

St James's Piccadilly
Royal Academy Varnishing Day
Summer Exhibition theme: 'Only Connect'
The Revd Dr Ayla Lepine
Associate Rector, St James's Piccadilly
2 June 2023

Readers:

Rebecca Salter PRA
David Remfry MBE RA

Readings:

Psalm 104.1-15
Esther Kondo, 'Grains'

Thank you for being here. Today this church resonates with the voices of hundreds and hundreds of artists and for that we give thanks. This church has long been home to artists, and a place where they find peace, inspiration and even transcendence. It was moving to see Royal Academy Schools student Anna Higgins describing St James's as her favourite place to pause and rest as she produces her work inspired by light and shadow.

The Turner Prize nominee Jesse Darling exhibited his work at St James's during Frieze Week last autumn and spoke powerfully as a trans artist about the need for the numinous in people's lives and the unique value of exhibiting in a church. If the idea of visual arts and exhibitions in this church piques your interest, talk to Richard Parry our Creative Director. The installation Darling produced in 2022, while he took up residence in the old church tower here, assembled vintage plastic radios on welded quasi-anthropomorphic pedestals. The radio FM bands were all tuned slightly off their chosen station. They stood - and even sat - in the church - here in the sanctuary, and up in the pews. During one of our weekly two-course meals for 35 people going through homelessness, which take place at tables in the sanctuary, a guest noticed the dulcet tones of Britney Spears drifting over their lasagne and folks at the table started humming along. The radios, these strange-voiced low-volume metal and plastic forms, were oddly friendly, and they had surprising personalities. They were connecting in ways that were unexpected, and we missed them when they left.

The poet Kae Tempest recently wrote a book titled *On Connection*, as a warm-hearted provocation for us all to get it together by figuring out how we are already united across our differences, more than the sum of our parts. Creativity, they explain, encourages connection. And connection, as Tempest puts it, 'to true, uncomfortable self allows us to take responsibility for our impact on other people, rather than going blindly through life in a disconnected buzz of one day to the next...Creativity in the ability to feel wonder and the desire to respond to what we

find startling... Or, more simply, creativity is any act of love.' Yes, in the arts of course, Tempest says, but well beyond that too.

Apparently, one of the uncanny aspects of connection is that with all of us packed in here together, singing and speaking, contemplating, praying, taking a close look at the font where the artist William Blake and the abolitionist Ottobah Cugoano were baptised, and Grinling Gibbons' gravity defying carved hymn to the environment - fruit, flowers, shells, and hungry baby birds.....one of the uncanny aspects of connection is that while we're doing all this, our heartbeats are settling, so the science tells us, into a unified rhythm. It's happening within us all, right now.

In the psalm that the President read earlier, God is 'clothed with light' - surely the ultimate fashion statement - and this is the God of interconnected creation as a whole. Oceans, hills, mountains, birds that sing in the branches of trees, and much more. Strange things happen in this poem of praise. Not only does the author imagine God's body - a wild thing to do - but also gives the earth a personality. The planet is 'satisfied' with the outcomes and realities that God creates. Human beings don't show up for a long while in this text, and when they finally do, they're drinking wine, eating fresh bread, and having a great time, grinning at what they see around them and its abundance. God is the ultimate artist here, creatively connecting everything, making nothing in isolation, and rendering glory as a communal thing that creates, above all, joy. Not just joy for humans. Joy for oceans and mountains and light itself.

That's why the hymns chosen for today also speak about that interconnected joy, finishing with a song based on a 13th-century poem by St Francis, whose life is being celebrated in another exhibition just down the road at the National Gallery. In July there will be two events here in partnership with the Gallery, exploring Francis in relation to poverty and in connection with dialogue between Muslims and Christians, historically and in our own time.

In Esther Kondo's poem, 'Grains', we hear the story of one human being, Jewli. Jewli's relationship to the land is deep. The corn grows tall, and the corn is lively too. Each one, we are told, is a grandmother. The plants, the nutritious soil, and Jewli are constantly connecting, in a cyclical conversation across generations. Grandmother corn will provide for Jewli's children, and their children, as they gather to eat the fruits of the earth. The corn in their mouths is golden stars. Like the people in the psalm enjoying their feast of fresh bread and flowing wine, the corn's creative energy does not just provide food. It provides wonder.

The theme of the Summer Exhibition, Only Connect, is inspired by another writer's powerful words, E M Forster's, from his 1910 novel *Howard's End*. 'Only connect!' In these two words, a woman offers encouragement to a man, who is, as Forster describes, not only shy but 'a little ashamed' of the idea of connection. Both characters are truly vulnerable in this moment. And Forster's comment on connection for us all is that we must 'live in fragments no longer.' A little further

along in the novel, Forster adds, 'By quiet indications the bridge would be built and span their lives with beauty.' There is a bridge between every living thing. There is a bridge between every work of art on the walls in those glorious rooms at the RA. There are bridges now, pulsating between us all in this holy place. And so we travel on from here today, creative and creating, tasting stars, daring to love. Amen.

Psalm 104.1-15

1 Bless the Lord, O my soul. O Lord my God, thou art very great; thou art clothed with honour and majesty.
2 Who coverest thyself with light as with a garment: who stretchest out the heavens like a curtain:
3 Who layeth the beams of his chambers in the waters: who maketh the clouds his chariot: who walketh upon the wings of the wind:
4 Who maketh his angels spirits; his ministers a flaming fire:
5 Who laid the foundations of the earth, that it should not be removed for ever.
6 Thou coveredst it with the deep as with a garment: the waters stood above the mountains.
7 At thy rebuke they fled; at the voice of thy thunder they hasted away.
8 They go up by the mountains; they go down by the valleys unto the place which thou hast founded for them.
9 Thou hast set a bound that they may not pass over; that they turn not again to cover the earth.
10 He sendeth the springs into the valleys, which run among the hills.
11 They give drink to every beast of the field: the wild asses quench their thirst.
12 By them shall the fowls of the heaven have their habitation, which sing among the branches.
13 He watereth the hills from his chambers: the earth is satisfied with the fruit of thy works.
14 He causeth the grass to grow for the cattle, and herb for the service of man: that he may bring forth food out of the earth;
15 And wine that maketh glad the heart of man, and oil to make his face to shine, and bread which strengtheneth man's heart.

Esther Kondo, 'Grains'

Jewli will go home
when the maize
is ready to harvest
to burn burn
he will burn it all on hot coal
each corn is a grandmother

searching the soil to scratch
a hole with the heel of her foot
feed the soil two kernels of corn
their heels a golden shovel
always in conversation with all
the backbones of all who is us
to bring nights when their children
& their children will sit around
fires adorned with
charred gold pinched in salt
teeth digging into the stars
of good fortune