**SERMON FOR TRINITY 2 / MUSIC SUNDAY | 13.06.21**

**1 Samuel 16: 14-23; Ephesians 5: 1-2, 15, 19-20; St Matthew 11: 16-19**

***Listen,* he said; and I said, *But I can’t hear anything.* *Then stop talking and you will hear…***

**I can’t do the Cambridgeshire accent but that was part of a conversation with an old man in a field, trying to get me to listen to bird song. Eventually I did learn to hear those two tiny thrushes. And he was right. It was magical. But I had to be trained to hear them. And I had to be eager to do so.**

**As we celebrate Music Sunday today, the first reading seems highly appropriate. King Saul is coming to the end his life and so many of his plans are unraveling. As a result his head is full of what the account calls evil spirits but we might think of as the restlessness of an over active mind. And so his servants suggest some therapy: gentle harp music played by someone sensitive enough to know how to calm him down. Mood music, we might say. And lots of us use music in that way – a way of soothing our over active minds. Some will go for Classic FM, some for Radio 2, but the essence is the same. Whether it is Messiaen or Johnny Cash, music has an almost unique ability to take us out of ourselves.**

**But ask someone why they enjoy a particular style or even a particular piece and you will be left with raised shoulders. Because the ability of music to soothe, stimulate and excite us is not really possible to sum up in words, and that is its virtue. Music is not able to be reduced to explanations and in that sense is not ‘understandable’. It may evoke all kinds of emotions in us – and delight or annoy us; but we are largely at a loss to know why we feel as we do.**

**Which is why music is often the perfect medium for religion and especially for worship. What that old bird twitcher was helping me to do was to listen out for what was already there but which I would otherwise not have noticed. In the same way we can’t pray unless God is prompting us and encouraging us – to listen. Unless Christ is literally at our side, praying for us – almost inside of us - pushing us, channeling our feeble attempts and making good what we can’t do very well, we won’t make much progress not hear what God has to say.**

**As Karl Barth once said, God is not passively waiting for us to sing and to pray, telling us to work just a bit harder if we want to be able to hear his voice. No, the way that he works is to keep prompting us, showing us how, and making us glad when we have managed to do it ourselves. Like abandoning ourselves into a good piece of music we have to learn to hand ourselves over to God and allow him to take over: to soothe away all the other noises that disturb us.**

**And that is how our worship in Church works too. All to often we come to it wondering why it is as it is: what this order, why these words and so on. We come to it with the skills of our ‘day jobs’, trying to analyse the content and the structure – and sometime being quite ruthless about the bits that don’t seem to work for us.**

**But if we did that to a piece of music, we would completely ruin the experience. What music teaches us to do is to immerse ourselves in what we are hearing, not worrying too much if we miss bits or don’t see why the piece modulates here or goes off on a tangent there.**

**And in time, as we get very familiar with the piece, the song, the experience, whether we still understand it or not, we find that it would seem inconceivable that the order or the details would be altered. We anticipate those special moments ‘at the right time’ and it is the very familiarity that gives the work substance.**

**So music teaches us that understanding issues is not the be-all and end-all that we might have expected; the source of our comfort and reassurance is not about getting the point the first time around. Often it is in the umpteenth hearing that the penny begins to drop and we see the bigger picture.**

**Which begs the question: should we adapt, abbreviate or even drop some elements of our services which just don’t seem that easy to work out? Sometimes I think we should. But as Timothy Radcliffe has written: *if we are dealing with the big issues of life: joy, love, death - or the choices that God seems to have made - can we really ever expect to understand these in the first hearing? Do we not have to allow some of these challenges to go beyond an easy understanding until they truly penetrate into our souls?* It may take listening to a piece of music lots of times before we really appreciate it.**

**I think, then, that music teaches us the value of repetition – giving something time to say what it needs to say so that its deeper meanings can reveal themselves ‘at the very core of our being’.**

**So: hearing, really hearing: not having to understand everything; and being patient. But there is another thing about music that I think we all recognise: the ability of music to transform and to make words beautiful.**

**Look at any set of lyrics – lieder to contemporary songs and even some of our hymns – the words on the page can be incredibly flat and uninspiring. But put to the right tune, those words come alive! Which is one reason why we are missing singing hymns so much and why texts like the Gloria seems so lack-lustre at the moment.**

**And finally, music makes memories. So often we warm to pieces because of where we heard them or who we heard them with. Couples talk of ‘our song’, choirs will recall special performances, solo singers will remember special gigs and so on. Music takes us to those places and those times in ways that even poetry is often unable to do.**

**It is for all of these reasons that St Paul in his letter to the Ephesians links music with the authentic Christian life, with the exploration of God’s purposes and a new life in the Spirit. So he encourages us to sing *and make melody in your hearts, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything.***

**Which is, of course, the key motivation for making this Church available to so many musicians as listed in the Weekly News this week. As last night with 30 young musicians performing their end of year recital at a local Music School; or the Proms or 101 other events during the course of the year. In these wonderful acoustics we are doing all we can to enable the widest number possible to make music to our God – to make all those connections we spoke of earlier.**

**But, as the Gospel reminds us, there will always be some who don’t get it! Whether we play music or don’t play, there will always be someone who is unhappy!**

**So why music at St James’? Because we want to give people the opportunity to listen – in the hope that through the time they give to music, they will also be tuned in to hear the voice of God.**