

Message for September 25, 2022

Philippians 2:1-11

Like many other people, I made a point of getting up early this past Monday morning to watch the Queen's funeral. For me it was most impressive from the first procession to Westminster Abbey to the committal service at Windsor Castle. As I watched it, and have thought about it since, one of the things that struck me the most is the crucial role that music played. There was of course the music played during the three processions ranging from the pipe bands to the brass bands to the sound of a muffled drum. The services were also filled with music, ranging from a piper to the trumpeters to the magnificent organs accompanying the choirs' and the congregations' singing. All of this music, whether it was played or sung, had quite an impact. Indeed for me one of the most poignant events in a day full of them came at the end of the committal service when the Queen's personal piper stood in an open doorway playing a lament. He was silhouetted by the bright light behind him and then, while still playing, he slowly turned and walked away towards the light. Talk about symbolism! Truly the music in its varied forms played such an important role and had such an impact but, though we may not always realize it, such is usually the case. One person who certainly realized the power and influence of music was St. Paul.

In today's scripture passage Paul told the Philippians that if they truly wanted to live as Christians then they should not be self-centred; rather they should always try to put others with their needs first. In fact Paul implied, they should strive to be like Christ himself. And just what was Jesus like?

Interestingly enough, when Paul tried to describe what Jesus was like he quoted a hymn that they quite likely sang all the time. According to this hymn, Christ is really God himself, but despite this Jesus did not go around demanding that he be treated as such. Not at all! Instead of coming to this earth in all of his divine power and glory for example, Jesus humbled himself by choosing to be born as a mortal. And even then, when he became a human being, he wasn't born a prince in a palace, rather he was born to a peasant couple in a stable. Jesus' birth was humble as was the rest of his life; it was because he had come to serve others rather than be served. Christ in fact was so humble that he had even endured the most shameful, painful death imaginable, and he did this for

the sake of others. And yet said Paul, because Jesus was so humble and obedient, he has been given the greatest reward of all. To quote the hymn itself:

“Therefore God exalted him to the highest place,
and gave him the name that is above every name.
That at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow
in heaven and on earth.
And every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is lord,
to the glory of God the Father.”

In today’s scripture passage Paul told the Philippians about who and what Jesus is. He also told them, and by implication us too, that if we would truly live Christian lives then we will love and respect one another using Christ himself as our example. As I thought about this though, what I found most striking wasn’t so much *what* Paul said but rather *how* he said it. He used a hymn.

I suspect that more often than not, we take the music that we sing on a Sunday morning for granted. I announce a hymn number, Josh plays the tune, we stand up and sing the hymn and that’s that. Likewise, I also suspect that we take the anthems for granted as well. Like the hymns, the anthem breaks up the service and marks a break from listening to me talk. But how often do we pay attention, and I mean *really* pay attention to what we are singing or listening to? We should because our church music has a far greater influence on us than what we often realize. This was brought home to me years ago when I was at a General Assembly.

Every year at assembly a special luncheon is held where the E. H. Johnson Award is presented. This reward is given to a person who is deemed to be on the ‘cutting edge of mission’. Whenever I was at assembly, I made a point of attending the luncheon as the speakers were invariably very interesting. One year when I was a commissioner, the award winner was John Bell of the Iona Community. John Bell, whom I have met a couple of times, is a Scottish Presbyterian minister and a noted composer and hymn-writer. Perhaps his best known composition is one of my favourite hymns, “Will you come and follow me”.

In his acceptance speech, Bell said that the music that we sing and listen to in church is supposed to reflect what we as Christians believe. He wondered though if this is really true and that it may actually be the other way around; that the music that we sing and listen to shapes our beliefs. By way of example, Bell used Christmas music. What was that first Christmas like? We all know! A silent and holy night where all was calm and all was bright. We can also think of the beloved Christmas hymn “Away in a Manger”.

“The cattle are lowing, the baby awakes,
But little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes.”

As Bell pointed out though, there is absolutely no biblical basis for this at all; indeed do these words sound realistic? Or to use another example, Bell said that we often think of Jesus as being the perfect child. In the words of one hymn:

“All through his wondrous childhood,
He would honour and obey.”

Bell noted that this sounds so nice, but what do we actually know about Jesus’ childhood? Virtually nothing except for the time when Jesus ran away from Mary and Joseph to stay behind in the temple. Now what Jesus did that day is understandable, but it was hardly the behaviour of a child who always honours and obeys his or her parents! Or to use another example, quoting directly from Bell’s speech:

“In Australia during a Bible study I was leading on the raising of Lazarus, a troubled consultant wanted to take issue with me because I had read that when Jesus saw Mary weep and those around her similarly distressed, he was ‘indignant’. I thought that perhaps he – like me – was still a little sleepy as we were meeting at 6:15 a.m.

‘That’s the word in the New English Bible’, I informed him.

‘What does it mean?’ he asked.

‘Angry’, I replied, ‘in fact, very angry’.

‘Oh no’, he protested. ‘That can’t be right. I have been a Christian all my life and I have never known Jesus to be angry. What does it say in the Greek?’

I said, ‘My man, at this time in the morning you’re lucky I can read the English never mind the Greek. But if we had a Greek New Testament we would discover that Jesus was really angry’.

He may have been a Christian all his life, but had he read Luke’s Gospel in which there is hardly a chapter which does not have Jesus raising his voice and letting his displeasure be known?

But I knew the hymnbook on which this man had been reared. It had very few hymns about the life of Christ. But one which did deal with the 33 years in between supplied the heretical insight,

‘No one marked an angry word
Who ever heard him speak.’”

Bell then went on to ask us, “What about the time when Jesus made a whip and chased out the moneychangers?” When we read the gospels, it is abundantly clear that Jesus was a passionate person but we would hardly ever know this from some of, or perhaps most of the music that we sing and listen to in church. In virtually all, if not all of our music, Jesus is portrayed as being so meek and mild that he is almost inhuman. And what is the unspoken message behind this? That there is no place for anger and perhaps even passion in a Christian’s life.

Truly as Bell went on to say, the music that we sing and listen to in church is so very important. It is because it not only reflects what we believe but perhaps even more so, it also shapes what we believe. St. Paul certainly realized this and that is why, when he wanted to teach the Philippians about the nature of Jesus and what their lives as his people ought to be like, he quoted a familiar hymn that many of them probably sang all the time without giving it a passing thought. And I wonder, how often do we sing and listen to the music on a Sunday morning without giving it a passing thought? How often would we be

comforted, challenged or perhaps even shocked if we gave our music more than a passing thought?

Pastoral Prayer

Gracious God, hear us as we come to you in prayer on this, the first Sunday of autumn. We thank you for the wonderful beauty of this season as the leaves start to change their colours, and we thank you too for the goodness of your creation, filling our physical needs as it does.

In your wisdom you have created us not only as physical beings but also as spiritual beings, and so we thank you for filling these needs as well. We are surrounded by the beauty of your creation and so much more including the books we read, the shows we watch, and the music that we listen to. We also have our families and friends who fill our need to be loved, needed, and appreciated, and for them we give you thanks.

We thank you this day for fulfilling our lives through your Son and the Spirit. You have shown us how to live if we truly wish to be at peace with you and others. You grant us the peace of your forgiveness at those times when we fail to care and to share, and for this we thank you.

We pray this day for all who are not at peace, whether it be with themselves or with others. We pray for all who feel hurt, angry, or alienated. We pray for all who have no peace because they and their nation are at war.

Even as we rejoice in your creation this autumn morning, we remember the people of Puerto Rico and our Maritime provinces in the wake of Hurricane Fiona.

We pray this morning for all those who are struggling to get by as food prices continue to rise, and we pray for the many businesses struggling to get by because they cannot find enough employees.

With all of this in mind, we pray for everyone in positions of authority as they try and deal with not only these, but so many other challenging issues including such as climate change and how to care for your creation.

We ask these things in your Son's name. Amen

