jesus' life's purpose is to assuage that judgment, to absorb and do away with it on the cross. A life for a life; a death that we might have life. But palatable or not, it is not simply a pious invention of a less enlightened age. The Old Testament system of sacrifice intended to make atonement for sin finds its culmination, according to the epistle to the Hebrews, in Jesus: *And every priest standeth daily ministering and offering oftentimes the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins: but this man [Jesus], after he had offered one sacrifice for sins for ever, sat down on the right hand of God; from henceforth expecting till his enemies be made his footstool. For by one offering he hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified.*

It's a theology echoed in the Book of Common Prayer's prayer of consecration: *Almighty God, our heavenly Father, who of thy tender mercy didst give thine only Son Jesus Christ to suffer death upon the Cross for our redemption; who made there (by his one oblation of himself once offered) a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction, for the sins of the whole world.*

An offering made to take away sin and put aside judgment and wrath; one day perhaps I'll preach on the words 'sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction', each of which carries a subtly different meaning (they are not just synonyms). In any case, 'Nolo mortem peccatoris' captures for us a Christian piety rooted in the New Testament and commonly held well beyond the middle ages. With deep insight into human emotion, pity, and sympathy, it presents Jesus Christ crucified to us and begs us respond to him.

*Father, behold my painful smart, Taken for man on ev'ry side;
Ev'n from my birth to death most tart, No kind of pain I have denied,
But suffer'd all, and all for this: Nolo mortem peccatoris.*

Here is Jesus, set forth before your mind's eye. He pleads his own blood before the Father. Look at his wounds. Imagine the pains he has suffered for you. Imagine the betrayal, the rejection, the loneliness. He endured it for you. He gave his life for you so that you might not die but have eternal life. *I desire not the death of a sinner; These are the words of the Saviour.* Such love, such selfless sacrifice. How will you respond? Amen.