

6 Joy

It is the Easter Vigil. Candles illuminate the dark church. The congregation has come together to celebrate Christ's resurrection from the grave. The deacon stands at the front, prepared to start the reading. A parchment scroll is brought forth and slowly unrolled. The deacon begins to sing the text on the scroll. His voice carries to the furthest crevices and darkest corners of the building, an elaborate melody of keen and ancient beauty.

Exult, let them exult, the hosts of heaven, exult, let Angel ministers of God exult, let the trumpet of salvation sound aloud our mighty King's triumph! Be glad, let earth be glad, as glory floods her, ablaze with light from her eternal King, let all corners of the earth be glad, knowing an end to gloom and darkness.

As he sings, the scroll is further unrolled and its top is draped further and further over the lectern, so that it becomes visible to the congregation. In the flickering candlelight those at the front of the church are able to glimpse the pictures that are interspersed with the text on the scroll. The images are upside down in relation to the text the deacon sings, allowing the congregation to see them more easily. Scenes from the Old Testament are revealed in the half-light of the church: Adam and Eve, the parting of the Red Sea; scenes from the life of Christ: the crucifixion, Christ enthroned, the paschal lamb.

The images unfurl before the people's eyes, taking their cues from the hymn sung by the deacon, lending colour and substance to the words that praise Christ's resurrection from the dead:

This is the night when Christ broke the prison bars of death and rose victorious from the underworld. Our birth would have been no gain, had we not been redeemed. O wonder of your humble care for us! O love, O charity beyond all telling, to ransom a slave you gave away your Son! O truly necessary sin of Adam, destroyed completely by the Death of Christ! O happy fault that earned for us so great, so glorious a Redeemer!

These words are from the *Exsultet* (meaning 'rejoice'), the Easter proclamation, which expresses the exuberant joy at the resurrection of Christ. Good Friday is over, and the light has returned. The broken world is healed by the voluntary sacrifice of God become man. Even in the darkest night, there is hope. Hope rises like a flame, conquering the shadows of death and despair. This is the thought that dominates the liturgical ceremonies of Easter. It is the most important feast of the church calendar, the feast without which none of the other feasts would exist. Without it, none of the other practices of the Christian faith would make sense. This is the night of Christ's resurrection, the night when life rises from the grave triumphant. After the abyss of horror and despair of the crucifixion, explored to its very depths by the poetry and music of the Triduum, comes a new day. Christ's tomb is empty. The light of new life radiates from the symbolism of the liturgy. We have already caught a glimpse of this symbolism in the scene that opened this book: the new fire is lit, blessed and carried into the pitch-black church. Each member of the congregation carries a taper, and as the candles are successively lighted, the church is gradually illuminated, a visible sign of the return of life after the darkness of the tomb, and the joy of those who are redeemed. Joy is central to the Easter liturgy. Joy shines through every word,

every movement, every gesture. Joy particularly speaks through the *Exsultet*, which is perhaps the most intensely poetic hymn of the entire liturgical year. Its imagery is particularly rich, combining typological references to the Old Testament and complex theological ideas with a tender consideration of seemingly small and insignificant things, such as the bees that produced the wax of the great Easter candle. The great and the small things of heaven and earth meet in this triumphant hymn of praise, which presents its ideas like a kaleidoscope of images. It is a hymn that invokes all senses, an effect that in the Middle Ages was often heightened by the use of colourful illustrations on the *Exsultet* scrolls that the people were able to glimpse, along with the smell of incense and the touch of the wax tapers held by all. The moving power of the *Exsultet* becomes particularly clear in performance. Given here are both the Latin original and an English translation, which are best read while listening to a recording of the hymn as it is sung.

Exsultet iam angelica turba
caelorum: exsultent divina
mysteria: et pro tanti Regis
victoria tuba insonet salutaris.

Exult, let them exult, the hosts of
heaven, exult, let Angel ministers
of God exult, let the trumpet
of salvation sound aloud our
mighty King's triumph!

Gaudeat et tellus, tantis irradiata
fulgoribus: et aeterni Regis
splendore illustrata, totius orbis
se sentiat amisisse caliginem.

Be glad, let earth be glad, as glory
floods her, ablaze with light from
her eternal King, let all corners
of the earth be glad, knowing an
end to gloom and darkness.

Laetetur et mater Ecclesia, tanti
luminis adornata fulgoribus:
et magnis populorum vocibus
haec aula resultet.

Rejoice, let Mother Church
also rejoice, arrayed with the
lightning of his glory, let this
holy building shake with joy,

filled with the mighty voices of
the peoples.

Quapropter adstantes vos, fratres
carissimi, ad tam miram huius
sancti luminis claritatem,
una mecum, quaeso, Dei
omnipotentis misericordiam
invocate. Ut, qui me non
meis meritis intra Levitarum
numerum dignatus est
aggregare, luminis sui claritatem
infundens, cerei huius laudem
implere perficiat. Per Dominum
nostrum Iesum Christum
Filium suum qui cum eo vivit
et regnat in unitate Spiritus
Sancti Deus, per omnia saecula
saeculorum.

Therefore, dearest friends,
standing in the awesome glory
of this holy light, invoke with
me, I ask you, the mercy of
God almighty, that he, who has
been pleased to number me,
though unworthy, among the
Levites, may pour into me his
light unshadowed, that I may
sing this candle's perfect praises.
Through our Lord Jesus Christ
His Son, who with Him and
the Holy Ghost lives and reigns,
one God for ever and ever.

R. Amen.

Amen.

V. Dominus vobiscum.

Deacon: The Lord be with you.

R. Et cum spiritu tuo.

People: And with your spirit.

V. Sursum corda.

Deacon: Lift up your hearts.

R. Habemus ad Dominum.

People: We lift them up to the
Lord.

V. Gratias agamus Domino Deo
nostro.

Deacon: Let us give thanks to the
Lord our God.

R. Dignum et iustum est.

People: It is right and just.

Vere dignum et iustum est,
invisibilem Deum Patrem
omnipotentem, Filiumque

It is truly right and just, with
ardent love of mind and heart
and with devoted service of

eius unigenitum, Dominum
nostrum Iesum Christum, toto
cordis ac mentis affectu, et vocis
ministerio personare. our voice, to acclaim our God
invisible, the almighty Father,
and Jesus Christ, our Lord, his
Son, his only begotten.

Qui pro nobis aeterno Patri Adae
debitum solvit, et veteris piaculi
cautionem pio cruore deterisit. Who for our sake paid Adam's
debt to the eternal Father, and,
pouring out his own dear blood,
wiped clean the record of our
ancient sinfulness.

Haec sunt enim festa paschalia,
in quibus verus ille Agnus
occiditur, cuius sanguine postes
fidelium consecrantur. These, then, are the feasts of
Passover, in which is slain the
Lamb, the one true Lamb,
whose blood anoints the
doorposts of believers.

Haec nox est, in qua primum
patres nostros, filios Israel
eductos de Ægypto, Mare
Rubrum sicco vestigio transire
fecisti. This is the night when once
you led our forebears, Israel's
children, from slavery in Egypt
and made them pass dry-shod
through the Red Sea.

Haec igitur nox est, quae
peccatorum tenebras columnae
illuminatione purgavit. This is the night that with a pillar
of fire banished the darkness of
sin.

Haec nox est, quae hodie per
universum mundum in Christo
credentes, a vitiis saeculi et
caligine peccatorum segregatos,
reddit gratiae, sociat sanctitati. This is the night that even now
throughout the world, sets
Christian believers apart from
worldly vices and from the
gloom of sin, leading them to
grace and joining them to his
holy ones.

Haec nox est, in qua, destructis
vinculis mortis, Christus ab
inferis victor ascendit. This is the night when Christ
broke the prison bars of death
and rose victorious from the
underworld.

Nihil enim nobis nasci profuit,
nisi redimi profuisset. Our birth would have been
no gain, had we not been
redeemed.

O mira circa nos tuae pietatis
dignatio! O wonder of your humble care
for us!

O inaestimabilis dilectio caritatis:
ut servum redimeres, Filium
tradidisti! O love, O charity beyond all
telling, to ransom a slave you
gave away your Son!

O certe necessarium Adae
peccatum, quod Christi morte
deletum est! O truly necessary sin of Adam,
destroyed completely by the
Death of Christ!

O felix culpa, quae talem
ac tantum meruit habere
Redemptorem! O happy fault that earned for
us so great, so glorious a
Redeemer!

O vere beata nox, quae sola meruit
scire tempus et horam, in qua
Christus ab inferis resurrexit! O truly blessed night, worthy
alone to know the time and
hour when Christ rose from the
underworld!

Haec nox est, de qua scriptum est:
Et nox sicut dies illuminabitur:
et nox illuminatio mea in
deliciis meis. This is the night of which it is
written: The night shall be
as bright as day, dazzling is
the night for me, and full of
gladness.

Huius igitur sanctificatio noctis
fugat scelera, culpas lavat: et The sanctifying power of this night
dispels wickedness, washes faults

reddit innocentiam lapsis et
maestis laetitiam.
Fugāt odia, concordiam parat, et
curvat imperia.

In huius igitur noctis gratia,
suscipe, sancte Pater, laudis
huius sacrificium vespertinum,
quod tibi in hac cerei oblatione
solemni, per ministrorum
manus de operibus apum,
sacrosancta reddit Ecclesia.

Sed iam columnae huius praeconia
novimus, quam in honorem Dei
rutilans ignis accendit.

Qui, licet sit divisus in partes,
mutuati tamen luminis
detrimenta non novit.

Alitur enim liquantibus ceris, quas
in substantiam pretiosae huius
lampadis apis mater eduxit.

O vere beata nox, quae expoliavit
Ægyptios, ditavit Hebraeos!
Nox in qua terrenis caelestia,
humanis divina iunguntur!

Oramus ergo te, Domine, ut
cereus iste in honorem tui
nominis consecratus, ad noctis
huius caliginem destruendam,
indeficiens perseveret.

away, restores innocence to the
fallen, and joy to mourners, drives
out hatred, fosters concord, and
brings down the mighty.

On this, your night of grace,
O holy Father, accept this candle,
a solemn offering, the work of
bees and of your servants' hands,
an evening sacrifice of praise,
this gift from your most holy
Church.

But now we know the praises of
this pillar, which glowing fire
ignites for God's honour,
a fire into many flames divided,
yet never dimmed by sharing of its
light,

for it is fed by melting wax, drawn
out by mother bees to build a
torch so precious.

O truly blessed night, which
spoiled the Egyptians and made
rich the Hebrews! Night in
which things of heaven are wed
to those of earth, and divine to
the human.

Therefore, O Lord, we pray you
that this candle, hallowed to the
honour of your name, may per-
severe undimmed, to overcome
the darkness of this night.

Et in odorem suavitatis acceptus,
supernis luminaribus misceatur.

Receive it as a pleasing fragrance,
and let it mingle with the lights
of heaven.

Flammas eius lucifer matutinus
inveniat.
Ille, inquam, lucifer, qui nescit
occasum.
Ille, qui regressus ab inferis,
humano generi serenus illuxit.

May this flame be found still
burning by the Morning Star:
the one Morning Star who never
sets, Christ your Son, who,
coming back from death's
domain, has shed his peaceful
light on humanity.¹

The words are rich and evocative. The *Exsultet* is a truly ancient part of the liturgy, going back to the fourth or early fifth century AD. Throughout the Middle Ages there was local variation between different versions of the text and the melody to which it was sung, before it became more standardized. Today it is often sung in the vernacular rather than Latin, but the essence of its ideas and imagery has remained stable over different centuries and in different places. The imagery of light illuminating the darkness and lifting the shadows of death is a central theme throughout the hymn. Christ is the bringer of light to a world in darkness, which is suddenly set 'ablaze with light from her eternal King'. Christ is hailed as 'the one Morning Star who never sets . . . who, coming back from death's domain, has shed his peaceful light on humanity'. With its emphasis on light dispelling the darkness, the hymn echoes the sensory experiences by which the congregation is surrounded in the liturgical celebration. The text makes reference to the dramaturgy of the liturgy as the light of the Easter candle is shared by the tapers of the faithful, 'a fire into many flames divided, yet never dimmed by sharing of its light'. The words reflect the ritual, and the ritual reflects the words.² The hymn is loosely structured by the recurring phrase 'This is the night', which exalts the

Easter vigil as a moment long foretold and central to human history. It uses typological readings of key events of the Old Testament, such as the exodus from slavery in Egypt and God leading the Israelites through the desert with a pillar of fire, as prophecies of the redemption through Christ. These promises are all fulfilled in this one night when Christ rises from the tomb. We encounter, as in so many other liturgical texts, an understanding of the Christian celebration as a continuation and fulfilment of the history of the people of Israel, who are described as 'our forebears'. It is striking, too, that the text describes the resurrection as an event not of the past but of the present: 'This is the night', rather than 'That was the night'. In the liturgical celebration, the past becomes the present. We are not merely commemorating a past event but participating in it through the ritual because of its everlasting significance for every individual person. All of humankind is redeemed, including each member of the present congregation. This historical event, which happened many centuries ago in the Middle East, is still relevant, still present, still celebrated through the liturgical ritual: 'This is the night when Christ broke the prison-bars of death and rose victorious from the underworld.'

The understanding of time implied by these words is different from the kind of chronological reckoning of time that we encounter in everyday life. The logic of the text is not based on a progression from hour to hour, year to year, century to century, but rests on a type of thinking that sees time as relative, expressed as a series of relationships between the past and the present, prophecy and fulfilment. This fulfilment in the form of the redemption is so central to human history that it is not bound by the normal daily progression of time; it is continually present, and can be repeatedly made present in the liturgy. On a poetic level, however, these ideas create a rich web of resonances, by which the pillar of fire in the desert becomes a mirror of the lighted Easter candle in front of the congregation's eyes. Everything is interconnected: words, objects and present experience are linked.

The section framed by the repetition of 'This is the night' then shifts to a different mode of expression. Typological references give way to repeated exclamations that express wonder at the abundant love of God for humankind: 'O love, O charity beyond all telling, to ransom a slave you gave away your Son!' This is followed by what is certainly the most controversial idea in the entire hymn: 'O truly necessary sin of Adam, destroyed completely by the Death of Christ! O happy fault that earned for us so great, so glorious a Redeemer!' This is an idea often referred to by its Latin term, *O felix culpa* ('O happy fault'). Embedded as it is in this richly poetic hymn of praise, it is easy to miss just how radical this thought is. The Christian faith rests upon the idea that humankind is fallen, that the world is broken, that things are not as they should be, as expressed in the story of Adam and Eve's expulsion from Paradise. Equally foundational is the idea that in order to repair what has been broken and heal humankind from the consequences of the Fall, Christ became incarnate and died as a willing sacrifice. The *felix culpa* motif turns this narrative upside down: Adam's sin was necessary, it was even a 'happy' event, as it brought about such an inestimably wonderful thing as the incarnation of God himself. Within a Christian framework, to describe the Fall as necessary and fortunate could hardly be more provocative. Indeed it has been controversially debated by theologians through the ages, and has sometimes been excised from the hymn in different churches and traditions, particularly by Protestant reformers who took exception to the idea. Yet the early liturgy boldly makes this claim. The idea is rooted in the writings of the Church fathers, such as St Ambrose and St Augustine, who writes that 'God judged it better to bring good out of evil than not to permit any evil to exist.'³ The *felix culpa* idea stretches paradox to its limits with its underlying logic that the unexpectedly fortunate outcome of an unfortunate event would not exist, had the unfortunate event not occurred in the first place. By this logic, the unfortunate event itself is redefined as something positive. The 'necessary sin of

Adam' is an idea so radical and paradoxical that it is perhaps only palatable in the liturgical context in which it occurs, accompanied by rich symbolism, and presented not as a sermon but as a poetic song.

Despite, or perhaps because of, the unexpected and provocative nature of this idea, it quickly became part of the fabric of Western thinking about the Fall. We see the motif reflected in a range of medieval texts, such as the carol 'Adam lay y-bounden', which is still sung in church services in the English choral tradition today. Here is a slightly modernized version:

Adam lay ybounden, bounden in a bond;
Four thousand winter thought he not too long.
And all was for an apple, an apple that he took,
As clerkes finden written in their book.

Nor had the apple taken been, the apple taken been,
Then had never Our Lady a-been heaven's queen.
Blessed be the time that apple taken was!
Therefore we may singen, *Deo gratias!*⁴ [= 'Thanks be to God']

The carol refers to the Fall as the taking of an apple, a somewhat more tangible version of Genesis, where Adam and Eve eat of the forbidden fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. Adam is described as being 'bounden in a bond' for 'four thousand winter' – according to medieval views, the length of time that was believed to have elapsed between the expulsion from Paradise and the redemption through Christ. Adam's punishment for the taking of the apple ends with the salvation of the world, and hope is restored. In the middle of the carol, after the first two stanzas, there is an abrupt shift: what has previously been alluded to in negative terms suddenly turns into something positive. If the apple had not been taken, if the Fall had not happened, the great mystery of the incarnation would also not

have happened. Mary would never have become the mother of God and queen of heaven. Based on this shift of perspective, which looks at the positive outcome of a negative event, the final stanza then paradoxically praises the Fall and declares that the taking of the apple was a 'blessed' event. This poetic text very clearly echoes the *felix culpa* of the liturgy. It is deliberately designed to turn upside down our ideas of what it means to define something as good or bad. The redemption through God's own son is unexpected, shocking, unhopd-for; it stands outside our usual frames of reference, and the texts emphasize this with ideas that are meant to startle and provoke.

The *felix culpa* motif had a long afterlife. John Milton (1608–1674) refers to the same idea in *Paradise Lost*, where Adam praises the goodness of God with the following words:

Oh goodness infinite, goodness immense!
That all this good of evil shall produce,
And evil turn to good; more wonderful
Than that which by creation first brought forth
Light out of darkness! Full of doubt I stand,
Whether I should repent me now of sin
By me done, and occasioned; or rejoice
Much more, that much more good thereof shall spring;
To God more glory, more good will to men
From God, and over wrath grace shall abound.⁵

In *Paradise Lost* the *felix culpa* paradox leaves Adam personally conflicted. He is unsure whether he should repent of his sin – the reaction which we would see as appropriate under normal circumstances – or in fact do the opposite and rejoice that his sin has brought about an even greater good: 'over wrath grace shall abound'. There is no easy answer to Adam's conundrum. The problem is not one of logic, but one of perspective and timescales:⁶ only in

hindsight does it become clear whether an unfortunate event has led to fortunate consequences. Milton's Adam is both within and outside of time. He speaks with the knowledge of the coming of Christ, knowledge which stands outside of the timeline of normal earthly chronology, which contends with the perspective of the supposed historical Adam who does not have the knowledge that his Fall will have a good outcome. The historical Adam wants to repent of his sin as he sees its negative outcomes, while the Adam with foreknowledge of the redemption wants to rejoice. Temporal and eternal perspectives are not easily reconciled. A thing can both be bad and turn out to be good in hindsight, depending on one's point of view. As the liturgy indicates, believers have to hold both of these aspects in balance and accept the paradox. The Fall is both unfortunate and, through God's unexpected intervention, the most fortunate thing that has ever happened.

The use of the motif was not restricted to religious contexts and narratives of the Fall and redemption; we also find it, for instance, as a literary motif in an Arthurian romance of the fourteenth century entitled *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. The plot of the story is complex, but at its core it revolves around the redefinition of a sign of failure as a sign of victory. Sir Gawain, the hero of the story, is sent on a quest to find the mysterious and monstrous Green Knight at the Green Chapel. In order to keep his honour, Gawain must accept a blow to the neck with the Green Knight's axe. Gawain tries to live up to the challenge, but in fear of his life accepts the gift of a green girdle to the challenge, but in fear of his life accepts the gift of a green girdle said to protect the life of whoever wears it. Although he had initially promised to surrender the gift, Gawain secretly keeps the girdle for himself. When he meets the Green Knight, his courage is tested and his life is spared. Gawain has proved himself a worthy knight, but with a single fault: he has not surrendered the green girdle. Gawain returns to King Arthur's court wearing the green girdle around his arm as a sign of his shame at his failure to keep his promise. Happy to see Gawain alive, the knights of the round table absolve him from

all blame, and collectively start to wear green girdles on their arms in recognition of Gawain's quest. In this way an unfortunate event – Gawain's failure to live up to his word – is redefined as a token of honour worn by all of King Arthur's knights. Gawain's fault has become a happy fault. The implications of the motif in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* are less universal and far-reaching than that of the redemption of humankind, but the same idea of the *felix culpa* echoes through the story.

We also find the idea of the Fortunate Fall expressed in visual art from the Middle Ages and beyond. Medieval representations of the Fall frequently include references to the crucifixion, or juxtapose the two images in a way that makes clear that Christ's sacrifice atones for Adam's Fall. For instance, in the south rose window at Lyon Cathedral, the expulsion from Paradise and the crucifixion are depicted on opposite sides, paralleling and balancing each other in the structure of the window. The parallel between the two scenes was emphasized by the fact that both the Fall and the redemption of humankind came from a tree: the Tree of Knowledge in Eden and the wood of the cross, respectively. The medieval imagination was much preoccupied by this parallel, giving birth to a number of legends that connected the wood of the cross quite literally with the tree of Paradise, whose fruit prompted the Fall. The Holy Cross legend weaves these connections into a story in which Adam's son is given a seed from the tree of Paradise and plants it in his father's grave. From this seed grows a young tree which, after many centuries, is cut down and eventually becomes the cross of Christ. The legend was extremely popular in the medieval period. It seems that a story that created a connection between the two trees, which was palpable rather than merely metaphorical, touched a nerve.

A late heir to this tradition is a stained-glass window at Saint Meinrad Archabbey in Indiana, produced at the beginning of the twentieth century (illus. 15). In the lower half we see Adam and Eve being banished from Paradise. The serpent is curling around the



15 Crucifixion and Adam and Eve, stained glass,
Saint Meinrad Archabbey, Indiana.

trunk of a tree, which appears like a traditional representation of the Tree of Knowledge if we look at the image in isolation. If we look at the upper part of the window, however, the tree grows into the tree of the cross on which Christ is suspended. The expulsion and the crucifixion scene are intimately connected; the tree from which came the Fall grows to be the tree on which humankind is redeemed. Out of death comes life. O happy fault!

The Easter liturgy may abound in joyful paradoxes, but it also teems with other exuberant expressions of joy. Certainly the most memorable and widely known of these is the exclamation 'Alleluia', which also occurs in the spelling 'Hallelujah'. Today the word is used in everyday contexts that often have nothing to do with religion, but still express joy or relief: 'I made it to the meeting on time, hallelujah!' Originally, though, the word was a loan from Hebrew, expressing praise of God in psalms and prayers. It literally means 'praise God', composed of the Hebrew words *hallel* 'to praise' and *yāh*, a shortened form of the Hebrew holy name of God, Yahweh. The spelling 'Alleluia' mirrors the Greek form, which was also adopted into Latin. Along with 'Amen', it is one of the few Hebrew words taken over untranslated in most biblical translations and in both Latin and Greek liturgies. It is a word familiar to all branches of Christianity, regardless of whether services are celebrated in Latin, Greek, English, Spanish, Vietnamese or any other language. Biblical translators clearly felt that the Hebrew version of the word carried a power or expressed a feeling that a translation simply could not match. The word is melodic and beautiful, including a range of different vowels connected by the consonant 'l', which gives it a flowing sound, almost like water. It is a uniquely singable word in the way in which it rolls off the tongue. Perhaps this is why it was felt to be such an appropriate word of praise. In the Bible the word occurs primarily in the psalms, at the beginning or conclusion of psalms of praise as a kind of acclamation giving glory to God. The word is included in Jewish worship, in a prayer known as *Hallel*, where six psalms of praise are recited at

specific feast days, including Passover. Outside of the psalms, Alleluia is a relatively rare word in the Bible. Nonetheless, it is a regular and constant feature of Christian liturgies. As an expression of exuberant joy, Alleluia is associated first and foremost with the celebration of Easter. In the Western liturgical tradition this is particularly marked as the Alleluia is not sung during Lent, the period preceding Easter, only to return triumphantly in the celebration of the resurrection of the saviour. St Augustine explained the significance of the absent Alleluia as follows:

The season before Easter signifies the tribulations in which we live now, while the time after Easter which we are celebrating at present signifies our happiness in the future . . . This is why we dedicate the first season to fasting and prayer, but now the fast is over and we devote the present season to praise. This is the meaning of the Alleluia we sing.⁷

Lent is a sombre period of fasting and penance, and this fasting is metaphorically echoed in liturgical practice: the church is fasting from the Alleluia. In medieval France various customs arose to make this absence of the Alleluia more tangible. In some places the Alleluia was physically buried in a solemn ceremony at the start of Lent. A hole was dug in the parish garden for a banner or wooden board on which was written the word 'Alleluia', only to be retrieved at Easter. This was not an official church service and the clergy did not officiate. Rather it was the choirboys who took the lead in the burial of the Alleluia, as a fifteenth-century statue book from a church at Toul reports:

On Saturday before Septuagesima Sunday all choir boys gather in the sacristy during the prayer of the None, to prepare for the burial of the Alleluia. After the last *Benedicamus* [i.e., at the end of the service] they march in procession, with crosses, tapers, holy water and censers; and they carry a coffin, as in a funeral. Thus

they proceed through the aisle, moaning and mourning, until they reach the cloister. There they bury the coffin; they sprinkle it with holy water and incense it; whereupon they return to the sacristy by the same way.⁸

At the paschal celebration of the resurrection of Christ, the Alleluia was also resurrected, both in physical form in the parish garden and as part of liturgical singing.

The Alleluia appears in the music of the liturgy in many different shapes and forms, with a rich tradition of different chant settings that express the joy of Easter with elaborate melodies. Composers of sacred music through the ages continually came up with new and different ways to voice the joyous character of the Alleluia. The musical form in which the word is probably most widely known today, however, is Handel's setting of the Hallelujah Chorus. Although it was originally written as part of the oratorio *Messiah*, the chorus has become a famous stand-alone piece, used in a wide range of contexts from religious services to adverts and television series such as *South Park* and *The Simpsons*. It is a uniquely memorable and moving piece, and audiences around the world often express their love for it by rising to their feet whenever it is performed. Handel's piece takes its cue from the Book of Revelation, the final book of the New Testament. The Alleluia here occurs in the context of a mystical vision of worship in a renewed heaven, where God is praised with the words 'Alleluia: for the Lord God omnipotent reigneth' (19:6). The word 'Hallelujah' occurs as a memorable, short motif at the beginning and throughout the chorus. Charles Jennens, Handel's librettist, adds to the quotation from the Book of Revelation the lines 'The kingdom of this world is become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign for ever and ever' (11:15). This text is interspersed with repeated exclamations of 'Hallelujah'. Perhaps the most exciting part of the piece occurs towards the end, when the final acclamation 'King of Kings and Lord of Lords' is repeated at an increasingly higher

pitch by the sopranos, accompanied by trumpets, raising musical tension until it culminates in a final *Hallelujah* chord as a triumphant, solemn praise of God. It is hardly surprising that many people feel so moved by this piece that they cannot stay in their seats.

The Alleluia has stirred not only concert hall audiences, but entire armies. The Venerable Bede, in his seventh-century historical account of the early years of the Christian Church in Britain, tells the story of the 'Alleluia Victory'. It recounts how in the year AD 430, Briton villagers on the Welsh borders were subject to attacks by the pagan tribes of the Picts and Saxons. Just after Easter, when many members of the army of the Britons had been newly baptized, they learnt that a great host of the Picts and Saxons was travelling towards them, preparing for a violent attack. A Christian bishop named Germanus offered to lead the Britons into battle. Germanus decided to waylay their foes in a narrow valley encompassed by hills, and instructed his army to repeat the words that he would speak, and shout them at the top of their voices. Bede writes:

as the enemy approached confidently, believing that their coming was unexpected, the bishops shouted 'Alleluia' three times. A universal shout of 'Alleluia' followed, and the echoes from the surrounding hills multiplied and increased the sound. The enemy forces were smitten with dread, fearing that not only the surrounding rocks but even the very frame of heaven itself would fall upon them.

In blind panic, the enemy host took flight and was caught in a nearby river, where many men drowned. The Britons celebrated their unexpected victory, which had been accomplished without shedding of blood.⁹ According to the belief of the early Christians in the British Isles, the victory of the risen Christ over sin and death could also give them victory over their pagan enemies – sometimes simply by shouting 'Alleluia.'

7 Death

Somewhere in medieval Europe, in some remote monastery on a cold winter's evening, a monk sitting in his lonely cell decided what death sounds like. He was trying to set a poem to music, a poem to describe the horror, grief and destruction of the Day of Doom in the most evocative language. The poem was gripping, but the music the monk invented was what made it truly haunting. It contained a simple, distinctive tune of just a few descending notes, in a key that sounded hollow and ominous. The tune of death was a stroke of genius. We will never know who the monk was, but his music has survived. It was passed down the ages, first from monastery to monastery, and later picked up by composers writing for general entertainment rather than religious purposes. Whenever they wanted to create a haunting atmosphere of danger, death and despair, this was their favourite tune to use, and it never failed to cast its spell. You can even find it in films today. Were you gripped by the spine-chilling music in Peter Jackson's *The Return of the King* (2003) that plays when the armies of Mordor march forth against Gondor? Or by the music in *Jaws* (1975, dir. Steven Spielberg) when the shark is closing in on its intended victims? Or by the terrifying march that accompanies the Huns' attack in Disney's animated film *Mulan* (1998)? What they all have in common is the same threatening tune that aurally convinces us that something dangerous and sinister is afoot. We are listening to the musical shorthand for death.