



Embrace and Renewal: Listening to the Music of the Cross

Sermon given on Good Friday, Friday 29th March, during Meditations and Music

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.

Heroes by David Bowie

‘When words fail, music speaks’ I challenge anyone here not to have at least one song or piece of music which transports them and lifts them into another world. Music which speaks like little else can to joy, hope, despair, depression, or just plain contentment that you are listening to something which speaks to you and communicates at a deep, wordless level. Why then should we not allow such music to feed us spiritually, especially considering that so much has the potential to put us in touch with the Divine or at least make us aware that there is something other and greater than this two-dimensional life?

Throughout this week I have been using pop songs chosen for my book ‘Six More Songs’ published last year as spiritual guides to help unlock new ways to interpret and understand the Easter story. Songs which have accompanied me throughout my life and which I firmly believe have formed part of that broad definition of spirituality which is what has contributed to making me a person of faith.

You have the lyrics of all the songs featured in the book with you, together with a leaflet which gives you an idea of what inspired me to write it and its predecessor ‘Songs for the Soul’ published in 2017.

On Monday, Tuesday and Thursday, we looked at ‘Piano Man’ by Billy Joel and ‘Eleanor Rigby’ by The Beatles, and to save time here if you want to read my addresses for those occasions, they will soon be available on the Cathedral website, along with a podcast of all the talks.

So welcome to what will be a very different - I might almost say unique - set of meditations for Good Friday. It will be noisier than usual (although you will see from your programmes there is plenty of opportunity for silence and reflection built in).

It may well challenge some who might have different expectations for a reflective Good Friday afternoon. But all I would ask you to do is keep a focus on what all these songs might mean for us, for our faith, and for a fresh perspective on the terrible and glorious story of Good Friday, and I hope that the thoughts and theological reflections I have for you will help you to see with new eyes what our modern musical world can offer us to deepen and enrich our faith.

This afternoon we are going to look at and listen to four songs, beginning with 'Heroes' by David Bowie. In the song the two Heroes are a pair of lovers from his own musical entourage who he saw kissing and cuddling directly under the Berlin Wall, in full view of the guards in the towers. It made such an impression on Bowie that the song 'Heroes' was the result. For him it was a two fingered gesture to that which would seek to forbid such human togetherness. At this moment they were heroes holding out for what it is that makes us human in the face of that which would normalise inhumanity.

In a society which seems obsessed with superheroes, and there are many examples on stage and screen, here is a heroism borne of the sheer effort to hang on to those things which define us as human beings. Contrary to a heroism which can stop a speeding bullet, defeat aliens or save the world, a Christian version of heroism looks very different. It resides rather in powerlessness, in a tentative and vulnerable kiss and cuddle in the very shadow of an enormous symbol of powerful hate. It places human virtue not in a violent realm where it must win through, but in a place of patient endurance where non-competitive passivity becomes the distinct hallmark of Christian behaviour.

And it's not hard to translate all that to the non-competitive passivity of the Passion narrative. It was a passivity which frustrated Pilate and then made him wonder. It was a passivity, a powerlessness, which refused the temptation to come down from the cross. It was a passivity which continued to show love in the face of blind hatred: 'Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing'. And this is what makes Jesus a true hero, and you may never have thought of the crucifixion in quite this way. The cross is not about the *eradication* of pain but its *transformation*. The true heroism of Jesus at this precise moment lies in the ability of his human body through its fragility to achieve the highest form of witness, bearing as it does the scars which have redeemed us and made possible the prospect of transformation and renewal.

And this leads us to one more important observation about what we might describe as the heroism of the cross. The song suggests that the insolent, counter-cultural behaviour of a lovers embrace under tyranny's gaze displayed a heroism that would be 'just for one day', before the forces of darkness would again succeed in segregation, and the lovers parting never to be re-enacted seemed inevitable. However, one day represented nevertheless an act of defiance against the status quo. Love which was that tiny act of destabilisation which became a voice in the wilderness proclaiming that however menacing and powerful oppression could be, one day it could and would be beaten. Little could those lovers have known that their fragile embrace, that most ordinary example of human behaviour and

affection in the shadow of that enormous emblem of hate was going to be 'The ghost in the machine' and would be the catalyst for a song which would eventually play its part in that emblem's demise.

In 1987, a mere eighteen months before the wall came down, Bowie gave a live concert yards from the wall, during which he sang 'Heroes'. Unbeknown to Bowie, thousands of East Berliners had gathered on the other side of the wall to listen to the concert, despite the aggression of the security forces trying to break up the gathering. A song which had been composed ten years earlier had now become an anthem of hope and defiance. From the other side of the wall, Bowie heard thousands of voices singing along with the song. Years later when Bowie recalled that moment during an interview, he became overcome with emotion. On the day of Bowie's death on 11th January 2016, the German Foreign office tweeted the following message: *'Goodbye David Bowie. You are now among heroes. Thank you for helping to bring down the wall'*.

At the Last Supper Jesus tells his disciples that he will not drink of the fruit of the vine again until he does so with them in God's Kingdom. But that vision too is rooted in the ordinary; he washes their feet to show them by what route this dream will be fulfilled. And the foot washing was the ultimate lesson that the vulnerability and passivity of love is the most powerful weapon of all. And here the song is at one with the Gospel because it brings that kind of heroism within the grasp of all of us. It is in the ordinary things that we do for each other that we may count of little worth which may turn out to be acts which are nothing less than life affirming and life saving for others.

This is why and how a secular pop song like 'Heroes' and many others like them can become a powerful example of a deeply ingrained understanding that love *is* stronger than death. Here is an ancient language that is given fresh interpretation by a contemporary song whose poetic vision can show us anew that the things of God are still a force for the world's changing.