



## **Embrace and Renewal: Listening to the Music of the Cross**

Sermon given on Good Friday, Friday 29<sup>th</sup> 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.

### **Solsbury Hill by Peter Gabriel**

Of all the songs studied this afternoon, the song 'Solsbury Hill' written and sung by Peter Gabriel is perhaps the most illustrative for the argument I am pursuing that all the songs I have highlighted do that thing which, as far as the Christian faith is concerned, centuries of religious thinking have sought to do; to try and make some transcendent sense of the nature and characteristics of our experience as human beings.

Gabriel was a member of the band Genesis which was about to break through into the big time, but Solsbury Hill is a musical poetic testimony to Gabriel's own Damascus road experience, a moment when he realised that because of disillusionment with Genesis and the music industry and some challenging personal and family issues, something needed to change. The story refers to a moment when one night he found himself at a small, flat topped hill, the site of an ancient Iron Age hill fort (from where the city of Bath can be overlooked) and there had something of a spiritual experience, something external which was given to him and which convinced Gabriel to make a dramatic change to his life. The lyrics leave us in no doubt that Gabriel was compelled to listen and pay attention; he had no choice in the matter.

On the back cover of 'Six More Songs' is a testimony as to why I undertook this project of using pop songs to focus on the Christian faith. Many are no longer familiar or comfortable with traditional religious language, symbolism and interpretation, for whom a faith perspective seems no longer relevant or effective to describe life's often momentous changes and transitions. And yet when we have some sense of the ultimate, we need to express the depth of meaning experienced in these odd and intense situations. The call to submit to a human need to give that experience a mental framework and a 'home', a description and an understanding, is overpowering.

'Solsbury Hill' precisely does that thing of helping us to find the sacred nestling within the secular. Peter Gabriel's experience on Solsbury Hill means that in a very real sense this secular space becomes a sacred one because of its *transformative* quality; because of what it does to and for Gabriel's life. The song has proved to be a spiritual anthem for many people either seeking to make sense of their own turnaround experiences, or merely wanting to equate with Gabriel's own experience.

The magnitude of what Peter Gabriel gave up should not be underestimated. It was a courageous step which entailed leaving the security of a life which promised fame and fortune and taking a leap into the unknown, but into an awareness of the potential for something transformative to occur. Gabriel himself once described the process as a 'letting go'. He said, 'It's about being prepared to lose what you have for what you might get, or what you are for what you might be.... By letting go you create the space for something new to happen' We talked of the non-competitive passivity of our two lovers in the shadow of the Berlin Wall showing the power of love to overcome the forces of hate, and here perhaps we have another kind of passivity - the requirement to 'let go' because there is nothing left to do except stare into the night - to stand and watch and wait and listen and to receive.

In case you are wondering where all this is leading, let me assure you that it is leading to one of the most fundamental things to understand about Christ's passion and death. For the whole story is about Jesus being handed over from activity and autonomy to passivity and dependence - on the whims and cruelty and control of others - a true 'letting go' without which the story of salvation would almost certainly not have been possible.

There is the 'letting go' of Gethsemane, when 'Father if you are willing, remove this cup from me' becomes 'Yet not my will but yours will be done' and there is the 'letting go' of the cross when 'My God, My God why have you forsaken me?' resolves into 'Father into your hands I commend my spirit'. And 'letting go' has everything to do with facing up to our worst fears. Here is the closest parallel between a modern secular song and the often attested Christian experience ultimately personified and fulfilled in the story of the crucifixion, when anxiety, depression or the fear of death and annihilation threaten to overcome us, and we find ourselves silently and passively staring into the night as Gabriel did. And it is a desperation with which Jesus would have been well acquainted in his ministry. I am struck by the number of people in the Gospels who encounter Jesus in need of healing because of a protracted period of *waiting* which has driven them into a state of hopelessness and inertia, and their subsequent encounter with Jesus is experienced as much through a letting go borne of despair as it is a conviction that Jesus can and will do something for them. And this too becomes an essential, integral part of the story of Good Friday. I am convinced that the words of the so-called repentant thief 'Remember me when you come into your Kingdom' are words of pleading borne of a state of hopelessness when, hovering between life and death, there is nothing else left but to throw yourself upon the mercy of God.

‘Lord, I believe, help my unbelief’ cries the desperate father of his severely demonically possessed son.

But the glory of Good Friday is that here is when we realise that even the frightened, vulnerable creatures of the night that we are, even the confused, questioning, non-functioning beings we think we have become are still valued and accepted by God. This is surely the ultimate reassurance the repentant thief had when he was told ‘Today you will be with me in Paradise’ And from the cross it’s the assurance we all have because we are forgiven, despite the fact that we do not know what we are doing. Despite all the evidence to the contrary, our sheer *belovedness* is irresistible to God, and too powerful to ignore. And the result is safety, acceptance and joy. In the song ‘Solsbury Hill’, each verse ends with an assurance to Peter Gabriel from the eagle that has appeared to him in the night that he would be *taken home*, and that assurance leads Gabriel in the final verse to assert that now no longer would he need a physical companion for that task. His new-found liberty and sense of purpose because of his experience on Solsbury Hill would be his new guides to a rediscovered life.

The song is a modern parable centred on the moment when we learn to relinquish what is ours, and it is reflected in the experience of Jesus himself as he passes from action to passion, and whose journey to the cross is one of utter renunciation. As such song and Gospel both hint at a behaviour which offers a new vision for society, not only our own passover into the needs of the other, but society’s too. From a state of selfishness and misunderstanding into another, distinctive kind of belonging.