

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Miserere mei, Deus: 'Have mercy upon me, O God'

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This is Holy Week for the Christian community, marked by special services such as Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter Day.

In the 1600s, at the request of Pope Urban VIII, Gregorio Allegri composed the music to the Latin text of Psalm 51, known as "Miserere mei, Deus."

For over a century, it was sung by the papal choir in Rome only during Holy Week, and carefully guarded so it could not be sung anywhere else. In 1770, a 14-year-old Mozart heard the piece, went home and transcribed it from memory. It later was published and now is heard frequently throughout the world, especially this time of the year.

I first heard it live at King's College Chapel in Cambridge three years ago, but again last weekend at the Cathedral of St. Andrew in Grand Rapids, sung by the Choir of Men and Boys.

You can hear a recording of the King's College choir performance at Youtube, or listen to it live at the Cathedral of St. Andrew this week at their Tenebrae Service at 8 p.m. on Good Friday.

It certainly is beautiful music and the text is most appropriate, not only for this time in the Christian calendar, but for any faith tradition seeking mercy in our world of conflict and violence.



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The Miserere is based on a text Christians share with the Jewish community. The Latin words of the sung Psalm 51 are translated, "Have mercy upon me, O God."

The theme of mercy also is reflected in most of the chapters of the Qur'an, which begin, "In the Name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful."

Mercy, a theme shared by nearly all of the world's religions, is the recognition that we cannot, on our own, live up to what it means to be authentically human. It is the recognition we do not always love our neighbor as ourselves, or love God with our whole heart, soul, strength and mind.

Miserere mei, Deus.

As I listen to the Miserere, I also am struck by the Latin words near the end of the psalm, "holocaustis non delectaberis"

VIDEO

To listen to the King's College choir performance of Miserere Mei Deus in Cambridge, go online at [youtube.com/watch?v=4IC7V8hG198](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4IC7V8hG198).

("thou delightest not in burnt offerings.")

Holocaustis is the Latin word for burnt offering. What a horrible word to use for that most terrible event of the last century. To think of it in any way as an "offering," no wonder many of our Jewish neighbors despise even the word and prefer to speak of the "Shoah," from the Hebrew word catastrophe.

Miserere mei, Deus.

I also am reminded of the powerful performance by the Grand Rapids Symphony in 2013

as a part of our Year of Interfaith Understanding. They performed the Stephen Paulus Oratorio "To Be Certain of the Dawn," which was commissioned by the Basilica of St. Mary's in Minneapolis as a gift to its neighbor synagogue, Temple Israel, to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the liberation of the death camps. I don't remember ever being moved by a piece of music as I was by that oratorio. Indeed, Miserere, mei Deus, Lord have mercy.

Later in the psalm we hear the words, "Make me a clean heart, O God: and renew a right spirit within me."

In our personal lives, as well as in a world torn by conflict, we need not only God's mercy but also a right spirit. Whatever faith we claim, let this be our prayer.

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