

A LIGHT TO LIGHTEN THE NATIONS

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Let me begin by thanking you for inviting me to participate in this festive occasion. And thanks to all of you: singers, directors, organists, readers, and brass players who are contributing to this wonderful afternoon of music. You have chosen an interesting theme: “a light to lighten the nations.” It comes, of course from the *Nunc dimittis*, the prophet Simeon’s song upon seeing the infant Jesus in the temple, which we have just heard.

Some translations say “. . . to be a light to lighten the Gentiles. . .” ; others read “a light to enlighten the Nations;” I think they both mean the same thing as long as we keep in mind we’re speaking of the people of the nations. The German translation is “a light to enlighten the heathen,” so I guess we’re all covered.

I like Martin Luther’s paraphrase of the *Nunc dimittis*, the German hymn “Mit Fried und Freud ich fahr dahin” – “In peace and joy I now depart.” “Peace” and “Joy” seem to be two of the essential elements of this Light that is capable of lightening the nations. Now as leaders in the worship of this Light—and that is what church organists, choir directors, and choir members are—we have *de facto* assumed the responsibility of engaging in this “Lighting” or “Enlightening” endeavor. There can be no doubt that music has an integral part to play: few areas of human experience so completely involve the heart and the intellect so fully and compellingly as music can. St. Augustine is supposed to have said [*“bis orat qui bene cantat...”*] “he who sings well prays twice.” And that often-omitted word “well” has to concern us.

I think that must have been the idea in the minds of the 14 clergymen and 20 organists who, in 1896, issued ‘*A Call For A Meeting Of Clergymen And Organists To Consider The Advisability Of Forming An American Guild of Organists.*’ In the minds of these leaders, the general state of church music in the country was apparently so dismal that there could be little hope of enlightening anything or anybody. Their call was answered, and subsequent meetings in February and April resulted in the formation of the American Guild of Organists. Closely modeled on the example of the Royal College of Organists in Great Britain, the American Guild established a series of examinations to inspire church musicians to develop their skills, to give direction and incentive to study and learning, and to certify those church musicians who worked to improve their skills and to deepen their understanding of the undertaking. For many years an examination was a requirement for Guild membership. All this, of course, predated the rise of college and university music departments that would come to offer courses and degrees. For many years now, the Guild examinations and collegiate courses have existed side by side, each contributing to musical development.

But, despite occasions like the wonderfully festive celebration we are participating in today, we have by no means reached a golden age in which the Light is lighting the nations adequately. If we are honest with ourselves, our own pride, procrastination, discouragement, or envy, all too often distract us. Pressures to “succeed” – that is, to recruit more church members *and their money*—can easily distort the mission of spreading the Light.

In the biblical narrative of the Temptation of Christ, a lesson that is often read in churches this time of year, it isn’t surprising that, when the devil tempted him, Jesus resisted the temptation. That is hardly news; so why is it even recorded – and in three of the four Gospels at that? I think this parable serves to clarify to us the various ministry styles that Jesus rejected, and therefore those pitfalls that we, who have been called or who have chosen to be worship leaders, should also reject.

First: Jesus had been fasting; he was hungry; why not just turn the stones into bread? But Jesus refused to put immediate personal satisfaction over his task of “Lighting the Nations.” He chose not to use his power for self-serving expediency.

Then the devil invites Jesus to attract the attention and adulation of the world through the means of show business: make a spectacular leap from the highest pinnacle and stage a dramatic angelic rescue. There is plenty of evidence that this show biz approach can work to attract large crowds and piles of money. But Jesus rejected it.

Number three is also related to the first two: all the abundance of the world will be given to him if only he will bow down to the devil. This is like Faust “selling his soul the devil.” The current tendency of many churches to be obsessed almost exclusively with the bottom lines of congregational size and number of pledging units worries me. How often have we been told that if we’d just “go commercial” everything would be OK?

So if we’re supposed to avoid these things, what **should** we as members of the American Guild of Organists do? As reflectors of the Light to enlighten the Nations, we need to remove our reflective tarnish, working constantly to improve our skills and attitudes. What kind of light are we reflecting? Are we diligent in searching out and selecting music of the highest quality, or are we content to fritter away our time and energy with immediately appealing, but ultimately insubstantial, flashes of second rate stuff? The story is told that Handel, after conducting a performance of Messiah, was approached by Lord Kinnoul who praised Handel, remarking how entertaining it was, Handel replied, "My Lord, I should be sorry if I only entertained them; I wished to make them better." Without getting too self-important about it, we should also feel this awesome responsibility.

We need to take the mission seriously, ourselves perhaps, less so. It doesn’t hurt to remember that some people say, “The organ is the instrument of worship, because in its sounding we sense the Majesty of God and when it ends we know the Grace of God.”

To help us in this mission we have the AGO through which we can support and learn from one another. In our Guild chapters, I suspect, as in most any organization, the 80/20 principle applies: the work is done by about 20%. As W. H. Auden is supposed to have said: “I know we are put here to help others; what the others are for, I have no idea.”

We need to find ways to encourage those others, not only for the “good of the chapter,” but to support and assist them in the same way others have done for us. I make no claim to the credit for this, but a successful aspect of the Wilmington chapter, I believe, has been the attempt to achieve a balance between local involvement in chapter programming and that of outside “big-name” performers. For several years we ran a wonderful choral festival, involving several church choirs, directors, and organists all from our chapter. It was a grand experience of sharing, of learning about new repertoire and conducting ideas, and giving local musicians an opportunity to develop their capacities.

That was followed by a few years of an AGO choir; the idea was to focus on organ and choral works of a specific composer in an annual concert. Some composers included in this series were of course Bach, Mozart, Haydn, Mendelssohn, Vaughan Williams, and Britten, all performed by the local chapter and friends.

One of the best things we do is this: late in the spring we have a series of meetings to plan the following years programs; everybody is invited, it is not restricted to board members or officers. Everybody does, or at least can, have a real voice in determining the outlines of the ensuing year, and we make an effort to include and involve everybody who will agree to participate.

How often do we question whether our work is really important? How can the sometimes tedious process of working out the fingering in a Bach fugue, or sorting out the multitude of sharps and flats in chords of Dupre or Messiaen, or struggling to get choir members to sing the same vowel sound be of any importance in reflecting the Light to the Gentiles? Well, the evidence of centuries is that the integrity of our work determines how brightly we can reflect the Light.

I recently ran across an excerpt from a 17th-century French document about the place of the organ in celebrating the Mass, particularly in the manner of alternation between plainsong or sung polyphonic phrases and organ versets:

“By their arrangement the organ versets symbolize the well-ordered and regular harmony of heaven. The variety of the pipes represent the multitude of the saints who all begin to sing—according to their respective rank—the divine hymn of praise; and this harmony emerges from the wind, which symbolizes the Holy Spirit . . . The organ player stands for the Father, who sets in motion the idea that he has developed in his mind. The organ is played during the *Gloria in excelsis*, because the *Gloria in excelsis* is the angel’s song under whose escort we enter while we join their hymn of praise; . . . and the organ symbolizes the harmony of heaven.”

English poet John Milton agrees:

Ring out, ye crystal spheres!
Once bless our human ears,
If ye have power to touch our senses so;
And let your silver chime
Move in melodious time;
And let the bass of heaven’s deep organ blow;
And with your ninefold harmony
Make up full consort of the angelic symphony.

We, the members of the American Guild of Organists and the choirs we serve, have the exciting opportunity and awesome responsibility to join with the song of the angels, and reflect to the best of our abilities that Light to enlighten the Nations.