



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.

Into the Fire by Thirteen Senses

So we come to the final song in this afternoon's exploration of how modern secular resources can shine a light onto an ancient Christian story. And it is probably the least well known one of the four songs I have chosen for today, and the six which make up the book 'Six More Songs'. It's the kind of song people are familiar with once they hear it, and that's because it has been used several times in the media and on television, because its lyrics speak directly to the human condition and the ability of human beings to endure, to persevere and ultimately to triumph. The American hospital drama 'Grey's Anatomy' is a good example.

Like all the songs 'Into the Fire' has forever been on my playlist, but of all the songs I think it is the one closest to me personally and professionally. The singer of this song describes himself as someone from the outside looking in, whose highs and lows reflect the experience of the encounter of life's extremes often travelling from one to the other, giving dramatic substance to life's joys and despairs. So 'Into the Fire' is a bit of an anthem for those who suffer from mental health issues, and how the song speaks to feelings of entrapment, confinement and sadness.

It is one of encouragement to those who find themselves at the limits of their endurance, the margins of their tolerance, when it seems impossible to feel or care anymore, when senses are dying. The depth of despair can be felt because the singer tells his injured audience to try and realise and experience the existence of another state which is completely different and which gives sufferers cause to hope. He draws on the creation to illustrate his point; to spring which after summer has passed and winter has done its worst promises to bring everything to life again. To the air which is free and clear, a canopy for mountains which however high they rise from the ground and try to touch the sky, are still wedded to the earth. And a biblical reference comparing Samaritan to sin which in this context I have never interpreted as a movement from good to bad, but one

from confinement to the discovery of wholeness to the people we really are, a rich diversity of humanity that contains within it both good and bad, a pastiche of what it is to be fully human. And this is all the more powerful because I think the singer identifies himself as a fellow sufferer. And we have encountered that in at least two other songs we looked at earlier in the week; Eleanor Rigby and Father McKenzie who are made companions through their mutual loneliness, and Billy Joel whose comforting music to a bar full of lost and lonely people reflects his own brokenness. Our singer knows what it's like to be incapacitated and repressed, who can see life but cannot join in, turning white and senses dying, who sitting in gloom, way down where the lights are dimmer, and feeling low, feels far removed from the action. It is descriptive language about his *own* confinement which would be familiar to many others enduring the same experience. Indeed, the song formed a backdrop to the mental as well as physical impairment of my own mother and my need and desire to try and make sense of why and how mental health issues reside within a spiritual and religious context.

Let me ask you a question which you may never have considered before in quite this way: do you think Jesus ever got worried, anxious or depressed? If God did empty himself and take the form of a fully human servant, it is surely hard to imagine he did not. Christ's experience in the Garden of Gethsemane reveals one of humanity's most powerful entrapments, the predisposition to worry. In the words 'Father.... remove this cup from me' is contained the worst that worry can do; the fear of what tomorrow might bring. The fear of failure, of defeat, of grief, of being overwhelmed by bad things beyond our control to limit or understand.

And this throws new light on the Passion of Jesus.

In Solsbury Hill we talked about the 'handedoverness' of Peter Gabriel, whose experience atop that Iron Age hill fort necessitated a 'letting go' to what lay ahead of him and what he had to do, which we said reflected the handing over of Jesus from action to passion, from activity and autonomy into passivity and dependence - an opening up to the cruelty and control of others. But here we might argue that all of that was amply to demonstrate an overwhelming that wasn't just physical but mental too. Here, 'handing over' isn't just about Jesus' eventual crucifixion but the crushing worry and anxiety about a whole lot of other things which *might* or *might not* happen - a fear of the future indeed.

Described in this way It is easy to see why *Jesus'* experience might be defined as like one who is low, from the outside looking in, watching helplessly events unfold in front of him. And perhaps it was a deep and personal empathy with his people's refugee status which inspired Jesus' understanding that the Samaritan as well as the Jew was made in God's image and that tax gatherers and sinners were equally worthy of the Kingdom of God. Perhaps it was a shared common ancestry which enabled Jesus to make deep connections with his own life, helping him to understand the depth and intensity of how human beings could suffer.

This is why 'Into the Fire' is not a comfortable song. To face mental health issues is to look deep within the heart of God, and why and how the price for seeking the

companionship of twelve others was the ultimate isolation and condemnation of the cross. And for our purposes today this is crucial because this becomes part and parcel of God's redemptive activity. It is the challenging image of Jesus himself, a marginalised person congregating with all those others on some kind of border which dictates automatically where the concerns and practices of the church should also be located. And it begins when those two very first disciples become Apostles of the very earliest Christian church, Mary and John, witnesses to the crucifixion of the one they loved. Their donation by Jesus into the love and care of each other is a demonstration that it is that patchwork quilt which is the lives, loves and experiences of those who are around us and intersect with our lives - people who are given to us - who become fellow travellers on the road and who are essential for any contemplation of Christian outreach.

In 'Brothers in Arms' we said that our dying soldier's assertion that even those against whom we fight are our sisters and brothers, a common humanity with an interconnectedness which was a true theology of neighbour, and reflected in that all-inclusive ministry of Jesus. A rootedness which also included a corporate belonging to God. Now, here, we see that same theology of friendship, but one that doesn't merely define our identity as a Christian community, but one which communicates hope through a genuine solidarity with those whose mental health may result in isolation and exclusion. An empowerment given context and meaning through the communities of which we are a part.

And our last song reflects that hope back to us, as the singer of our song faces up to and names his burdens and pains enabling him to encourage others to face up to and name theirs. And so through companionship and understanding exhorts them to put their hands 'into the fire' and to re-engage with the world with their wounds and scars acknowledged and accepted. Here is a secular song with a powerful sacred message because it speaks of a death and resurrection truth which is about a call to wholeness. To be enabled to carry on in spite of injuries to hands, feet and side which have done their best to entrap and imprison. Nobody has ever suggested that such a death and resurrection experience is not enormously costly, but perhaps part of that cost *may* be having to grasp the enormity of our potential as people of faith, rather than shrinking from that which we consider is an impediment to our living. Maybe, on this Good Friday, putting our 'hands into the fire' should mean nothing less than this.