

Sermon – 22.11.20

Music in Worship

*In the Lord I'll be ever thankful
In the Lord I shall rejoice
Look to God, do not be afraid
Lift up your voices, the Lord is near
Lift up your voices, the Lord is near (Taize) (Singing)*

When I was asked to write a sermon for this week – Christ the King – and to focus on music in worship I have to say it gave me a thrill. As most of you will be aware, music is a massive passion of mine, having, apparently, started singing before I could speak. Mum says I used to sing along to the radio from about 6 months old.

So, I thought I would begin today's sermon by singing a Taize chant – one that we are probably all familiar with. And I will come back to it at the end when perhaps we can all sing it through together a couple of times. Taize has a rich history. I have never been there, but would love to do so. Much of the purpose of singing chants is to enable the worshipper to enter into prayer. The idea is that by singing repetitively your mind is unlocked, it ceases to think and is carried into space where it is easier to receive the presence of God. When I have attended services that have been purely Taize in style I find that I always leave in a more peaceful state. My mind has been released and the very act of singing means that my body has taken the lead. Chemicals are released like endorphins and oxytocin, a stress and anxiety-relieving hormone. For many people this is one of the best ways to pray.

The Taize chant I opened with happens to be in English, but of course, one of the things about Taize chants is that they are in a variety of languages – Latin, Spanish, French, German, to name just a few. And this is the other aspect of music. It is a language in and of itself. It does not need to be literally comprehended by the mind in order to be understood by the soul. Whatever language we sing in, it will contribute to our worship. In fact, at times it is better if we are singing in a foreign language in order to let the music do its work.

One of my favourite short classical pieces to sing is Vivaldi's Gloria. I think I first sang this when I was in King Edward VII's choir – the school across the road from St. Mark's. It's only a couple of minutes long, but it is thrilling. Here the words are in Latin – Gloria in Excelsis Deo (Glory to God in the highest in English) and they are simply sung over and over again. It doesn't matter that the words are not in anyone's native language or that they repeat, the thrill is in the structure of the piece. To demonstrate this, I am going to play just the first minute of this.

Vivaldi's Gloria (first minute)

As you can hear you have 30 seconds of fast orchestral music before the choir storms in with the first Gloria. In some ways it is reminiscent of the beginning of Zadok the Priest for those familiar with that piece by Handel. The orchestra builds up the tension, so that once the singing starts you're ready to give it your all – either as a singer or a listener. Glorifying God becomes instinctive, visceral almost. You are carried away by the energy of the music and the joy of praise. This is an example of a composer who knew exactly how to link the

meaning with the execution. And of course, Vivaldi was a priest. No need to think – the music will tell you how you feel and what you mean. And God will be listening.

Of course, music in worship is not always about praise. In the same way that prayer has many meanings and often more than one purpose, so does our use of music in communing with God.

For several years now I have done the Holy Saturday vigil at St. Mark's, and in designing that worship I have always known that it needed music within it to enable us to enter such a dark space, full of mourning. One of the pieces I have used on more than one occasion is the *Lacrimosa* from Mozart's *Requiem*. I shall play a little of it in a minute. When you hear it just listen for the way in which the orchestra speaks with the voices. This is deep despair combined with the fear of God. The strings have a relentless and repetitive pattern that goes in and out like the never-ending waves upon the rocks. And the choir lean into their notes as if you can feel them moving their bodies in the rhythm of mourning. In this case I will let you know the words before you hear music. As expected it is sung in Latin, but in English they are:

Full of tears will be that day
When from the ashes shall arise
The guilty man to be judged;
Therefore spare him, O God,
Merciful Lord Jesus,
Grant them eternal rest. Amen.

Mozart's Lacrimosa (first 46 seconds)

Sometimes you need music to help you delve into the darkness. Other times you need music to help you heal or help you through it when you are already there. Recently in a PCC meeting, Pat Hunt read out the words to a Taize chant. This was done in the context of the difficult times we are all living in at the moment and it happened to be one of my favourite chants. It's called *Nade te turbe*. It is in Spanish, but I certainly think that this is one of those times where, although it may be helpful to know what the words mean, when actually singing it, it is better that you can allow the peace within it to enter you without it having to go through your mind first. Pat read it in Spanish and I really appreciated the fact that she did. The words in English mean:

Let nothing disturb you,
Let nothing frighten you,
He who has God nothing lacks.
Let nothing disturb you,
Let nothing frighten you,
God alone suffices.

In a minute I will sing the melody. It is a very gentle melody that has two sections and the beginning of each section is the same in both word and tune, emphasising the meaning and direction to allow yourself to be free of your burdens. The tune rises only slightly after that and both times it is when God is mentioned, as if the presence of God will rise you up also. Finally, the last 3 notes are longer than any of the others, slowing down the pace as if to bring you the peace you seek. Many of you will be familiar with it and it goes as follows:

Nada te tube (singing)

In a minute I am going to suggest that we all sing the Taize that I opened with together – In the Lord I'll be ever thankful. In a similar way to Nada te turbe, the shape of this chant means that when we start to acknowledge the presence of God and our praise of him or her, the tune leads us there also, rising up and taking us with it. Maybe when we sing it you can notice this and let yourself go into it. Don't think about it, just let go.

I was asked to talk about music in worship and I hope that I have given some insight into it. But what I would also say is that one of the wonderful things about music is that much of our response to it and the way it makes us feel is unconscious. I enjoy looking at the ins and outs of it, but it isn't necessary in order for it to do its job. The most important thing is to let the music take the lead. Partner it and dance with it and the meaning will be there. And it will be your own unique meaning. So, as we sing In the Lord I'll be Ever Thankful together now, remember this. We'll sing it twice through and you can let yourself fall into it.

In the Lord I'll Be Ever Thankful (x2 – singing)