

Sermon at Brecon Cathedral

Sunday 09 August 2015 10.00am: The Jazz Service

The Very Revd Dr Paul Shackerley

Dean of Brecon

When I was growing up I always had a fascination for the piano. My mother loved listening to Russ Conway playing on the old vinyl records. Liberace, in spite of his showmanship of glitter and glamour, in my eyes as a young boy, was magical the way he played piano. And Mrs Mills, with her honky tonk piano, getting everyone signing along in pubs and on stage. My early exposure to piano performances. We probably laugh at them now, looking back, they are so dated.

Growing up in the valleys, the son of a miner living in relative poverty, we couldn't afford a piano or piano lessons. You can imagine to my surprise, coming home from school when I was 12 years old to find someone had given my mother a very old piano, which we put in the parlour, and always out of tune. But, that didn't matter. I would play it for hours without dots. When I was 13 my mother went to a parents' evening at school. The first and only time she ever went, to see if I could attend music lessons, because I wasn't very bright, and below average children didn't do music theory. Somehow she managed it, and the music teacher started to teach me piano in private lessons. She lived four miles away and charged five shillings, which we couldn't afford. So, every week, I would go up the mountain and find kindling wood, wrap it into bundles, and sell them to neighbours to light their fires. That was enough to pay for my piano lessons.

Lessons didn't last long, as I left school when I was 15, and my music teacher said, 'it's pointless you coming now you've left school. You will never make a music teacher'. So, I ordered a two keyboard electric Yamaha organ on hire purchase, and within 6 months I was playing for modern sequence dancing around the working mens' clubs in the Welsh valleys. It was much easier to play, because I only had to play chords with my left hand. I was very lazy. I stopped playing in the clubs when I was 19 and moved away.

Such were my early years of the growing love for the piano. I never lost my love for piano, and grew to love listening to jazz pianists, with the same mesmerising intrigue as when I was a boy. Five years ago, I bought myself a Kawai baby grand, and started weekly jazz lessons, taught by a retired 82 year old civil engineer, who was a fantastic player. Alas, his teaching skills were not that great. So, after a year, and my searching

questions about jazz chords and structures and theory, which he told me not to worry about – ‘just improvise’ he would say, I stopped. I wanted to learn something of the theory behind the musical genre of jazz. I still play the piano every day, but usually alone, where I feel free to improvise and make strange sounds and mistakes. Plus, I have little rhythm. But that doesn’t matter. A gentleman said to me yesterday, it doesn’t matter how you play, as long as you make music and it brings pleasure. We have been the recipients of much pleasure this weekend. So many have worked so hard to make it possible.

I always knew when I followed the dots, just the chords and melody – mind you, that there was more than what was written on the page. The art of jazz can touch and speak to all ages, in deep and mysterious ways. I have been looking forward to this jazz festival, even if a little anxious about how jazz worship works, but this is a service where the musicians do not only play music for us, but is played to inspire us, just as much as the Choral Tradition of this magnificent spiritual and heritage Cathedral.

My Christian faith has led me to study and practice of a faith that brings justice and liberation. I have always worked in the poorest areas of England, where like the roots of jazz, the Christian faith have rejuvenating power to change a world of brokenness and oppression of the poorest. Jazz has its roots in human pain, injustice and brokenness; and recognised the need to bring healing, liberation and forgiveness – qualities much needed today in the world. And, the Christian faith, like Jazz, is contagious and communal, something we have all engaged with as a community. Faith and jazz has these roots in common. It has been said that ‘an artist creates a sculpture alone; a painter uses a brush in isolation; but jazz forms a community.’ I hope you have witnessed and enjoyed the inspiration of creation through music, and enjoyed a sense of coming together to enjoy the life God’s has given, and experience the gifts and skills given to musicians.

Jazz gives us permission to be creative and opens the soul to new sounds and configurations. And so, this jazz service is not a showbiz entertainment, but a bringing together of music and faith, a communal experience, that resonates with its birth to bring equality and justice for the oppressed. And, our prayers for the world in this service should reflect our deep desire for justice and equal rights and opportunities for all human beings made in God’s image and beauty.

The work of jazz musicians is demanding. It requires self-discipline, sacrifice and patience, much like the Christian faith that is practiced every day in this holy place. So I hope you have enjoyed your jazz weekend experience, where performers who have spiritual and mental calibre who have legitimately expressed creative sound that have touched our soul. We know, just how rewarding their skill, knowledge and ability is to bring us great joy. Today's worship unites faith and music in a unique way because it touches our souls, our hearts and heals the hurts.

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