Grace Notes in Miniature

For Wednesday, April 23, 2020

St George’s Day – slayer of Dragons!

Dear friends:

Yesterday’s musings on music led me to think about other ways in which our senses are engaged in the practice of our faith. Today I decided to investigate the “smells” part of the old catchphrase, bells and smells.

Perhaps the most obvious of these is incense, a substance that is used less and less these days in churches as we respect the sensitivities and allergies of those who are negatively impacted. We are used to it being used to incense the candle et al at the Easter Vigil. Mentioning candles brings up another issue: the ever-increasing use of oil or butane candles to replace beeswax. It seems ironic that, as a paean to the bees is in the newly-revised Exsultet, (On this, your night of grace, O holy Father, accept this candle, a solemn offering, the work of bees and of your servants’ hands… …we know the praises of this pillar, which glowing fire ignites for God’s honour, a fire into many flames divided, yet never dimmed by sharing of its light, for it is fed by melting wax, drawn out by mother bees to build a torch so precious.) so many of the candles offered to God are hollow resin shells with a fuel canister and no beeswax at all! And I do like the smell of beeswax candles! Many liturgists, while recognising sensitivity to people’s allergies and sensitivities, will mourn the loss of understanding of the engaging of all our senses in liturgy and the seemingly pragmatic actions which accompany this.

I am one of the fortunate people who can inhale incense with pleasure; for many years, I led Vespers, or Evening Prayer of the Liturgy of the Hours, in my parish church or wherever I was serving, and also proclaimed the Exsultet; I loved being able to relax in that crepuscular celebration with candlelight and incense.

Incense is used in many faith traditions, often in a stick or cone, and its use goes back to antiquity. At Evening Prayer we sing, “Like burning incense, O Lord, may my prayer rise up to you.” (Psalm 141) You may enjoy this prayerful version in a fairly familiar tune: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W8LyZ2S1D_U

In the book of Revelation, we read:

And another angel came and stood at the altar, having a golden censer; and there was given unto him much incense, that he should offer it with the prayers of all saints upon the golden altar which was before the throne. 4 And the smoke of the incense, which came with the prayers of the saints, ascended up before God out of the angel’s hand. (Rev 8:3-4), making a connection between the incense and the prayer of the saints.
Incense is also reminiscent of the smoke of the burnt offerings of another age. It may be used to reverence a holy object or place – the altar, the cross, Paschal candle, tabernacle, book of the Gospels – or people. When incense is used at Liturgy, the priest or deacon proclaiming the Gospel will incense the Book of Gospels; the priest incenses the altar, and gifts, etc., then the thurifer (acolyte responsible for the incense) will incense the presider and the people. (Think of the smudging ceremonies of our Indigenous brothers and sisters.) The vessel in which the incense is burning is called a thurible, and the container in which the incense is carried prior to being put into the thurible is often called a “boat”. Some thurifers can be quite athletic in their carrying of the incense in procession and love to swing it in a pattern like a majorette with a baton!

The incense used in our churches is usually what is called “indirect-burning” incense as, unlike joss sticks and other items made by drying a paste into a cone or around a core, it requires a charcoal briquet or other source of heat to keep it burning. This contrasts with materials such as cedar, sweetgrass and sage used in Indigenous ceremonies which will smoulder on their own.

The incense we use is most often made with a base of frankincense or myrrh – both resins from trees, sometimes with other plant materials mixed in to vary the odour. There is a very obvious connection for us between these substances and the gifts brought to Jesus by the Magi. One incense sampler I found online included: Balsam, Cedars of Lebanon, Queen of Heaven, Archangel, Frankincense, Byzantine, Damascus Rose, Rose Geranium, Sweet Myrrh, Virgin Mary Bouquet, Lily of The Valley, and Russian Gardenia. Many churches have their own preference. Unfortunately, I haven’t figured out how to send samples of the fragrances to you yet!

You may enjoy this short version of Evening Prayer. The outline is available in a drop-down below the video. There is no need for incense; however, you may want to light a candle (scented or unscented) and/or burn an incense cone. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eG8RAk6Ppmg

You’ll also find settings for daily prayer in most parish hymnals and missalettes and on Aleteia.

Until tomorrow,

Gillian

P.S. Thanks to Elizabeth Trolio for sending this link in response to yesterday's GNIM:

https://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=i+will+sing+with+the+spirit+rutter&view=detail&mid=0BEC62B6A277FF739E810BEC62B6A277FF739E81&FORM=VIRE0&ru=%2fsearch%3fq%3di%2bwill%2bsing%2bwith%2bthe%2bspirit%2brutter%26FORM%3dEDGENA%26refig%3d215835918bebe4df7f1d99b5e56d168ee

If you open it, a whole lot of other music files will be available below. John Rutter was a favourite arranger and composer of my prof when I studied liturgical music at Toronto School of Theology, and he continues to delight the Church music scene through his work with the Cambridge Singers. He also has some beautiful recordings of traditional songs.