

THE MUSIC OF POSSIBILITY

A sermon preached by Galen Guengerich
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City
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After an exceedingly long and unnecessarily cold winter, the past two days were beautifully warm here in Manhattan — 82° on Friday and 77° yesterday. The budding flowers seemed happy, the emergent leaves seemed happy, and nearly everyone I saw on the sidewalk and in Central Park seemed happy. I certainly felt happy about the return of spring.

If winter is a time when living organisms — certainly trees and other plants, but also often people — withdraw within themselves in order to survive, spring is a time when everything emerges once again. Birds and bees get busy tending to their labors as birds and bees, trees resume their work of contributing oxygen to the environment, and human beings shed extra layers of clothing and begin to turn outward and come alive. It's a beautiful thing to see and experience.

More than anything else, spring marks the return of beauty to the world. Whether beauty appears in our experience as a budding flower, an unfolding leaf, or an unfurling line of songbird melody, beauty attracts us, engages us, and calls us to pay attention. But beauty also plays another role, by reminding us of how ugly the world can be at times — not only the ugliness of littered streets and filthy snow, but also the ugliness of sexism, racism, poverty, and other forms of human degradation. As Elaine Scarry, a professor of aesthetics at Harvard, once put it, our experience of beauty ultimately calls us to justice in our relationships with each other and with the natural world.

This morning, we are reminded of the interplay between beauty and justice through the sublime music of the English composer Thomas Tallis, who was born in 1505. His career as court composer in London spanned more than four decades during the Sixteenth Century, a time of extraordinary religious and political turbulence.

For more than a thousand years, the church had held a monopoly on truth and salvation. Individual believers had no access to these things, except through the church. But the church had become increasingly irrelevant to the spiritual needs of the people. Economic and political life became fragmented, the result of the feudal system falling apart. City-states and nations governed by kings began to emerge, made possible in part by the development of national languages.

The catalyst for many of these changes was the Renaissance, a rebirth of interest in the philosophy and literature of ancient Greece and Rome. It began in Italy in The Twelfth Century, but gained renewed impetus when Constantinople fell in 1453. Many Eastern scholars fled to Italy, taking with them important manuscripts and a tradition of

Greek scholarship. This source of knowledge gave the Europeans an alternative to the religious orthodoxy they had labored under for so long.

The Renaissance inspired wide-ranging inquiry and infused a new confidence in the possibilities of human thought. This confidence became known as humanism. It did not involve rejecting God, as humanism often does today, but rather embraced the promise of human potential.

Put simply, the Renaissance gave people the chance to listen to a different voice. For centuries, only one voice could be heard: the absolute and incontestable voice of the church. Now the people had another voice to listen to: their own. Renaissance thinkers, like the Greeks 2,000 years before, began to champion the individual as an instrument of reason and a source of knowledge. With the invention of printing and the consequent growth in literacy, this trend soon spread throughout Europe.

Eventually, the re-discovery of the individual also sparked a religious revolt, which came to be known as the Protestant Reformation. In 1517, a German monk named Martin Luther issued a list of 95 criticisms of the Roman Catholic Church. Luther's central insight was that salvation was an individual matter between God and each believer. The church had a role to play in the life of faith, but the sacraments of the church weren't the means of salvation.

At the time, neither Luther nor any of the other Renaissance thinkers knew the scope of the cataclysm they were unleashing. They merely intended to reform the world they knew, the world we call the Middle Ages. Instead, their world came crashing down, and a new world arose, one we call the modern world. Once individuals became aware of their ability to think and reason for themselves, to discover truth and make decisions on their own, there was no going back.

The celebration of human agency quickly gained momentum. One of the leading English proponents of humanism was a London historian and statesman named Thomas More. In 1516, one year before Luther laid down his gauntlet, More published a slim volume with a title he made up: *Utopia*. The word utopia is actually a clever double entendre that means, in Greek, either "no place" or "good place." In other words, utopia is a good place that can never fully exist.

More's *Utopia* became one of the most important and influential expressions of European humanism. Thomas Tallis would have been eleven years old when it was first published. *Utopia* was one of the first efforts since the Greeks to describe a city-state governed by reason, rather than by the edicts of the church or the precepts of a divinely-appointed king.

In literary terms, More hedges his bets. The central character is a mysterious traveler named Raphael Hythloday. His first name means "God's healer," and his second name means "the peddler of nonsense." As this traveler describes the kingdom of Utopia, half of what he says is visionary, and half is outrageous. Nonetheless, the chronicle as a whole indicates that More was a passionate advocate for social justice — a

defender of the oppressed, the poor, the sick, and the weak, a supporter of equal rights for women, and a champion of religious pluralism.

Over the next two decades until his death, More continued to publish and travel in support of religious and cultural reforms. Eventually, More was made Lord Chancellor of England by Henry VIII, who subsequently divorced Catherine of Aragon and married Anne Boleyn in a frantic effort to procure a male heir. Because the Pope refused to legitimate these arrangements, Henry declared himself head of the church in England.

Like all Henry's subjects, More was required to swear an oath to the Act of Supremacy, which declared the king's marriage to Catherine void and the marriage to Anne valid. More was willing to acknowledge Anne as queen. But he refused the oath because it required him to recognize the king as head of the church. More could not abide the commingling of authority between church and state. His refusal was ruled high treason, and More was beheaded at the Tower of London in 1535.

Against this backdrop, Thomas Tallis became court composer in 1543, eight years after Sir Thomas More's execution. There is no record of any contact between the two, but they doubtless knew each other, and Tallis was evidently a great admirer of More. The lead beneficiary in the will of Thomas Tallis's wife was the grandson of Sir Thomas More.

From 1543 until his death in 1585, Tallis served as court composer under four monarchs — Henry VIII, Edward VI, Mary Tudor, and Elizabeth I — and he managed to keep his head. Nonetheless, was a bumpy theological ride. Henry began as a Catholic, but his Act of Supremacy had severed England's ties with the Roman Catholic Church. Edward VI was intensely devoted to the Protestant movement, but Mary Tudor, his half-sister who succeeded him, sought immediately to reestablish the Catholic faith in England. Upon her death, Elizabeth, Mary's half-sister, abolished Catholicism once again.

Tallis responded by composing music that met the liturgical and doctrinal demands of the moment. The Catholic monarchs required monumental masses and traditional chants. The Protestant monarchs demanded intelligible texts and simpler musical styles. Tallis survived this ecclesiastical push and pull in part because he was a composer of incomparable talent. His music has been consistently and enthusiastically performed for the past five centuries.

But Tallis was also a pragmatist. His idiom was not doctrine but music, and he was willing to set his music to whatever language or text would enable his listeners to hear the music.

For Tallis, the music was the message. Whatever his personal theological proclivities, and they remain unclear, his music embodied the spirit of humanism. Tallis knew the power of the individual human voice. He became a master of the use of polyphony, which is music comprising two or more relatively autonomous voices or parts. The different voices are heard separately, and they are often rhythmically

independent of each other. Earlier musical forms, such as Gregorian chant, were monophonic, consisting of a single unaccompanied melodic line.

Tallis's crowning musical achievement, by many accounts, is *Spem in Alium*, a monumental piece written for forty voices, each of which has its own musical part. Fittingly, the first word of the piece is the Latin word for hope. The piece begins: "I have never put my hope in any other but you, O God." Note where hope is placed: not in the king or the Pope or the sacraments or the church, but in God. On the cusp of the modern world, surrounded by the cacophony of religious and political turmoil, Tallis listened to forty different voices make one sweet sound. It gave him hope.

The challenge, of course, was to translate the vision exemplified musically by Tallis into the political realm. How could many individual voices constitute one civic body? Thomas Hobbes, an English philosopher and political theorist who was born about the time Tallis died, took up the challenge. Hobbes described a human society that was not ordained by god or instituted by the church, but created by human agreement.

In his book *Leviathan*, Hobbes says that humans once lived in a state of nature, in which selfishness reigned and justice was unknown. Life was a war of all against all, and therefore, in his now-famous formulation, life usually turned out to be "nasty, brutish, and short." To confront this dangerous and quarrelsome situation, people got together and formed what Hobbes called a social compact for mutual safety and advantage. For convenience, they gave some of their collective power to a sovereign, who ruled not by divine right, but by common agreement. In this context, justice is the product of a social contract among individuals. This remains the basis of our understanding of justice today.

Five hundred years seems like a long time ago, and many of those religious and political battles seem distant to us now. Unfortunately, they are not. The quest to describe an ideal society did not end with the publication of Thomas More's *Utopia*. The struggle to keep church and state within their proper domains did not end with his execution. The effort to champion the dignity of the individual human voice did not culminate in Tallis's composition for forty voices. The task of defining how we are responsible to and for each other did not reach a conclusion in Hobbes' *Leviathan*.

But they made a beginning. Today, we pay tribute to Thomas Tallis and others in the past who have made our world both more beautiful and more just. But work remains for us to do, and our task is just as daunting.

For this reason, I say thank God for Thomas Tallis. The work of creating beauty where there is ugliness, and right where there is wrong, is so difficult, and often so depressing, that for me it literally would not be possible without people like Tallis. His music reminds us that beauty is vital to our work of transforming the world. Beauty can lift our hearts when we are downcast and discouraged; music can transform our sense of what is possible.

As springtime blooms around us, my counsel is to surround yourself with beauty. Listen to uplifting music that captures the unfolding spirit of the season, and allow it to

renew your soul. Let the sights of spring delight your eyes and the faces of those you love fill your heart. Know again and again that life is good.

Then, perhaps in a new way, let the beauty you enjoy make you dissatisfied, even outraged, at the ugliness you encounter — the arrogance, the violence, and the structures of injustice. Raise your voice in righteous anger. Call for the world to be a different place: fairer, more just, and yes, more beautiful.

The plea for beauty to inhabit a place of ugliness is a call for justice. Justice is the form beauty takes in human relations. Our challenge — our task — is to unite our many voices into one clarion call for our world to become more beautiful for everyone.