



Embrace and Renewal: Listening to the Music of the Cross

Sermon given on Thursday 28th March during the Maundy Thursday Eucharist

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.

Eleanor Rigby by The Beatles

For many of you tonight, perhaps, this will be your first foray into a series of Holy Week meditations that I am offering throughout this week based on my book 'Six More Songs'.

You might already know that the book like its predecessor 'Songs for the Soul' published in 2017, examines how modern secular but globally iconic pieces of popular music might be used as fresh resources to look anew at the meaning and significance of the Christian Faith. But what is new, for me and for you, is how the songs can relate specifically to the story and journey of Holy Week and how we might see all our faith journeys and stories nestling within this, the greatest faith story and journey of them all.

On Monday and Tuesday night we looked at the song 'Piano Man' composed and sung by Billy Joel. He the Piano Man sings and plays to a disparate and broken group of people in a downtown bar, all wishing for something better in life, and yet he is their 'wounded healer' as we discover that he too has known a much better life. The parallels with the upper room which is where we are tonight were not hard to draw. A group of disparate disciples gathered round *their* wounded healer each in their own way doubting, angry and disappointed souls, creatures of the night, wondering where and how it was all going to end, about to share a meal with a strange and powerful friend who has asked them to leave everything and follow him.

Tonight, we turn to the Beatles 'Eleanor Rigby'. In one sense it is an incredibly sad song, almost a tragic one, about the intense loneliness and unfulfilled ambitions of a priest and one of his parishioners, a strong echo of the customers in the Piano Bar. Eleanor Rigby, a stalwart of the church who in this song is clearing up after a wedding in the church but who hides a crippling solitude matched only by an intense yearning to be noticed and loved - so - she keeps her face in a jar by the door. Father McKenzie her priest finds himself, perhaps after a lifetime's ministry, in an obscure downtown parish where nobody comes to church. Darning his socks in

the middle of the night, writing a sermon that no one will hear. And then the song finally brings these two lost souls together. He conducts Eleanor Rigby's funeral who died as she lived, with no one there, and Father McKenzie walks away from the grave, wiping the dirt from his hands.

Well, I can hear you thinking, what on earth has a song like this got to do with this solemn and beautiful liturgy tonight?! Simply this. Because when we come to Church we miss sometimes the most obvious and important fact of all. We come together, in a specific place, and at a specific time. And as I argued with the song 'Piano Man', that is a crucial observation for two reasons. Not only because pain and disappointment when it is shared brings people together, and that being in a community as Rowan Williams has argued is where we discover the essence of our self - understanding and our own true identities. And if you look at the story of the Last Supper it is all about that. Above all, it is about the sharing of mutual pain and hurt, Jesus' included, and it leads to some pretty searing truth telling about Jesus' own self-understanding about what's going to happen to him, and the future conduct and sifting of the disciples' beliefs and loyalties, whatever they thought was the truth about themselves.

But coming together at a specific place and time I said on Tuesday night also has a sacramental quality about it because all those stories of loss and dependence and the common need for companionship and the recognition and understanding of each other's needs is found within an occasion of liturgy and worship - and a Last Supper at that - where the broken bread was to become the ultimate symbol for our own and Jesus' brokenness and the Christian concept through that brokenness of what it means to belong to a damaged and yet redeemed community, itself a kind of wounded healer.

However sad and difficult this song is, Eleanor Rigby and Father McKenzie have one precious thing in common. Their mutual experience of disappointment and fragmentation gives them common symbolic ground - a kind of companionship through suffering, and it finds its existence and its expression in the simple presence of the sacred in both their lives, sharing the same sacred space of the Church as we are doing tonight, and for whom however obscure and difficult it might appear to be, God occupies a central place in their lives as he does in ours. Both the characters in our story tonight share a sacred context and an experience of liturgy and worship which helps them to confront the depth of their own needs, and to recognise that in many ways they inhabit a shared story. That despite their isolation they are nevertheless members of a community where failure and hope continue to wrestle together.

For us here tonight this liturgy is the *language* of our sacred community, and it helps us to recognise *our* common anxieties and *our* connectedness and indebtedness on to the other. It is hard to think of a more graphic and effective way of demonstrating that than through the drama of the foot washing. And this is important not only for the discovery of who and what we are as a community but in offering the world intelligent hope for the future, helping us to continue a

journey through a torn and fractured world, whilst being enabled to keep an eye on a God whose assurance is that he has already overcome it.