

Sermon for Music Sunday – 14th June 2020

The Royal School of Church Music instigated the idea of holding Music Sunday on the 1st Sunday of Trinity many years ago, but this must be the strangest one that's ever been celebrated. To celebrate the power of music to connect us to the divine at a time when we're unable to actually meet and make music together is in many ways a melancholic thing. I have personally been very powerfully affected by the loss of the choir over these last months. I chose that psalm this morning because this really does feel like an exile, and I've done my fair share of weeping, and asking plaintively "how shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?"

And yet, that's exactly what we've done. It's not ideal, and I am yearning for the day when we sing together again as a choir, and as a whole church community, as I'm sure many of you are, but we have continued to "sing the Lord's song in a strange land". Of course we did. It is fundamental to our humanity, and there is something about music which connects us straight to the divine. There is a tendency in our wider, rationalist western culture to think of music as one of "the arts" – a hobby, decorative, non-essential, nice-to-have. The same could probably be said to societies attitude to religion as a whole I suppose! I read that in Bali there is no

word for “art”. Not because they don’t have any – they have very rich tradition of music, theatre, visual arts - but because these things are inseparable from just “life”.

At its best, music has the capability to reflect something timeless, something immortal, something immeasurably greater than ourselves. There is an essay by that towering figure of 20th century American music, and one of my great musical heroes, Leonard Bernstein, where he is discussing the music of Beethoven, and he describes how, when hearing a particular piece for the first time, it felt like the music must have always been there, someone just needed to pluck it out of the air and write it down. Beethoven had somehow tapped into the mind of God and managed to express something fundamental about the nature of humanity, of God and of the universe, something deeply and powerfully true.

We can see this connection music makes between the human and the divine in our readings this morning. The book of Chronicles is at least 2,300 years old and the scene it’s describing is much older – King Solomon – the Son of famous lyre player David, of course - placing the ark of the covenant in the new built Temple. The scene is one where the veil between the human and the divine is very thin indeed, and there are cymbals, harps, lyres, trumpeters and

singing. And then in St John the Divine's wild ecstatic vision of heaven the veil is gone completely, and he sees in heaven the eternal, unending worship of God which the Israelites in the Chronicles reading are echoing – the elders and the weird heavenly creatures around the throne of God are singing for all eternity. And then a reading which every one of you will know really well, but taken out of its Christmas context – here the reading takes its place alongside the other visions of the endless worship of the inhabitants of heaven. Lose the cutesy Christmas card image - The sky is suddenly filled with angels – it's book of revelation, not quiet crib scene – the shepherds are terrified - again the veil between heaven and earth is dropped, and what are the angels doing? They're singing.

There's even a long and honourable tradition of portraying Christ himself as musician, right from the early drawings in the Catacombs, through Medieval verse, up to the modern day – Christ as “Lord of the Dance” to pick an example from a well known hymn written in the 1970s.

Try this written in the early 17th century by George Herbert from his poem “Easter”.

“Awake, my lute, and struggle for thy part with all thy art.
The cross taught all wood to resound his name who bore the same.

His stretched sinews taught all strings, what key
Is best to celebrate this most high day.”

It’s obviously not just the Judeo-Christian culture that gets this connection between music and the divine, either. Think of Orpheus with his Lyre producing music that is so powerful it tames even the forces of the underworld.

This is the power of music: to express what cannot otherwise be expressed, to give voice to things which we know to be true, but which we cannot articulate in words. To give visceral expression to that deep need to touch the ecstasy of heaven, to join in the heavenly chorus. St Augustine said

"He that sings praise, not only praises, but also praises with gladness: he that sings praise, not only sings, but also loves him of whom he sings. In praise, there is the speaking forth of one confessing; in singing, the affection of one loving."

This is the quote which has been abridged to the more well known “he who sings, prays twice.” (Although it is interesting to note that the original Latin of the abridgement has “he who sings well, prays twice.”)

Music, and singing in particular, isn’t an adjunct to worship. It’s not just a beautifying, pretty decoration. It’s how we mirror and model the eternal and infinite song of the

heavenly host. One of my favourite hymns “How shall I sing that majesty” puts it like this, talking of the heavenly host:

Thy brightness unto them appears,
While I Thy footsteps trace;
A sound of God comes to my ears,
But they behold Thy face.
I shall, I fear, be dark and cold,
With all my fire and light;
Yet when Thou dost accept their gold,
Lord, treasure up my mite.

Enlighten with faith's light my heart,
Inflame it with love's fire;
Then shall I sing and bear a part
With that celestial choir.
They sing because Thou art their Sun;
Lord, send a beam on me;
For where heaven is but once begun
There alleluias be.

Music matters. It’s fundamental. Thank God for organisations like the RSCM who understand it’s importance and thank God for people like the members of our choir who are willing, even when something as drastic as this current hiatus happens, to spend time in their living rooms, bedrooms, and studies, recording themselves, so that we

can have music produced by our community as part of these services, and thank God for congregations like you who appreciate it, and support it, and understand the importance of it in our worshipping life.

These are strange times, but we will continue to sing the Lord's song in a strange land. To quote a hymn from a very different, but equally powerful Christian tradition:

My life flows on in endless song;
Above earth's lamentation,
I hear the sweet, though far-off hymn
That hails a new creation
Through all the tumult and the strife,
I hear that music ringing
It finds an echo in my soul
How can I keep from singing?

Amen.