Sunday, April 27, 1975
THE UNFOLDING DRAMA OF REDEMPTION (A Sermon Based on Handel's Messiah)

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.

A voice cries: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."

Behold the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief, and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

Surely, he has borne our griefs and carried away our sorrows; he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that made us whole, and with his stripes we are healed.

Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns. The Kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever. King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

What then shall we say to this? If God is for us, who is against us? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies; who is to condemn? Nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing. To him who sits upon the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might for ever and ever!

"THE UNFOLDING DRAMA OF REDEMPTION" (A sermon based on Handel's Messiah)

A little over 230 years ago, in the late summer of 1741, a man sat in his study in London, feverishly writing. A heavily built man in his middle fifties, he had hardly stopped his work for over three weeks. The scattered sheets of music paper around him still bore traces of the sand with which th.1had been hastily blotted. At one moment a servant, tiptoeing in with a tray of chocolate, had found the composer weeping. The tray was noiselessly placed on the table and the servant glanced at the page moistened with tears. Under the notes were written the words, "He was despised and rejected of men." The unfolding drama of redemption as portrayed in the prophecy, birth, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ was finding its most sublime expression in music.

Only 24 days earlier, Handel had headed his first page with the words, MESSIAH, An Oratorio, and dated it August 22, 1741. Now as he ended his work, he added the final dates, which tell of the composition being completed on September 12, and the instrumentation finished two

days later. Two hundred sixty — -five pages of score lay before him, most of them without a single correction or sign of indecision.

This morning in the sermon we want to look at some of the events in the life of George Frederick Handel which sur-rounded his writing of MESSIAH and then at the inner meaning of the Oratorio itself. And of course, tonight, parts II and III will be performed here.

Handel had first come to England in 1710 and had taken London by storm as a composer and producer of operas. It hadn't taken him long to find among the wealthy, aristocratic society of London, a congenial circle of patrons who were willing to sponsor his ambitious schemes.

Though he had a brilliant beginning, in a few years dissension crept in as London society became divided into two camps. These rival groups caused jealousies among the opera singers. This coupled with Handel's sometimes haughty and uncompromising attitude brought him many powerful enemies who were determined to ruin this insolent-foreign upstart.

So, by 1737, he was bankrupt and physically paralyzed and temporarily broken in health and spirit. In 1741, he produced his last opera, and it was a total failure which ran only three nights.

Handel now turned to composing Oratorios, and just a few months later he had created MESSIAH, and this was followed by a succession of Oratorios. Out of defeat had come victory in another form.

But how did Messiah itself come to be? Among those who stood by Handel in his darkest days was a person named Charles Jennens. Jennens had already interested himself in Handel's first excursions into Oratorio, and a few years earlier had provided the libretto for an Oratorio called SAUL.

Now he came forward with a selection of words from the scriptures, some of which we read earlier this morning as our scripture less. selections from both the Old Testament and New Testament which set forth the prophecy, birth, crucifixion, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ as Messiah.

The uniqueness of the plan for MESSIAH consisted in the fact that it was not, like the usual passion music, a theatrical narrative of the martyrdom and ascension of Christ. On the contrary, as the sermon title suggests, the whole subject is treated as a profound presentation of the unfolding drama of the salvation of the world which is still going on. Thus, MESSIAH is not, as is often supposed, a number of scenes from the Life of Jesus linked together, but a representation of the fulfilment of redemption through the Redeemer, Messiah.

It is more like an epic poem and portrays in succession every shade of devotional sentiment from piety, resignation, and repentance to hope, faith, and exultation. It translates the facts of Christ's life into exalted symbols of human destiny and produces a Christian epic unfolding the moral autobiography of human beings.

In other words, the whole work is a profound statement of Christian belief. Thus, the Oratorio is reflective in tone and purpose and dwells upon the deep emotional meaning of the Messiah, rather than upon its external features.

Handel in his 24 days of writing had produced a masterpiece. He had been inspired as never before or after. So much so was this composition an act of devotion and spiritual release, that when he had completed it, there was little thought of performing it.

His operas had always been written with a performance in view, but this was totally different. It was as if he had caught a vision, a special inspiration, a peak experience translated into music. So, after it was completed, he laid it aside. His last thought was to perform it for monetary gain, though at no time in his career had he more need to recoup his financial losses.

Not long after this, Handel received an invitation to visit Dublin, Ireland to compose a new work to be performed for charity. At that time, all the principal musical societies of Dublin gave their performances for charitable causes.

Handel got in touch with the charity, “For the Bene£ it and Enlargement of Poor Distressed Prisoners for Debt.” What a coincidence that the bankrupt Handel should give his masterpiece MESSIAH for his fellow-sufferers for the crime of not being able to pay ones bills often received the harshest punishment in those days.

So, at the end of March 1742, the newspaper carried the follov1ing announcement — “For the relief of the prisoners in the several Gaols and for the support of Mercer’s Hospital in Stephen’s Street, and of the Charitable Infirmary on the Inn’s Quay, on Monday the 12th of April will be performed at the Music Hall in Fishamble Street, Mr. Handel’s new grand Oratorio, called MESSIAH.”

It was also announced that the performance would be preceded by a public rehearsal at which all could be present who had bought tickets for the actual concert. Ladies were requested to come without hoops to their dresses and gentlemen without their swords, as the people in charge hoped by this means to seat seven hundred persons instead of six hundred.

The public rehearsal on April 8th, was an unqualified success. Dublin critics hailed the work as the “finest composition of music that was ever heard.” The performance itself, postponed a day, took place on April 13, 1742. Enthusiasm was greater than ever. The Dublin press could scarcely find words to describe the sublime, grand and solemn occasion, and the exquisite delight it afforded the admiring crowded audience.

It is reported that one gentleman in the audience was so transported by the singing of the solo, “He was despised.” that rising in his seat he exclaimed, “Woman for this be all thy sins forgiven,” an involuntary compliment to her artistry, though an unfortunate reference to her private life.

Thus, MESSIAH was started on its career, both as a musical masterpiece and prophetically enough as a charitable in-stitution, for never has any musical work raised more money for charitable purposes or relieved more suffering both of body and spirit.

A few years later, Handel attended a committee meeting at the Foundling Hospital in London, a hospital that had been organized in 1741, the same year Messiah was written. At this committee meeting, Handel offered a performance of vocal and instrumental music, the proceeds of which would be devoted to the completion of the Hospital’s chapel. The offer was accepted, although at this first concert, Messiah was not a part of the program.

However, in the following year, 1750, Handel presented the Foundling Hospital with an organ for the chapel and offered to open the chapel with a performance of MESSIAH.

This concert was an overwhelming success. In fact, so many people wanted to attend that a repeat performance had to be arranged, and this began the series of charitable performances which Handel gave each year for the benefit of the Foundling Hospital until the time of his death. The Messiah was always performed with Handel himself directing and playing the organ.

After he died, it was discovered that a codicil to his will contained the following — “I give a fair copy of the score and all the parts of my Oratorio called MESSIAH to the Foundling Hospital.”

So, it was than an Oratorio which in words and music presents the mighty drama of redemption at the same time in its own history of performances has always been a part of that redemption.

Overall, less than one-fifth of Messiah has to do with the nativity of Jesus. It is rather a statement of faith that nothing can separate us from the love of God because God goes to all lengths to redeem all people and creation itself.

Let’s see if we can put it in other words. We are all aware that there are forces at work in the world which are destructive. The horror of death and the anxiety of life; the irresistible strength of natural and historic powers; the ambiguity of the present and the inscrutable darkness of the future; the incalculable turns of fate from height to depth and from depth to height; and the natural destruction of creature by creature. We can see it in the horrors and tragedies of war such as that in Vietnam which has seemed unending. And we all know of tragedies in our personal lives.

It is to such things and more that God’s saving power is directed. Thus, an Oratorio like MESSIAH does not carry the vague promise that with the help of God everything will come out all right; there are many things which come to a bad end.

The deep meaning of the unfolding drama of God’s redemption is this: When death continually surrounds us as it often does; wl1en cruelty wields power over nations and individuals, as it does now; when hunger and persecution drive millions from place to place as they do now and when prisons and slums all over the world distort the humanity of the bodies and souls of persons as they do now — -we can still boast in that time, as did Job in the Old Testament, “I know that my Redeemers lives,” or as Paul put it, “even all of this cannot separate us from the love of God. In this sense and in this sense alone, all things work together for good, for the ultimate good.

We know that nothing, nothing, can prevent us from fulfilling the alternate meaning of our existence. There is a creative and saving possibility implied in every situation which cannot be destroyed by any event. This means that the demonic and destructive forces within ourselves and in the world can never have an unbreakable grasp upon us and that the bond with connects us with the fulfilling love of God can never be disrupted.”

As George Fredrick HANDEL read the libretto, a collection of passages from the Bible, called MESSIAH, this was the message that came through so clearly, to him and which he set to music in an inspired way.

My brothers and sisters, with such a message, we can join in saying and singing, “Hallelujah, for the Lord our God the omnipotent reigns. The kingdoms of this world have become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ and He shall reign for ever and ever.”

Worthy is the lamb that was slain to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing. To Him who sits upon the throne and to the Lamb, be blessing and honor and glory and might for ever and ever! Amen.