



Embrace and Renewal: Listening to the Music of the Cross

Sermon given on Monday 25th March during Compline

In this series of sermons and homilies Revd Canon Ivor Moody takes us through some of the experiences and emotions of living with love, death, despair and hope using contemporary music as an explorative vehicle for us to site our joy and pain within the context of the Passion of Jesus Christ.

Piano Man by Billy Joel (Part 1)

The meditations and talks which I will be conducting tonight and throughout Holy Week are all based on a book I had published last year of pop songs and how they might be relevant to us in the Church today. Called 'Six More Songs', it is a sequel to 'Songs for the Soul' which was published in 2017. Now that might not seem a very promising start to theological and spiritual reflection for the most important and solemn week of the Christian year.

But, in the face of what seems to be a struggling Church with its rituals and expressions of belief finding it hard to maintain their appeal they are attempts to look for innovative signs and symbols which might help us to focus anew on the Christian faith. Resources - interpretative tools - which not only might help us to make more sense of our Christian journeys but help us to tell our Christian stories in the bustling no faith and all faith environment of the Aeropagus, the noisy and competitive twenty first century marketplace. And of all the events and times and seasons of the Church's year, Holy Week is surely the one where journeying and storytelling are at their most acute and relevant.

The song which will accompany us tonight and tomorrow night is called 'Piano Man', written and sung by Billy Joel. Imagine a piano bar in downtown Los Angeles. Billy Joel is at the piano entertaining a crowd of people containing some individuals and their stories we would all recognise. There is an old man sitting at the bar making love to his tonic and Gin, tearfully reminiscing about former, happier days. A jolly bartender whose enforced happiness hides frustrated ambition and a sense of a wasted life. 'I'd be a movie star' he says, 'If only I could get out of this place'.

Then there's a young man, Davy, who will probably be in the navy for life, talking to a man trying to write a novel which he believes will be the definitive American book. And there is a crowded bar of people, all sharing a drink they call

loneliness, because it's better than drinking alone. 'Sing us a song' they shout to the piano man, who they've come to see to forget about life for a while; 'We're all in the mood for a melody, and you've got us feeling alright' What they don't realise, is that the very music which defines the unfulfilled aspirations and shattered dreams of his audience also defines Billy Joel himself. He is there because he is like all the customers who he seeks to entertain. It was because Billy Joel found himself where he did, in a random downtown bar, that he was able to tell the stories of others - a kind of 'wounded healer' who through his own pain and loneliness can help others through his music to reflect on happier days.

Well, we hear tonight about a group of twelve disciples gathering for an intimate meal with Jesus, soon to be their wounded healer. And here too there is frustration, pain and unfulfilled ambition, so much so that one of his disappointed disciples has already resolved to betray him as another one will do very soon. Remember these are people who wanted so much more than they were promised: people who had left everything to follow Jesus, but who wanted to know what their reward would be.

People who wanted to sit to the left and right of Jesus in the Kingdom of Heaven, and who argued about who was the greatest among them, people who did not understand and who did not want Jesus to suffer and who thought that little children were too much of a nuisance and too insignificant to warrant a place at Jesus' side.

Dare I ask you then if you can see telling parallels between a secular song of the twentieth century and the well-trodden biblical story of the first century? Yes there is loneliness, thwarted ambition and shattered dreams common to both, but that is not the most important comparison to make. As we begin this journey through Holy Week together, there is something even more obvious to recognise - that shared pain and disappointment nevertheless brings people together at a specific place and time, whether it is a piano bar or the beautiful confines of this cathedral church.

Holy Week calls us, gravitates us, to this liturgical journey and story, because like in that piano bar there is so much shared experience and common ground, and life with our wounded healer can help us to realise that uncomfortable memories and painful lives is not the only fruit.

Rowan Williams has argued that the essence of our self-understanding and where our identity resides is precisely in the arena of what together we have learned, experienced and shared. The thing that ultimately defines our humanity, he says, lies in our facing up to and recognising our limitations, a collective responsibility through a process of reflection to question our stories and motives.

Tomorrow night we will reflect further on this gathering in an upper room which had been furnished and made ready. But for now, perhaps, might we say that called into community as we are to celebrate our togetherness and to reflect on our aspirations and pain - symbolic of our Gospel story tonight - cannot be a better

or more important place to begin this journey and exploration into the story of the road to Golgotha and to glory?

Sermon given on Tuesday 26th March during Compline

Piano Man by Billy Joel (Part 2)

All through this week I am delivering a series of talks, culminating on Good Friday, exploring how an ultra-modern resource which is constantly around us and weaves through our lives might help us to look afresh at the story of Jesus and his disciples as they travel from Jerusalem to Gethsemane, to Golgotha and the Easter Garden. I am focussing on six iconic, globally known pop songs, featured in my book 'Six More Songs' published last year and examining how these secular soundbites might offer us new thoughts and insights into a story - a journey - which not only represents the core of our faith but is a story - a journey - in which as Christians we are called to participate.

Last night we looked at Billy Joel's 'Piano Man', and tonight we will continue with that song. The song's lyrics reveal that it is about a collection of somewhat damaged people in a downtown bar who are there sharing their sorrows and nursing unfulfilled aspirations and broken dreams. They are being entertained by a piano player who somehow shares their pain and is their 'wounded healer'. As they come up to put tips in a jar on the piano, they realise there must be a reason why such a talented musician finds himself nevertheless in such a horrible environment. 'Man' they ask, 'What are you doing here?!'

Well, I suggested that the whole tenure of the song lends itself easily and comfortably to our Gospel story last night and tonight - the gathering in the upper room for the Last Supper. For here too are friends and colleagues with *their* soon to be wounded healer, a collection of disciples who have left everything to follow Jesus, but who are still uncomprehending about what is going on - what does it all mean? What does Jesus want from them? How *can* faith no bigger than a mustard seed move a mountain? How can this man control the wind and the waves, and more to the point what does he want from us? And as the Gospel story makes clear, for Judas Iscariot it was too much. For Peter, the love for his Master ended with unfulfilled aspirations, shattered dreams and ultimately betrayal.

But the point I made last night was that this wasn't the only comparison to be had. If we stopped there, it would simply be an exercise in textual criticism, a placing together of texts in a redaction style format to see how and why the two were similar and could exist side by side at all. I said that the piano bar and the upper room had one crucial similarity, and that is that both in the song and in the Gospel damaged people with their anxious questions, fears for the future and a powerful sense of loss were brought together at a specific place and time, helping to foster a sense of community and togetherness. Places where there at least could be self-understanding, and a recognition of shared experience and pain and the discovery of common ground. Places where there could be a collective responsibility to face up to the challenges, shortcomings, and potential of our own stories and journeys.

And that all this has enormous significance and relevance for us here in this cathedral in this Holy Week. Called to a specific place and time to do precisely those things to help us recognise not only our vulnerabilities and our need for restoration and wholeness from our own wounded healer, but fundamentally our call to discipleship. To be members of a Church for whom one of its primary and most important functions is simply to be there for people, a transforming presence, defined by its sheer acceptance and inclusivity, and not to disappear when the going gets tough.

Tonight, I would only want to add one more thought to all of that. And that is, if we have a collection of people whether it's in a downtown, rundown piano bar, in an upper room, or in this cathedral tonight who are struggling with their identities and in the process of trying to comprehend and to reconcile the reality of their present: and if we are all shaped by the reality of our past and having to engage with a future which may bear little resemblance to our hopes and desires, then I would want to suggest that here is a community of God which also reflects *sacramental* qualities. Sacramental in the sense that all those stories of loss and dependence and the common need for companionship and the recognition and understanding of each other's needs speaks too of the self-emptying of God, who with all that vulnerability and pain and doubt borne of being fully human hands himself over as something to be handled and consumed. And this we reflect and make present through our liturgy and worship and which helps to bind us together as the people of God: 'How I have longed to eat this Passover with you before I suffer' says Jesus.

On Maundy Thursday at a space and time which surely can be no more relevant and appropriate an occasion, and with the help of our next song 'Eleanor Rigby' by the Beatles, we will explore a little further how that liturgy and worship, so expressive of this sense of community and togetherness which I have espoused, might help us further to travel together and share our stories as we continue this journey throughout Holy Week.