



**St James's
Church
Piccadilly**

**RA Service for Artists
Varnishing Day
Monday 13th June 2022**

Readings: Psalm 19 and 'Caged Bird' by Maya Angelou

The image of a bird singing in a cage is a powerful one. A creature that was made to fly confined behind bars. Wings unexercised and useless. A trapped body, a confined spirit but a voice unleashed to sing all the same. Unsurprising then that, as Maya Angelou's poem reminds us, the caged bird sings of freedom.

Over the last 2 years, there has been much public conversation about the place and meaning of art and music in society, not least because we lived without live experiences in the visual arts, theatre and music for a long time during successive lockdowns and pandemic restrictions on the way we live.

Unlike during a war, when we might have sung together to keep our spirits up, gathered around a piano, had a laugh and a pint and raised our spirits, this respiratory virus, transmitted by breath in the air, stopped us singing altogether. Made meeting together and talking a perilous activity. Made playing the trumpet suddenly dangerous.

And our attempts to be the singing caged birds ourselves were heroic but frustrating: if like me you were live streaming any kind of musical event like a religious service or a concert, then you will have learned quickly like me that singing together on Zoom is, well, how can I put this politely, not what Zoom was designed for.

Over the last two years I learned to say in online services not 'please stand to sing the hymn' but instead 'please mute yourselves to sing the hymn'.

Maya Angelou's meditation on a caged bird and a free bird, their relative ability to sing, and what they sing about reveals powerfully and importantly the pernicious and persistent inequalities in British society that were exposed by the virus. One of the most contentious and exposing aspects of lockdowns was access to safe green public space, quite literally, freedom of movement.

The pandemic exposed persistent and pernicious assumptions about ethnicity, class, gender identity and disability which in turn intensified what opponents will dismiss as culture wars or identity politics, but which reflections are vital for a healthy spiritual life as much as a political one. The church had a moment of reckoning too. It should be more normal than it is to be led in reflection and prayer by the words not only of holy Scripture but by the defining words of Angelou and the contemporary composer Sarah McDonald, whose music we heard in her anthem 'Crux fidelis' today: women and writers of colour are still underrepresented in church liturgy and music.

William Blake was baptised at St James's Piccadilly in the font here at St James's in 1757. And one of his most powerful images was equally as poetic and prescient as Maya Angelou's caged bird. Blake talked of 'mind-forg'd manacles'. That is, the seemingly inescapable constraints we construct for ourselves that place limits on what we think we can do, who we believe we can be. Contemporary therapeutic language might call this 'self limiting beliefs'. According to William Blake we forge these manacles, these chains, ourselves. We shackle our imaginations, stop hoping for a better world, and convince ourselves that it is better for us to live behind the walls we have ourselves constructed than it is for us to live free of these chains.

But it isn't as simple as this either.

You are artists. I am a musician, Maya Angelou was a poet: but I believe that we have in common the realisation that the gift and glory of making is most intensely expressed when it recognises that it is itself dependent upon constraint, disciplines, rhythms and sometimes dissonances. Not everything should or can be beautiful or harmonious.

A little like the relationship between individual spirituality and community building in religion, there is a creative, not always easy, but creative relationship between constraint and freedom that allows the expression of not simply an unfettered individualistic freedom but the kinds of shadow sides of human experience that emerge when we relate to each other and I would want to say, to God.

The cruelty, violence and destruction of which every one of us is capable has to find expression from our artists. In making art the struggle seems often to be one between constraint and freedom, between the boundaries set not only by the artist but by the one who looks at the art, and the imagined freedom to do whatever it is you find to do, whenever it is that you find to do it.

In Christian theology it is God who creates and re creates and all human creativity is joining in this limitless recreation: as in Psalm 19 read earlier;

The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handywork.

² Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night sheweth knowledge.

³ There is no speech nor language, where their voice is not heard.

⁴ Their line is gone out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world. In them hath he set a tabernacle for the sun

In the Christian tradition it is the divine feminine – the figure of Wisdom – who at the beginning of the world, sends the angels out to set the limits and boundaries of creation. They are measuring out – not for confinement - but for shape and form of things.

Their words go to the end of the world says the Psalm.

The limit is set only by the horizon – and as you will know as visual artists *an horizon is nothing save the limit of our sight.* (Bishop Charles Henry Brent 1862-1929)

Which perhaps brings us to God; in places like this on days like these there is a chance to wonder about God. And the limits and freedoms that we live with, and how that makes us, like the caged bird, imagine *things unknown but longed for*. The poignant image of a bird that doesn't know there is a life beyond the cage means that this bird sings of *things unknown but longed for*.

What are the confinements, the constraints in society today that are not yet seen as they are?

What is it that my successors as Rector of St James's Church Piccadilly might hold a service to celebrate the abolition of in 100 years' time, that today you and I are not seeing clearly enough?

This kind of relationship between constraint and freedom, seeing and being seen, is the vision held out to us by the psalm of the heavens simply existing, and in a riotous expression of life, are telling – just telling – of glory and creativity because they are what they are.

This is a vision too fit for a world trying to digest the realities of the climate emergency and what we have to do to address it. This vision of creativity transgresses boundaries of time, of death, and is a unifying vision of the voices of all that lives: all creation, not just some imagined celestial version of a neat human choir on earth. This music in the psalm is at once recognisable to us, singing as it does of blessing and glory, but it is utterly unknown and other too.

This is the eternal song of praise that is at the heart of creation seen and unseen and which we ourselves with our human earthly voices join whenever we express our creativity. This music, *unknown but longed for*, yearns for deep connection, for unity, for genuine interdependence with all that lives, and is a yearning implanted in human beings by God.

As well as being a vision of heaven it is a manifesto for a just and beautiful life on earth.

The theological ground that we stand on here is rooted in the language of *looking*. Before we start contemplating God, God contemplates us.

This reversal of our expectations means that it is no longer primarily up to us to debate and decide what God is like, with all the attendant fractiousness that this produces. It is the other way round: for us to live, in the expectation that God gazes at us with delight – way before we start to notice God. Rather than straining our eyes to see, we become the one who is first and foremost, seen.

It's a different way of living: letting go of our own tightly held rigid point scoring exchanges with which we fill our week, releasing us from a focus on what I can get out of you and how I can get on, independently from you; and allow ourselves to fall into this dynamic loving interdependent way of living with not only other humans but with the spiritual beating heart of creation. And as we fall, we hear the words of the mystic Teresa of Avila who assured us that we cannot fall out of the everlasting arms of God – we can only fall into them.

It's tempting to draw grand conclusions from our pandemic experience. But this would be hasty. We don't yet know the impact of this past almost 2 years. But what we do know is that we experienced what life was like without the live experience of art, words and music. And it was not a world that most people want to live in.

And so today we re-gather knowing that we are not yet sure what it has all meant but acknowledging in our song, that we have been changed by the knowing.

Thank God for the gift of art, poetry, science and music, words, silence, colour and form:
things *unknown but longed for*.

And may we join with the living creatures and all that gives voice in Creation.

Let all creation say – no – sing – Amen.