

The Year of Music: St Thomas-on-The Bourne, September 29th 2019

Last Tuesday for Jan and for me, time itself came to a juddering halt. Why? Because we received the news that Garth Hutton, one of our dear friends in this parish had suddenly and unexpectedly died.

Some of you might not have known Garth, though he was here at St Thomas' most Sundays, handing out service books, being a sidesman, ringing the bell, tidying up, counting the money in the vestry. He sat with Betty, his wife, on the back row, unobtrusive, quiet, almost diffident, but he was a righteous man, a good man, a just man, a faithful soldier and servant, a devout Christian disciple whose beliefs underlay and informed his professional and his personal life. He was the kind of man who simply through his demeanour and his loving-kindness made the world a better and more wholesome place. His faith went through his life like the word 'Southend' goes through a stick of rock. And we miss him, terribly.

So, why did time stand still for us? It wasn't just the shock of the news of Garth's death, nor was it the loss of a lovely friend; it was the reminder that death is a great and terrible mystery.

And of course at such a moment our faith is called upon. You and I are people who believe that our Lord has risen from the dead and has opened for us the gates of everlasting life. But in the face of desolating grief how can we express and explore that belief?

We can turn to prayer, to silence, to poetry, but especially, especially to music. Let me offer you an example:

I'm going to ask Andrew to play a few bars of Bach. Here we go...[**Wachet auf**]...

There is something about the lightness and happy certainty of that music which takes us towards the joy of Christ's resurrection. It gets very, very close to penetrating the mystery; it doesn't explain; it doesn't preach, it takes us out of ourselves and suggests that beyond the confines of our mortality there is, in truth, the hope of eternity. If you want that music expressed in Biblical terms: it's that moment when Mary Magdalene encounters the Risen Christ and reaches out to him, and he says 'Do not touch me...' It's utterly tender, filled with grace and hope and it sings of transcendence.

Today in the parish we are launching 'The Year of Music'. It's a brilliant idea, a way of celebrating all that this church and parish can offer and sharing it with others; again, not with words, not with preaching, not with wrapped-up explanations. Instead it will be revealing the riches of our amazing inheritance and, I pray, by its very nature the music will take all of us closer towards the mystery of God; for music has that astonishing capacity to enrich and to satisfy, but at the same time it points beyond itself to the mystery at the heart of all mysteries.

It's deeply healing and refreshing...but often we just taken it for granted. Again, let me give an example. I'm going to ask Andrew to play the opening bars of a piece of music by Vaughan Williams...[**Sine Nomine ...'For all the saints'...**]

I can guarantee that you could now sing the next few bars; that's what I mean about music being healing and refreshing. It's healing because Music has the ability to bring together our experiences of the past and the present and knit those things together. It's refreshing because It enters the very neurons and synapses of our brains and lodges there, or, if you prefer, it seeps into our souls but can then be called up to give us hope, even in our darkest moments. And that is part of the rich heritage of this parish...you and I have a repertoire of hymns and anthems amazing in their breadth and depth. Think about it: we take part in singing well over 400 hymns per year, and we listen to about 100 anthems, and I haven't even mentioned the 100 or so organ voluntaries...

So, I want to suggest that in the face of the terrible mystery of death, music can help us cross the barrier towards resurrection, and in the face of the mystery of life, it can ease us towards the depths of the beauty and the glory of God.

I offer you two quotations; the first from Edward Elgar who once said, 'The trees are singing my music, or am I singing theirs?' For him Music had something within itself which partook of the very nature of the Creation; it had an intertwining, elemental and haunting beauty.

My next quotation comes from T S Eliot's *Dry Salvages* in the *Four Quartets*, in which he wrote:

To apprehend

The point of intersection of the timeless

With time, is an occupation for the saint —

No occupation either, but something given

And taken, in a lifetime's death in love,

Ardour and selflessness and self-surrender.

V

For most of us, there is only the unattended

Moment, the moment in and out of time,

The distraction fit, lost in a shaft of sunlight,

The wild thyme unseen, or the winter lightning

Or the waterfall, or music heard so deeply

That it is not heard at all, but you are the music

While the music lasts.

In this coming year that is what we shall be celebrating: the capacity of music to penetrate the mystery of death and the mystery of life; the capacity of music to refresh our souls and bring us joy and peace even at times of darkness; the capacity of music to take us beyond ourselves into the divine beauty of Creation and at death towards the music of heaven.

May this Year of Music be a profound and wonderful blessing to us all...

The Rt Revd Christopher Herbert.