

# “God’s Gifts?”

Sunday, January 28, 2007

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Printed by  
THE EXTENSION SERVICE  
of  
FOUNTAIN STREET CHURCH

Single Copies..... \$1.00

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**To the reader:** This sermon was only part of a service of worship with many components working together, all of which were designed to be experienced in a community context. In our "free pulpit" tradition, its concepts are intended not as truths to receive, but as spurs to your own thought and faith.

# “GOD’S GIFTS?”

## *Johannes Chrysostomos...*

No doubt it was cold in the unheated church that January 28<sup>th</sup> 1756. Certainly colder than it was in February 2000. They were in Salzburg, a town on the edge of the Alps. I stood in the St. Marx Friedhof (cemetery) outside of Vienna. No one noticed the little family then, and no one was there with me either. But these are the bookends of a singular life – a baptismal font and an unmarked grave.

He had four given names - Johannes Chrysostomos was for the saint on whose day he was born. John Chrysostomos was a fourth century Byzantine bishop, a notable preacher whom seminarians are told said “after ten minutes, no souls are saved.” Chrysostomos is not his name. It is his nickname, like Johnny Appleseed. It means golden mouth.

He has two other names, by which he is well known - Wolfgang Gottlieb. As a young man, to appear more cosmopolitan, he translated Gottlieb into Italian and signed his name Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. I cannot figure out whether it means the one who loves God or the one whom God loves.

Even those who don’t care know Mozart was a genius. Another great composer, Josef Haydn, who was 24 years older and outlived Mozart by 18 years, told Mozart’s infamous father, “Before God and as an honest man I tell you that your son is the greatest composer known to me ....” Haydn was Beethoven’s personal teacher, but I never heard that he said the same of Beethoven.

The genius of Mozart defies definition, but is not beyond description. He is said to have memorized an elaborate choral piece in one hearing as a boy. He promised some dance music to a Count and forgot about it. When the Count invited him to the occasion he suddenly remembered and with an hour’s notice had just enough time to compose the pieces. Another story says the director of his opera, Don Giovanni, ran to Mozart in a panic because there was no overture and the opera was opening the next day. So Mozart sat down and wrote one, handing each page to a copyist as he finished it.

Those stories are specious, but others aren’t. His wife, Constanze, said he composed “in the same way as he wrote letters” while riding, while playing billiards, anywhere. Mozart wrote his father about a new opera saying, “I composed in one day Adamberger’s aria in A, Cavalieri’s in B-flat, and the trio” Together they make 371 measures of music. Earlier that same year he wrote about a concert “where three of my compositions were performed...[including] a sonata with violin accompaniment, which I composed last night between eleven and twelve....” It survives today as one of eighteen such sonatas. But there’s more. “...in order to be able to finish it, I only wrote out the [violin part] and retained my own part in my head.”

Music came to him as though it were dictation. Fully formed. He could literally copy out one piece from memory while mentally composing another at the same time.

Imagine an artist painting a different picture with each hand simultaneously, and you get some feeling for what Mozart could do.

There I was in the little cemetery, now in an industrial area. I am alone, shivering in the bright February air. This is a stop on a long-awaited pilgrimage. A tiny grove of scrubby trees has an opening in which stands a squat marker on which it says that somewhere nearby are the bones of Mozart. Despite the cold I linger as long as I can, freezing the experience in my memory. I returned to the old city. At the St. Michael-kirche right outside the royal palace, a plaque says it was here where the funeral was held, and here also on another occasion that the world first heard the astonishing *Requiem*. As I rode the Ubahn (streetcar) to my hotel the heartbreaking notes of the *Lachrymosa* ran through my mind.

### ***Wolfgang...***

The magnitude of his talent has no explanation. No wonder people thought it a mark of divine favor. I have read three biographies of Mozart, and there are many more. His surviving family labored to preserve his story and his legend. But none of them, alone or together, explains his startling abilities. In fact, what you find is that, though he is the pinnacle of musical genius, he was in other ways ordinary. His financial problems throughout life were because he was inept, spending on clothes and parties and gambling. In some ways he never grew up. His private letters are often vulgar, his jokes are puerile, his personal tastes childish. He was a provincial from Salzburg, with only a modicum of school, reared in a family of servants – musicians, yes, but when they were still of the serving class.

My pilgrimage had several stops that year. One, the most moving (to my surprise) was a visit to Mozart's only remaining home in Vienna. Because of his poor personal finances, Mozart often moved just ahead of the eviction notice. In all he lived in over a score of apartments. Only one survives, in a building quite close to the Stephansdom cathedral where he and Constanze were married. I went into the tall courtyard and mounted the stairs, passing doors to still-occupied apartments on my way.

Eager to escape the confinements of a court musician in a remote town, Mozart defied father and employer to make his fortune in Vienna, already the gathering place for notable musicians. Never lacking in confidence, he was sure he would prosper like the great Antonio Salieri, whose music was the rage and who was in the direct employ of the Emperor. And he did.

Mozart virtually invented the piano concerto as a means to show off his skills as a composer alongside his reputation as a performer. In those days a composer would hire a hall and an orchestra and then promote the concert himself, hoping to raise enough money. Which he did. Unlike today, the people craved new music, modern music, and Mozart obliged from that bottomless well of creativity. But his aim was to get a job, a position. His hope was to write opera. He failed at the first, and succeeded at the second. History is grateful because the reverse would have deprived us of something that is very nearly theology in its impeccable hope and beauty.

Standing in the apartment, having paid my schillings to enter, I saw no furniture per

se. The walls were hung with pictures and in the room were library-like tables with chairs where people could sit and through headphones listen to his music. I was disappointed. But that did not last. I listened to every last one. It took me most of two hours, and at each one I could look around and imagine his presence; look out the windows and see the city or the courtyard.

And then it happened. In the main room, overlooking the street below, Blutgasse, sitting on the wide ledge with headphones from a nearby station I found myself hearing the finale of *Nozze de Figaro*. The comedy of errors that turns the tables on a pompous count has him suddenly brought face to face with his faults and he pleads with his wife for forgiveness. (sing if you can)

And the tears welled up as I heard the countess extend forgiveness. There I stood, in the room where these notes emerged into the world. This was Bethlehem, a manger for some of the world's most sublime and eternal beauty.

### ***Amadeus...***

This difference between the man and his genius is what perplexes. Mozart himself started the rumor that Antonio Salieri poisoned him. He was wrong. Mozart died of kidney failure, in part brought on by over-drinking, under-nourishment and exhaustion. But in his desperate state he thought he was poisoned by a jealous Salieri. So it's all a fable, a canard that persists despite the facts. Pushkin was the first to dramatize it a century ago. Another composer, Rimsky-Korsakov, made it into an opera. A few years ago Peter Schaffer wrote the play "*Amadeus*" which was made into a movie. Each portrays the imaginary murder of Mozart by the envious Salieri.

This is a case where the myth is stronger than the reality. But in some odd way, the fiction is closer to expressing truth than the facts. And that's why the legend persists. The myth captures the enigma of Mozart, which is enigma of genius, which is the enigma of God. "Where, where is justice," writes Pushkin, "when the sacred gift, When deathless genius comes not to reward Perfervid love and utter self-denial (Salieri says of himself)...but puts her halo 'round a lack-wit's skull, A frivolous idler's brow?..." Fictional Salieri is tortured two ways. First, Salieri has worked harder, given up more, struggled to become a composer. Now this 'obscene child' as Schaffer calls Mozart, comes along and without work, even effort, spills forth music Salieri could never hope to make. But to make matters worse, Salieri is talented enough to perceive his true genius while others cannot. In Schaffer's play Salieri is celebrated and Mozart scorned. But Salieri alone perceives that Mozart will outlast anything he Salieri could write.

This means Salieri understands Mozart better than Mozart himself. In all his genius, he is ignorant about the depth of his gift, which makes it all the more enigmatic. How can the beneficiary of such a blessing be unaware as to its true value? Where is God's love here? In the fictional stories, the enigma becomes too much to bear. Salieri ends it by murdering this man who confounds him. But death resolves nothing. The enigma remains, both in fiction and fact. The rumor of murder by envy haunted the real Salieri for the rest of his life. He spent his last words saying, "I did not poison Mo-

zart." The need to believe Salieri killed Mozart is our way of ending the enigma.

But it cannot be ended. If Mozart's genius is an enigma, every genius an enigma. Look at all of them and you find very ordinary people with extraordinary gifts. Richard Wagner was a bigot, Stravinsky was a miser. Van Gogh was crazy, Lautrec was a deviate. Gandhi was a sexist. Dylan Thomas and James Joyce were drunkards. Their genius did not save them from suffering, stupidity or silliness.

Some cannot accept that greatness lives in ordinary and even unworthy people. It's too hard to understand, so they either worship the genius as perfect or deny any greatness because of human faults. The enigma of genius challenges our basic ideas. If Mozart's genius is an enigma, so is Salieri's comparative mediocrity. The enigma of why Mozart is blessed is also the enigma of why Salieri isn't. All people struggle but only a few succeed, why? Some who don't work prosper, why? Many do evil and get away with it, why? The matter is not confined to one extravagant example, but in the sinew of existence. Geniuses only amplify it, showing us the rarefied heights to which a human being can climb, and by reflection the depths in which most of us live.

When genius appears on earth, that height is glimpsed. That it arrives in plain packages, often ugly ones, should actually encourage us. Maybe you will shine forth in some way, with your special gift. And if not, we can see the lights of genius, savor it, and be illuminated by it. The gift of genius that Mozart had is also the gift he gave. If he could not see his own greatness, we can. So maybe God loved Mozart and gave him genius for his short life. But God loved us even more, because we get to listen to Mozart forever.

The theologian Karl Barth said it best. The angels may play Bach when serenading the Almighty, but at home they play Mozart.