

In the name of the Father...

As we gather together today with the suffering and death of our saviour before us, I want to draw together our reflections around a remarkable image of that suffering in a poem by the Welsh poet R S Thomas. At a certain point early in his life Thomas found himself onstage at a concert by the Austrian violinist Fritz Kriesler and many years later he wrote a poem about it in which he compares Kriesler's performance to the Crucifixion of Jesus. Of all the possible ways of understanding what Christ was doing on the cross, Thomas imagines him making music.

The Musician

A memory of Kreisler once:
At some recital in this same city,
The seats all taken, I found myself pushed
On to the stage with a few others,
So near that I could see the toil
Of his face muscles, a pulse like a moth
Fluttering under the fine skin,
And the indelible veins of his smooth brow.

I could see, too, the twitching of the fingers,
Caught temporarily in art's neurosis,
As we sat there or warmly applauded
This player who so beautifully suffered
For each of us upon his instrument.

So it must have been on Calvary
In the fiercer light of the thorns' halo:
The men standing by and that one figure,
The hands bleeding, the mind bruised but calm,
Making such music as lives still.
And no one daring to interrupt
Because it was himself that he played
And closer than all of them the God listened.

I. So it must have been on Calvary

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What kind of music was it that came from the Cross of Jesus, that issued from the broken body of the Son of God? A solemn music it must have been. A music in whose depths all the suffering and sorrows of a fallen world, a fallen humanity, were contained. A lament, then, an outpouring of grief, one that gathers to itself all the bitter cries of the bereaved, the lonely, the despairing.

There is no suffering that is not comprehended by the music of the Cross. The indiscriminate outrage of death. The evangelical hopelessness of war. The groaning of a maligned and exploited creation. All of it finds its place in the music of the Cross.

And yes, of course, we cannot fail to hear in that music a reproach. How could it be otherwise? How could we not be cut to the heart by such music, we who have crucified our own Creator, who have turned the cosmos upside down with our violence and lack of love?

In the liturgy of Good Friday the Lord speaks to his people from the Cross and he reproaches them: *What have I done to you my people? How have I offended you? I led you out of Egypt, but you led your saviour to the cross. I opened the sea before you, but you opened my side with a spear. I gave you water from the rock, but you gave me gall and vinegar to drink.*

If the music of the Cross is a music of consolation, then, it is also inextricably a music of judgement, a music in which we are forced to face the magnitude of the our rebellion.

And yet there is another note that comes to us from the Cross of Jesus, sounding from within the sorrow and the suffering, but deeper than either of them, coming to us quietly at first, but growing and asserting itself against all odds. A music impossibly alive with the promise of joy.

Joy — unthinkable, impossible, and yet unmistakable. The powers of evil start up from their feasting table and spit out their wine, for the closer we come to that darkened hill outside of Jerusalem the more undeniable it becomes: the bruised and bloodied figure hanging upon the Cross is singing a song of joy.

Perhaps this is why it is music that so readily comes to mind when we think of the Passion of Jesus, why we have found it so difficult to comprehend the Crucifixion *without* music of one sort or another, because somehow it is easier to recognise in music the place at which the deepest sorrow and the deepest joy meet and join hands.

II. The new-old song

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What kind of music it was it that came from the Cross of Jesus? Above all, it was a *new* music, a strange and wonderful new melody, coming to our ears for the first time through the din of violence and recrimination and bringing them all to silence.

And as the music swells, it begins to be heard. The good thief on the cross beside Jesus, hears the music and repents. "Lord remember me when you come into your kingdom". The centurion at the foot of the cross, hears the music, and declares "Truly this was the son of God". The dead in their graves, hear the music, and come forth.

The Church Father of the second century Clement of Alexandria called the saving work of Christ a "New Song". In his "Exhortation to the Greeks" he calls to mind the stories in which birds and beasts are charmed by the great musicians of Greek mythology. "But far different" he says "is my minstrel", Christ:

He[...]is the only one who ever tamed the most intractable of all wild beasts —
man[...]See how mighty is the new song! It has made men out of stones and men out of
wild beasts. They who were otherwise dead, who had no share in the real and true life,
revived when they heard the song.

But if the music of the Cross is indeed a New Song, there is another sense in which it is not new at all. "Do not suppose" says St Clement "that my song of salvation is new in the same sense as an implement or a house. For it was "before the morning star". This New Song is, he tells us, is the very music:

which composed the entire creation into melodious order, and tuned into concert the discord
of the elements, that the whole universe might be in harmony with it[...]this pure song, the
stay of the universe and the harmony of all things, stretching from the extremities to the
centre, reduced this whole to harmony.

In other words, this new song of salvation, the song of the Cross, is the music by which the heavens and earth were made, the song of creation.

About halfway through *The Magician's Nephew*, the first book in C. S. Lewis's Chronicles of Narnia, the boy Digory and the other children find themselves witnessing an extraordinary sight, the creation of the world, sung by the lion Aslan.

In the darkness something was happening at last. A voice had begun to sing. It was very far away and Digory found it hard to decide from what direction it was coming. Sometimes it seemed to come from all directions at once. Sometimes he almost thought it was coming out

of the earth beneath them. Its lower notes were deep enough to be the voice of the earth itself. There were no words. There was hardly even a tune. But it was, beyond comparison, the most beautiful noise he had ever heard[...] Then two wonders happened at the same moment. One was that the voice was suddenly joined by other voices; more voices than you could possibly count. They were in harmony with it, but far higher up the scale: cold, tingling, silvery voices. The second wonder was that the blackness overhead, all at once, was blazing with stars...

And so it goes on as each new wonder of creation springs into life with the rising and falling of the lion's song.

So as we stand here together before the Cross, we are standing in position very much like Digory and the other children in Lewis's story. We are listening to the music that made the world. And what we are witnessing that music accomplish on the Cross is nothing less than a new creation. It is the music that made the world, re-making the world.

III. Make me an instrument

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“Make me an instrument of your peace”, so prayed St Francis of Assisi. It is sometimes said of the greatest musicians in history that they transformed the instrument they played upon. It is said of Chopin that he freed the piano from its bondage. And something similar of what Bach did for the cello. What Chopin and Bach did for the piano and the cello, Jesus Christ did for our humanity, for the instrument of human flesh. The Son of God became incarnate not in order to die, but in order to play the music of human flesh as no one had ever played it before, and in doing so he transformed it forever.

The Fathers of the Church were of one mind in their *prohibition* of musical instruments in Christian worship. To the early Fathers, the cithara and the harp were irredeemably tainted by their association with the rites and rituals of paganism. But there was another and a deeper reason for this prohibition, because for the Fathers of the Church the body of the baptised Christian believer has in a very real sense *become* a musical instrument, an instrument upon which the music of Jesus Christ, the music of Cross, is played. To introduce other musical instruments into Christian worship is, therefore, not merely unnecessary, but a failure to recognise the transformation wrought upon human flesh by the Incarnation of the Son of God.

“Here there is no need of the cithara, nor taut strings” wrote St John Chrysostom “nor any sort of instrument; but if you wish, make of yourself a cithara[...]For when when the flesh does not lust against the spirit, but yields to its commands and perseveres along the path[...]you thus produce a spiritual melody”.

And yet how right he is to speak of “persevering along the path”, for as anyone who has ever learned to play an instrument can tell you, to learn to play this music is the labour of a lifetime, a labour which most of the time consists in the thoroughly unromantic business of practice, of persevering day after day with a simple set of repetitive exercises: the daily office, the Eucharist, reading the scriptures.

St Benedict has a favourite image for the life that goes on in his monasteries. It is of a workshop. And in the fourth chapter of his Rule he describes at great length what he calls the “tools” of this workshop — Ridding the heart of all deceit. Learning to keep silence. Speaking the truth in love — And the kind of work St Benedict envisages these tools being put to is exactly the kind of patient craftsmanship I have been describing. As he puts it “The workshop where we are to toil faithfully at all these tasks is the enclosure of the monastery and stability in the community.” “These, then, are the tools of the spiritual craft” he says and we are to practice with them “without ceasing day and night” until finally we return them on judgement day.

But if St Benedict had been of a more musical caste of mind, these tools of good works might just as well have been the *instruments* of good works: the steady drum of humble obedience, the little penny whistle of kindness, the awkward, unwieldy trombone of chastity.

The Crucifixion of Jesus, as St John the Evangelist is at such pains to help us see, is not the low point of the life and ministry of Jesus, but the crowning performance of his entire career. It was in order to bring forth this music when his “hour” came, that all the struggles and sacrifices of Jesus’s life and ministry were undertaken. All the secret pains and confusions of his youth and adolescence. The temptation in the wilderness. The agony in the garden. All of them he suffers in order to understand this human flesh, to master his instrument, that he might draw forth from it its true potential, its deepest music.

“This player, who so beautifully suffered / for each of us upon his instrument[...]And no one daring to interrupt / Because it was himself that he played”

IV. Such music as lives still

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'Making such music as lives still' — Yes, the music plays still, but differently. And the great difference is that the music of the Cross is no longer a piece performed by a soloist. Since the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, it has become a symphony, played by the great orchestra of the baptised, the Church, the Body of Christ.

Some time around the middle of the second century, less than a hundred years after the gospels were written, the Bishop of Smyrna, St Ignatius of Antioch, wrote a letter to the Christians in Ephesus on his way to Rome where he was shortly to be martyred. And in that letter we find a remarkable sentence. Commending the Ephesian Christians for their love for one another, St Ignatius writes that "Jesus Christ is sung in your harmony and symphonic love". Jesus Christ, the crucified and risen Lord, is *sung* in the love of the Ephesians for one another.

"And each of you" he tells them "should join the chorus, that by being symphonic in your harmony, taking up God's pitch in unison, you may sing in one voice through Jesus Christ to the Father".

What we find in these remarkable words of St Ignatius is a mystery we encounter again and again in the writings of St Paul in the New Testament: that for all the splendid music the individual soul is capable of, it is only a single part, a single instrument, in an infinitely greater and more subtle orchestra. And it is to this orchestra that the music of Cross has been entrusted. Only when played in harmony with the whole orchestra of the baptised can the music of the Cross be heard in all its depth and subtlety.

And if this is case, then, as St Paul is at such pains to point out in his letters, no one is expendable, the humble third clarinet is no less essential than the greatest soloist or virtuoso.

No one is expendable, and yet, as we very quickly discover, no single player's experience of this orchestra will be without struggle and pain. For to learn to play this music together is to persevere when half the orchestra seem to be playing in a different key, with someone butchering the music in the row behind you or drowning out everyone else with their selfish, showy performance.

And yet persevere we do, because at one time or another all of us have heard the music soar, we have been part of the orchestra when it becomes a single, unified body of sound, of extraordinary density and richness, of infinitely greater depth than any one player could achieve alone. And in that moment there is nothing that could possibly compare with the making of this music together.

"More sweetly pleasing to God than any musical instrument" wrote Eusebius of Caesarea, is "the symphony of the people of God".

V. The song of the redeemed

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“How shall we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?” complain the Israelites in exile in Babylon. How can we sing the songs of Zion, the longed for homeland, while we languish here in exile? And a little later “When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, then were we like those who dream, then was our mouth filled with laughter and our tongue with songs of joy.”

The music of the Cross is from the beginning a song of exile, it is the song of the son who went into the far country and was crucified. And yet, like so many of the great spirituals of the exploited and enslaved, it is just as truly the song of the homeland, of the heavenly Jerusalem, a music in which resounds the eternal “alleluia” of the redeemed.

In one of his sermons St Augustine compares the life of a Christian to a long journey to heaven by ship and the “Alleluia” of the Christians to the refrains called out by the boatmen to speed them on their journey home. “Indeed” he says “At present alleluia is for us a traveller’s song; but by a toilsome road we are wending our way to home and rest where all our busy activities over and done with, the only thing that will remain will be alleluia.”

As the book of Revelation so vividly reminds us, this heavenly country is no city of quiet retirement but one whose walls resound with music. “Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels surrounding the throne and the living creatures and the elders; they numbered myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, singing with full voice.” And what is the song that all these myriads upon myriads sing? It is the song of the Lamb, the song of crucified one, the music of the Cross.

And with this we approach the final mystery of the music of the Cross. For as St Ignatius has already made clear to us, the song of the Church, the song of the redeemed, is not our own song, its voice not our own voice, but the voice of Jesus, singing his eternal song of love to his Father.

Not only, then, is the music of the Cross the music of the creation, the music by which the world was made, it is a music more ancient still, more ancient than time itself. It is the music the Son has made to the Father from before the world was made, the love song of the Son to the Father which we call the Holy Spirit.

And so for us to participate in this music, then, to sing the music of the Cross, is nothing less than to enter into, to participate in, the eternal song of the Holy Trinity.

But perhaps, after all, we are getting a bit carried away. Are we not in danger of forgetting that this cosmic love song we are talking about comes to us today from the bruised and bleeding body of a crucified man? Is it even thinkable that this scene of death and horror could make manifest to us the eternal love song of Father, Son and Holy Spirit?

I am reminded of something the late Dominican Friar Herbert McCabe once said. He said this:

The story of Jesus is nothing other than the triune life of God projected onto our history[...]. I use the word 'projected' in the sense that we project a film onto a screen. If it is a smooth silver screen you see the film simply in itself. If the screen is twisted in some way you get a systematically distorted image of the film. Now imagine a film projected not on a screen but on a rubbish dump. The story of Jesus[...] is the projection of the trinitarian life of God on the rubbish dump we have made of the world.

And so as we stand here before the Cross of our saviour, we come with the deepest silence we possess, that we and all who dwell in the ruins of this great rubbish dump, may hear the music.