

Sunday 7 June 2009: Trinity Sunday

An equal music

Readings: Romans 8.12-17; John 3.1-17

Last Wednesday was a very special day. In the morning, here in this church, we held the funeral for David Hardwick, well known and loved by so many of this congregation. He had been churchwarden and chief steward, and together with his wife Alison he had for many years organised hospitality, Bible studies and welcomed everyone, remembering each person by name and making them feel part of this place. When I arrived three years ago David was already affected by the illness that robbed him of his memory and wonderful ability to relate and engage with people. I heard the stories of the Spirit of this wonderful man and recognised his goodness in the love and incredible dedication of his wife Alison, but I never witnessed the full Spirit of David myself. On Wednesday at his funeral, however, in words, prayers, music and people, his Spirit came rushing back, as though set free from his body. After the service, Anne Duffin said to me “That was a beautiful service, that was the David we knew.” The fullness of his life had suddenly returned, magnified. The words I found myself holding onto were the words Nick, our vicar, quoted from John Donne:

*Bring us, O Lord God at our last awakening
into the house and gate of heaven,
to enter into that gate and dwell in that house,
where there shall be no darkness nor dazzling, but one equal light;
no noise nor silence, but one equal music;
no fears nor hopes but one equal possession;
no ends nor beginnings but one equal eternity.*

Equal light, equal music, equal possession, equal eternity. Equal... As I began to think about the Holy Trinity, a concept that sometimes appears more like a cold doctrinal equation than a living God... the words which actually filled my thoughts and prayers were those words ‘equal music’.

The writer Vikram Seth chose the words ‘Equal Music’ for his beautiful novel about a string quartet and the intense relationships that such an ensemble represents. Describing the quartet warming up before a rehearsal, the music they are creating becomes a powerful metaphor for a deeper belonging to one another. Seth writes:

“Every rehearsal of the Quartet begins with a very plain, very slow, three-octave scale on all four instruments in unison: sometimes major, sometimes minor, depending on the first piece we are to play. No matter how fraught our lives have been over the last couple of days, no matter how abrasive our disputes about people or politics or how visceral our differences about what we are to play and how we are to play it, it reminds us that we are, when it comes to it, one. We try not to look at each other when we play this scale; no one appears to lead. Even the first upbeat is merely breathed, not indicated by any movement of the head. When I play this I release myself into the spirit of the quartet. I become the music of the scale. I mute my will. I free myself.”

“I free myself and enter in.” Isn’t that something of the nature of this Trinity of which we are called to belong? Not a distant, remote God, some authoritarian judge looking down on us from above, not even the Jesus of Nazareth we have learnt to love from Gospels from 2000 years ago from a remote time and culture of wandering prophets, miracles, demons, angels,

visions, and crucifixions. It is the Trinity that makes this Christ present, that calls us into the making of an equal music, that makes us part of the movement of God, here and now. Trinity is the way in this life we are able to sing God's music and God is able to sing our music and we discover that there is a harmony greater than us, greater than we imagined possible: an equal music in which we are set free.

On Wednesday afternoon after David's funeral, at St George's Hostel, I took the memorial service of a man called Craig Hunter. Craig, who was a Scottish Rangers supporter, had spent more than twenty years of his life homeless, most of the time around Berwick Street Market, before getting a place at St George's last year. He had suffocated in his sleep. He was aged 35. At first it seemed hard to salvage much from such a tragic life and death. Craig's mother had died when he was still young and all those I spoke to said he had never really got over it. He had taken to drinking and substance misuse and sort of stumbled from day to day never really able to take control of his life or break free. For twenty years he had not contacted his home fearing another rejection, but a year ago, supported by his case workers Martin and Neil from the Connection, and by the hostel, he decided to write to his father. A few weeks later he received a reply from his dad. He was over the moon and brought the letter to show Martin and Neil. He took the letter everywhere with him. That one letter from his father was like a burst of light into his life and in the last year of his life he began for the first time to get himself sorted out, getting a place at the hostel, with his own room and phoning his dad on his mobile. I went up to Berwick Street Market and all the stallholders knew him: "Don't say anything bad about him; I won't have anything bad said about him... He could have a heart of gold at times... he just wanted to be liked, wanted to belong. We all need family."

At his memorial at the hostel, three women arrived and then Martin from the Connection, and we sat for ages waiting for others. There were some curled up cheese sandwiches waiting and some sausage rolls and a big bottle of tomato sauce and Craig's Rangers shirt on a table and a candle. Then slowly more and more of the residents of the hostel arrived until there were about seventeen of us all sitting rather awkwardly. I said a prayer and I played the CD of the Scots Dragoon Guards recorded when stationed in Basra playing 'Abide with Me', while facing the tragedy of conflict and missing home. And suddenly I realised that everyone in the hostel was singing along. I started to tell the story of his life that I had put together but I had not got far before everyone started joining in. "We didn't call him Craig, we called him Chucky." They told me how he could be grumpy in the morning but he would always apologise, about how generous he was, how he was a worker, how he could make you laugh. How he was so proud of his father's letter and the TV in his room. How they all liked him and how cut up they had been when they heard he had died. And how they hoped he was at peace now buried in his mother's grave. "When someone dies" I said "it makes us think about our own life, doesn't it, and what's really important and that it is often kindness, simple kindness that lives on." Everyone really agreed. And then I put the CD on again and the bagpipes played:

Dear Lord and Father of Mankind
forgive our foolish ways
Re-clothe us in our rightful mind
In purer lives thy service find

Take from our souls the strain and stress
And let our ordered lives confess
The beauty of thy peace
The beauty of thy peace

Everyone was singing along and once again I was aware of that sense of 'equal music', and that somehow our God was not some remote fiction but a relationship we all longed for so painfully at times and how sometimes, like now, could realise and enter into, and sense that we too can belong.

In our Gospel, Nicodemus comes by night, hesitant and afraid. He comes like all of us, self-conscious and afraid of what others will think of him, unsure of how to frame the question or what answer he is looking for but believing somehow that he must come to Jesus because he has recognised that here is a man who somehow may have answers. And Jesus does answer him, answers him in a way that seems to penetrate through all the façade and awkwardness of the encounter and to speak to Nicodemus's – indeed all of our deepest needs; words which address the very depth of our longing: "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the Kingdom of God without being born again." Now Nicodemus, like us, is even more confused, what does this mean, being born again? Nicodemus interprets the words physically. How is it possible for someone grown old to enter the mother's womb a second time? But Jesus is talking about an even greater belonging, even more than our belonging to the mother who bore us and from whom our umbilical cord was cut. This is a belonging to the eternal God.

The Spirit of God, like wind, blows where it wills. It cannot be contained or directed but it moves us and fills us, it can set us free. What is this Spirit of which we can become part? Not a nameless, shapeless, directionless, chaotic restlessness, but the Spirit of our true belonging: God's love for the world with which each one of us can be filled. It is the circle of love which is only complete when we too enter that circle of love both to receive and to reciprocate. 'Born again' can also be translated 'born from above', for it is the revelation of a whole new belonging we may never have seen, or realised, or believed could be possible for someone like us. We thought *this* a music from which we were excluded but it is for all: for David and Craig and each one of us, and needs our participation to complete the harmony. It is an equal music. And then those remarkable astonishing words, so familiar now that we may not even hear them: "God loved the world so much that he sent his only son so that all who believe in him may not perish but have eternal life."

Last week at a day for refugees and asylum seekers, I invited all those taking part to paint a huge picture together. The picture had the title 'I am the vine and you are the branches.' Each person drew their own branch and the fruits that they wanted to bear. There were about twenty of us taking part, drawing birds and fruit and writing words of hope. One woman called Sarah wrote in colours from the branches "The Spirit of God is me." "You've got the words wrong," another participant told her, "you should have written 'The Spirit of God is in me.'" I looked at Sarah, knowing something of the suffering she has been through, and I knew that she had got it right: one equal light, one equal music, one equal possession, one equal eternity – each one of us called to be part of the action of God's Trinity of love.