

Why JB chose Psalm 71 for his Funeral Service:

Even though I had been brought up as a chorister in the choir of St. Mary's Church, Shoreham-by-Sea, Sussex, and was confirmed at the age of 12 by the saintly Bishop of Lewes and believed in God and thought myself a Christian, it wasn't until I went to Oxford in 1953 as organ scholar of Lincoln College that I met fellow students whose Christianity seemed to add an extra dimension to their lives, which I found both challenging and 'real'.

And so, after much thought, on a Saturday evening in January 1954, I knelt by my desk in my room at College (12.4) and committed the rest of my life to God – for He had created me and knew what was best. There were no flashes of lightning, but I knew that my prayer had been heard.

What God thought best for me almost immediately was to be sent down from Oxford at the end of that term! I was unable to pass the necessary examination in Latin, which was required for membership of Oxford at that time. My world seemed to fall apart, but my Mother was determined that I should succeed.

JB as a chorister in St. Mary's Church Choir, Shoreham-by-Sea, Sx.



Corpus Chapel

So, with focussed tuition from a housemaster at Lancing College (Arthur Cooper of Olds House), I passed Latin the next time, and eventually won the organ scholarship to Corpus Christi College, Cambridge.

This was, for me, far better than my Oxford scholarship, for I was taught by the legendary director of the choir of King's College, Boris Ord, and I had a fine choir of my own at Corpus and endless opportunities to make music.

In my first term at CCC I saw The Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh make a State Visit to the University (that was only 2 years after the Coronation); I saw Albert Schweitzer receive an honorary Doctorate of Music from the hands of the Chancellor, Lord Tedder, and I played the organ in the University Church for Billy Graham's first Mission to Cambridge. In other words, God knew what he was doing when he made me leave Oxford!

I was in my room at Corpus one day (1.3) reading my bible. There was a knock at my door and I hastily hid my bible under a cushion – for 'reading the bible' was not necessarily one of the things that one did in that sort of society! In strode a fellow student, Chris Bennett, who said, 'John, you've been playing the organ for our Christian Union meetings and coming to our prayer meetings, but you haven't signed up to be a member of the Christian Union to acknowledge that the Lord Jesus Christ is your Saviour. You should!' 'OK,' I replied, 'please set it up for me.' And Chris left as abruptly as he had arrived.

I was rather sorry that I'd hidden my bible, so I carried on reading from where I'd left off a couple of minutes earlier. It was Psalm 71. And the verse I next read was,

'Thou hast brought me to great honour, and comforted me on every side, therefore will I praise Thee and Thy faithfulness, O God, playing upon an instrument of music.'

Well, isn't that nice, I thought. And that's as far as it went.

Three years later, after graduation, I applied for the post of Organist of Choirmaster of St. Matthew's Church, Northampton which was, at that time, the leading musical church in this country. It had a superb 4-manual organ, a dedicated choir of men and boys, a large Choral Society and Orchestra and also the conductorship of the Northampton Symphony Orchestra. I was called for interviews one weekend. On the Saturday evening the Vicar said to me, 'I'll tell you tomorrow whether or not you've got the job.'

That night I looked at my Bible Reading Fellowship notes to see which passage I should read. It was Psalm 71. I'd forgotten that I'd read that Psalm three years earlier, and so when I came to the words, *'Thou hast brought me to great honour, and comforted me on every side, therefore will I praise Thee and Thy faithfulness, O God, playing upon an instrument of music,'* I nearly fell out of bed. 'I've got the job!' I thought.

And the next morning, after the service, the Vicar said, 'You've got the job!' to which I nearly replied, 'I know!' As he turned around to walk up the aisle I said, 'Father, you should know that I'm a committed Christian.' He half turned round and replied, 'You wouldn't have got the job unless you had been!' So I knew I was in the right place.

St. Matthew's choir, 1960



In 1964 I applied for Blackburn Cathedral and was interviewed by Provost Robinson. The cathedral was in an awful state, the roof leaked, the place was dirty, but it was about to be transformed throughout.

I didn't know whether or not I should accept it if it were offered to me. So, after the interview, on the way back to North Wales where I was a housemaster on a week's RSCM Choristers' course, I stopped at the first service station on the M6. I prayed, 'Lord, tell me if you want me to go there.' I opened my Bible at random – and it was Psalm 71, but this time the words were,

*'With the mighty deeds of the Lord God I will come,
I will praise Thy righteousness, Thine alone.'*

That put it into the right context – I wouldn't be going there to show how clever I was (for I wasn't) but to praise God. A few days later Provost Robinson wrote me a letter offering me the job.

Dismantling the old organ in 1964, and installation of the temporary small organ before work started on transforming the Nave.

God has a sense of humour. Halfway through my 18 years at Blackburn Cathedral I bought a brand new car – sporty with gold finish – which was going to be delivered to me the next day. I could think of nothing else for it was at the centre of my life. That night my set Bible reading was Psalm 20: *'Some put their trust in chariots and some in horses, but we will remember the Name of the Lord our God.'* I apologized to God, and put Him back at the centre of my life again!

And the same sort of specific guidance has happened to me at every major turning point in my life – far too many to list.

After I had been at Blackburn for 18 years, I was reading Deuteronomy in my house in Mellor, and the verse that stood out was 28:9. *'The Lord your God will bless you in the land he is giving you.'* Fifteen minutes later the phone rang: it was the Senior Warden at Trinity Church, Princeton (where I had been interviewed two months' earlier). She said, 'We'd like to offer you the post of Director of Music at Trinity Church.'

I suggest that similar guidance can be true for others who, like me, continually need their faith strengthened. I've found that when I listen, I hear, but when I don't, God seems silent.

