

Jazz service – St Mary’s Marlborough – Sunday 11.7.10

It is a real and rare honour to be invited to speak at this Jazz Service here in St Mary’s, Marlborough. I rather take the view that retired MPs should not only ‘be seen but not heard’, but so far as possible not seen either. I am breaking both those rules today!

I do so without qualms because it allows me to say a few words about why I think music matters in this world today, why it has always been a part of our relationship with our God, and why it has been such an important part of my life.

I was brought up in a house where music was a constant backdrop. My father was an accomplished jazz pianist and our home was always filled with the sounds of jazz. My father was a quiet and gentle man and his music was the way in which he expressed himself most fully.

It was from this that I learned that music is not so much an entertainment or a cultural experience but much more a means of communicating and expressing and bringing together. The Psalms not only communicated to and united the people of Israel over 2500 years ago, but still teach us today concepts and truths whose impact would not work without music. Nor do they need the music of their time; they can regain their impact through fresh and more contemporary music.

That haunting song of the Jewish people in exile ‘by the rivers of Babylon where we sat down and wept as we remembered Zion’ ending with the cry ‘how can we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land’ only really hit me when it some thirty years ago it topped the hit parade as a Rhythm and Blues song.

The negro spirituals of the deep south of nineteenth century America and the African rhythms and harmonies from which they sprang gave hope and inspiration to an enslaved and oppressed people, the message of which was driven by the music through which they were communicated. And in so many of them that hope and inspiration was based on their faith in a loving and just God. ‘Nobody knows the troubles I’ve seen, nobody knows but Jesus’.

And from these beginnings jazz was born, conveying emotion, feeling and expression and above all a sense of the indomitable and God-given spirit of Man. And it communicated, like the psalms, not just with its age of origin but cascading and evolving through the generations that followed. As indeed did my own genre of folk music.

Which is why music matter even more in the world today. We live at a time when communication has become faster and easier and more horizontal.

Information technology allows us to communicate our ideas and reactions instantaneously across the internet in various forms. Its very speed means that while the surface message can more easily be transmitted too often the deeper more fundamental and transcendental message cannot.

Music fills that void. It too can be transmitted instantaneously but the message it conveys can be profound. Paul Robeson in his time sang for a still oppressed people in America. Bob Dylan twenty years later sang for a generation who felt that the political class had abandoned them. Archbishop Desmond Tutu twenty further years on swayed and sang along to music which contained within it the seeds of apartheid's destruction and the building of a more tolerant South Africa. The list is endless, but the power of music to speak to people's deepest soul like some great river rolls on.

That is why for music is so much a part of our relationship with our God. I sometimes think that it is because we find it so difficult to pray or to find the right words with which to communicate with our Maker and our Saviour that we find it easier to do so in song. The psalms are but one example. Our rich and shared Christian hymnbook is another. The truth is that often it is easier to express our wonderment and awe at our God in music and song than in mere words. St Francis of Assisi, my favourite saint, believed ardently in the power and appropriateness of music and of song – and even dance – which is why his message remains so fresh to so many today. Spirituals gained their name precisely because they are essentially and powerfully of the spirit. In short music helps us in our puny efforts to communicate with our God – and in my case I need all the help I can get.

Which brings me to why jazz and folk music have always been so important to me? In my political life one of the greatest challenges was always to try to get across a principled idea or message in a way that people would be interested enough to listen to. My generation even before the Vietnam War heard Bob Dylan's 'Blowing in the Wind' as a clarion call to move away from international confrontation to engagement. 'We Shall Overcome' not only led the US Civil Rights Movement gradually towards a fairer society but pointed oppressed peoples and societies around the world to a greater sense of hope, a stronger spirit of resistance to injustice and a lessening of despair. 'God is on our side' they sang and I sang along with them.

The songs however which really captured my imagination were the ones which asked us not so much to look up at great ideals but to look down at the reality around us, to understand that however badly we felt about ourselves there were others who were far more in need of help and understanding. These may not have been hymns or prayers but their impact carried as strong a Christian message as any that were. And they made a generation think.

I will end on just one of these. My friend Ralph MacTell some forty years ago wrote and sang a powerful song about the loneliness around us. His words and music are as relevant if not more today when paradoxically in the face of ever expanding communication and information technology the incidence of loneliness and sense of abandonment is growing.

His song is 'The Streets of London'. I will not explain it to you; rather if you will forgive my cracking voice and my increasingly arthritic fingers I will sing some of it for you.

May God be with us in our hearts and in our minds and in our voices.