

## Carol service 2013

"I think there are an awful lot of artists around who're very good at leading us into hell. I'd rather someone would show me the way to paradise".

So said the composer of that last piece, Sir John Tavener, who died on 12 November aged 69. Tavener was a deeply spiritual man, rooted in Eastern Orthodoxy but glad to find treasures in other faiths. He was someone not afraid to do God - to speak of God and to celebrate the divine, but for him God was not an argument but a presence, not so much to be thought of as to be felt and encountered. So his music came to him, not by fierce activity but through receptivity:

"If one is going to create this eternal celestial music, one has got to listen, to be silent, to hear the angel of inspiration dictate".

And so he produced, as one commentator put it, 'moments of ecstasy' and 'other worldly intensity', with 'quiet passages that seemed to shimmer like dawn light'.

He wrote the music to 'The Lamb' while being driven by his mother from South Devon to London. 'It came to me fully grown so to speak, so all I had to do was write it down.'

The words he set to music are those of the artist and poet William Blake. An unconventional mystic, Blake testified to seeing visions of angels all of his life, from the age of 8 when he told his mother he had seen a tree filled with angels "bespangling every bough like stars."

Blake who saw angels and Tavener who heard them – a perfect combination for Christmas, enhanced by the belief of both in the need to rediscover the innocence and simplicity of childhood. The way to Paradise takes us back to the beginning and invites us to a new birth. That is what St John does, of course, in the great Christmas gospel reading. 'In the beginning' is a deliberate echo of the book of Genesis where our nine lessons began. St John is affirming that this birth, this child, heralds in a new creation, a new beginning for the world, a new beginning for us. And the angels transport us in the Lukan narrative to the Judean hillside and cowshed to rediscover what we have lost and to see and hear a world being made new. For in this unfolding story we too hear the angels, perhaps not as directly as the shepherds or Blake or Tavener, but in their company we make our way to behold the word made flesh mindful of the promise that those who will receive him are empowered to become children again, children of God.

So, come, let us adore him.