

Brancepeth Sermon: Jesus' Music

6th Sunday of Easter

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Acts 16.9-15; Revelation 21.10,21.22-22.5; John 14.23-29

Some people love everything to be clear.
They like it all laid out in straight lines.
They like it all to connect and make sense.

And I am one of those people.
I am *so* one of those people.
I like lists. I like alphabetical order.
I like logical explanations.
I like – and I'm beginning to get a bit over-excited here –
I like *colour-coded filing systems*.

But John, the author of our Gospel passage just now...
well, he is *not* one of those people.
He loves the spirals and the tensions in Jesus' words;
he loves the mysteries and the ambiguities;
he loves the questions that never quite get answered.

And he *loves* the paradoxes.

He loves it, for instance, when Jesus says,
'I am *going away* — and I am *coming* to you.'

He loves it when Jesus says that,
when *he* speaks — it is *not him* speaking.

And, being who I am, I can't help but be frustrated:

I want to know how to make sense of this.

I want to know what it all means.

So: I want to take you on a dive
into one of those paradoxes this morning —
the one where Jesus says that when he speaks,
it is not him speaking.

'Those who love me will keep *my* word', he says,
'and the word that you hear is *not* mine,
but is from the Father who sent me.'

But in order to help us make sense of this paradox,
I'm going to begin by talking about something else.

I was listening to the radio last week,
and I heard a programme about Elgar's cello concerto.
Don't worry if that's not your kind of music,
or if you've never even heard of it; that's not going to matter.

What matters is that they played two different recordings.
The first was from the 1920s,
soon after Elgar first wrote the piece;
it's by a cellist called Beatrice Harrison,
was one of the first to play the concerto,
and it was conducted by Elgar himself.
She gives a fine performance, and it's a lovely recording.

But then they played another recording –
one that some of you might know.
It's from 1965, from a twenty-year-old cellist
called Jacqueline du Pré.
And it is something else again.
It's the same piece, the same notes in the same order,
but it just *sings*.
There's something about the passion,
the commitment with which she plays:
she puts *everything* into it –
throws herself into it completely,
and the result is *a revelation*.

Think about how we might describe that.
This performance is absolutely *hers*.
All her skill, all her years of practice,
all her insight and sensitivity –
it's all there in this performance.

So I want to say that it's not just her cello that's the instrument,
but her whole body:
for the duration of this piece,
she *becomes* the instrument on which it is played for us.
If I was listening to this recording, and you asked,
'Who are you listening to?',
I'd be able to say: I'm listening to Jacqueline du Pré –
I'm listening to her doing *her* unique thing,
her doing something she seems to have been made for.
I'm listening to *her being utterly herself*,
perhaps more than at any other time in her life.

And yet – and yet. I'm *also* listening to Elgar.
It's Elgar's music. He wrote it. All the notes are his.
Everything I hear when I hear Jacqueline du Pré play
is the music of Edward Elgar.
Her performance is so revelatory
precisely because she's dedicated herself,
she's committed herself, she's thrown herself completely into
becoming a servant of that music.
She has become an instrument
on which we can hear Elgar's music,
and hear it more richly, more fully,
than we've ever heard it before.
Her performance is a revelation, yes,
but what it reveals is the beauty of *Elgar's* music.

You may have seen where this is going.

Jesus –
everything in him, his whole life, his body, his words,
his movements, his relationships –
Jesus' *whole life* is an instrument on which
his Father's word, his Father's music,
is played out.

Everything we hear, everything his disciples saw,
when they were with him, belonged to Jesus –
he was being utterly himself,
he was doing what he was made for,
he was *being Jesus*.

And yet everything we hear, everything his disciples saw,
was *the Father's* music,
the Father's word –
the Father's love.

Who are we listening to? Jesus.

Yes, but who are we listening to?

The Father.

'The word that you hear', Jesus says, 'is not *mine*,
but is from the Father who sent me.'

* * *

But notice something else.

Jesus also said,

‘Those who love me will *keep my word*,
and my Father will love them,
and we will come to them and make our home with them.’

All Jesus’ disciples, including us here this morning,
we’re like amateur musicians at a master class.

We’ve heard Jesus play the Father’s music;
we’ve heard what it can sound like.

Hearing it played out in Jesus’ life is a *revelation*.

And now we’re asked to ‘keep his word’.

That is, we’re asked to play this music ourselves –
to practice, to stumble and correct,
to keep going at it and going at it,
and to learn how to echo his music in our own lives.

And, if you’ll allow me a paradox of my own,
what goes on in us as this happens is both *ours*, and *not ours*,
in a different way than it was with Jesus.

Let me try to explain what I mean.

In one sense, *none* of what happens in us
as we go deeper into discipleship,
deeper into playing this music,
is ours.

For a start, *the music* isn't ours:
we hear it from Jesus,
we learn it from those who pass on Jesus' music to us.
In that sense, it's not ours at all,
but something we receive.

But this truth goes deeper than that.
Where does our *desire* to play this music –
to live according to this word, to embody this love –
come from?
What makes us people who *want* to follow Jesus,
who *want* to live and love like him?

After all, *we can't simply choose what to desire*;
desire is more like something that happens to us.
In our reading from Acts, we heard about
'Lydia, a worshipper of God, ... from the city of Thyatira
and a dealer in purple cloth' –
and we hear that
'The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly
to what was said by Paul.'
'*The Lord opened her heart.*'
The first move is always God's:
Lydia hears the beauty of the music being played by Paul,
and she's captivated by it –
her desire to hear more of it, to learn it, is awoken.

She doesn't *choose* to be attracted by what she hears.

She doesn't *choose* to be excited.

She doesn't *choose* to be eager for more.

It's not in her control.

It's something that happens to her.

And any commitment, any determination, any dedication

we might have to learning Jesus' music

and playing it for ourselves,

to becoming people who live the same love that Jesus lives –

well, all that dedication, all that commitment

flows from our desire.

The more we want this music,

the more we'll be willing to throw ourselves into it,

the more we'll be willing to practice –

but we can't simply *make* ourselves want it.

You can't turn your desires on and off like taps.

It's something that happens to us,

it's something we receive,

it's something that God gives to us.

'The Lord opened Lydia's heart to listen eagerly.'

It's something God awakens in us

by the beauty of what he shows us,

the beauty of what we hear and see in Jesus.

So: God gives us the music;
God gives us the desire to play it;
God awakens in us the determination to practice it;
And God gives us whatever ability and strength we have;
God gives us the bodies and minds
that are fitted to be instruments of this love.

It's *all* God.

And yet, at the very same time,
our discipleship, our following – it's *ours*.
It is our hands and feet, our words,
our efforts and failings and repentance,
our learning, our growth.
It's our bodies, our minds, our hearts, our lives,
that are the instruments playing this music –
often badly,
sometimes unrecognisably badly,
but sometimes well,
sometimes in ways that do echo the music of Jesus' life.

So it is *ours*, and it is *not ours*.

It is *all* ours, and *none of it* is ours.

And at this point, I have to say to myself –

‘Stop trying to tie this down.

Stop trying to come up with one neat description.

Stop trying to explain it just one way.

Stop getting hung up on trying to decide

whether it’s really us, or really God.

It’s both. It’s always both.’

Our discipleship, our lives of faith, our lives as Christians –

they are definitely our lives,

they are made up of our actions, our words, our attitudes;

they’re our responsibility –

and it makes sense for us to practice,

and learn from our mistakes,

and try, and try, and try harder, and try again

whenever we fail.

It’s down to us.

And yet, at the very same time,

whatever echoes we hear in our own lives of Jesus’ music –

whatever snatches of the love concerto he played,

whatever cadences and harmonies –

it is all gift.

It comes from God, wholly and entirely,
and it doesn't make any sense
for us to take a moment's credit for it.

It is *God's* music, the music for which *God* made us,
and if *God* has awoken us –
awoken our desire and determination
to be instruments on which that music is played –
then thanks be to *God*.

It is simply Jesus, and the one Jesus called Father,
coming to make their home in us:
it is their life, their love, their peace, in us – not ours.

So. In the end,
I don't think I can make this any clearer than John did.
You are an instrument for the music of God's love;
that's what you were made for.
Your performance of that music – it's *entirely* yours,
it is indeed down to you;
and yet it is *entirely* God's; it is *all* gift.

So what can you do, but thank God for the music
– and keep practicing.
Amen