

SEASONS OF THE SPIRIT

SUMMER

Summer....

Summer conjures up images of holidays, lazy days by the river, green trees, tennis, cricket, long evenings and warm nights. Whatever the weather is actually like in summer, these tend to be the memories and impressions that stay in the mind and which have become a fertile source of inspiration for writers and poets alike.

In this passage the poet Siegfried Sassoon recalls peaceful summers in Kent where he lived in his early twenties, just before the outbreak of the First World War:-

In summer I didn't often wake early. But when I did, and had the gumption to get up and see the sunrise, I was always glad of it afterwards. In fact a few such 'getting-ups' have dwelt in my remembrance ever since.

Near and far, the June landscape was vocal with the exultant chorus of the birds, here in the terraced garden and away down into the low-misted Weald, where my old friend the milk-train was puffing away from Paddock Wood station. Somehow the sound of it gave me a comfortable feeling of the world remaining pleasantly unchanged and peaceful... The white pigeons too were already up and about, sitting idly on the gabled roof above their loft as though they didn't quite know what to do with themselves after getting up so early.

And now I was beholding the sun himself as his scarlet disc rose inch by inch above the auroral orchards and the level horizon far down the Weald. A very Kentish sun he looked, while I surmised, as had always been my habit, that he must be rising from somewhere just beyond Canterbury or the cliffs of Dover – rising out of the English Channel, in fact – this being as yet the boundary of my earthly adventures in that direction. There he was, anyhow, like some big farmer staring at his hay-fields and hop-gardens.

And here was I, unconsciously lifting my arms to welcome the glittering shafts of sunrise that went wide-winged up through the innocent blueness above the east.

Choir

Summertime

George and Ira Gershwin

Summertime – Gershwin’s lush and lazy tune conjures up the essence of summer days. And here is that seductive evocation of a still summer’s day written at about the same time as Siegfried Sassoon’s: Adlestrop by Edward Thomas, who was killed in action at Arras during the First World War:-

ADLESTROP

Yes. I remember Adlestrop –
The name, because one afternoon
Of heat the express-train drew up there
Unwontedly. It was late June.

The steam hissed. Some one cleared his throat
No one left and no one came
On the bare platform. What I saw
Was Adelstrop – only the name

And willow, willow-herb, and grass,
And meadowsweet, and haycocks dry,
No whit less still and lonely fair
Than the high cloudlets in the sky.

And for that minute a blackbird sang
Close by, and around him, mistier,
Farther and farther, all the birds
Of Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire.

Organ Solo

Song of Sunshine by Alfred Hollins

Late June, as well as being the time Edward Thomas came upon Adlestrop, is also, in the church’s calendar, the time we remember St Peter – his feast day falls on the 29th. Jesus gave Peter the nick-name ‘The Rock’, the foundation –stone on which the church would be built. He was, according to tradition, martyred in Rome during the persecutions of the Emperor Nero, and beneath St Peter’s Basilica in Rome archaeologists have uncovered a tomb which is almost certainly Peter’s authentic burial-place. Peter reminds us that in spite of human failings there are always fresh opportunities for witness and service, if only we keep going. How appropriate that beneath the splendid basilica that bears his name are the bones of this all too human saint:-

From 'The Killing' by Richard Holloway

In spite of all his weaknesses, Peter was great in one thing: he never, finally, gave up. He fell at all the fences, but he just picked himself up and struggled on, blinded with tears and covered with mire. And that was his glory. It was this quality which Jesus must have detected in him, this refusal ever to accept defeat. In his long life Peter lost all the battles, but he finally won the war.

People like us can learn a good deal from Peter. His real secret was humility. It takes humility to struggle on in spite of repeated failure. Only the proud and self pitying are defeated by failure. The humble man, however, soon shakes off the failures of the past. He never had an inflated idea of himself in the first place. He knows that he will not be judged by his successes but by his perseverance, so he picks himself up, swallows the lump in his throat, and struggles on. That was Peter's way. When they came to crucify him, he asked to be crucified upside down, because he felt unworthy to die in the same position as his Lord. If you, like me, are not much of a Christian, then Peter's story will give you courage. No matter what your failures are, pick yourself up and, even if tears are blinding you, do not give up the struggle.

Choir Tu es Petrus by Duruflé

The heat of summer doesn't just cause nature to blossom. It can inflame the human passions too – summer is a time for trysting, and for love, and Shakespeare in his 18th Sonnet memorably compares the unknown object of his passion to the heat and fullness of summer itself:-

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
 Thou art more lovely and more temperate:
 Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
 And summer's lease hath all too short a date:
 Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,
 And often is his gold complexion dimm'd;
 And every fair from fair sometimes declines,
 By chance or nature's changing course untrimm'd;
 But thy eternal summer shall not fade,
 Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st,
 Nor shall death brag thou wander'st in his shade,
 When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st;
 So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,
 So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

Summertime – we long for its coming, we look back on it with nostalgia, whatever the reality. Let George Gershwin have the last word.

Choir Summertime by George and Ira Gerswin