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Lent 5C

Sermon notes on Psalm 32

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"The world in tune"

The 17th century poet, Henry Vaughan, makes the following remark about prayer in his poem "The morning watch":

... Prayer is

The world in tune,
A spirit-voice,
And vocal joys,

Whose echo is heaven's bliss.¹

Were I not such a wordy Protestant I would probably have the sense to leave my sermon at that, and sit down. But alas, I am such a one, and so will venture to say more (if only, I hope, to say the same thing over, and then, perhaps, again)!

I'll begin by noting what is scarcely going to be controversial: that we live in times when so-called "spiritual" things are being hotly debated. Part of that controversy has to do with the overlap and conflict of religious and secular space, and with identifying what space is appropriate to each of these two purportedly incompatible spheres of practice and influence. This is relevant to our quote from Vaughan because he links "prayer" – supposedly an interest of the religious space – with the "world", the presumed domain of the secular, and he goes so far as to imply that the world is out of tune when it is out of prayer. Recent "atheistic" polemic runs in exactly the opposite direction – that prayer, and public religion in general, is the source of most of the evils which beset us.

As lovely as Vaughan's lines might seem to be, then, they are scarcely straightforward. While the religious and non-religious alike might resonate with the lovely image of a world in tune, it is scarcely the case that all would consider *prayer* to be such a tunefulness, or a way to finding harmony. This is an argument which can neither be won nor lost. But we might at least understand what it is that Vaughan proposes, in order better to understand might be at stake in prayer, and so what might be gained or lost if we pray in his way, or not.

"Prayer is the world in tune".

The metaphor of being in tune is a rich one. We might note, to begin with, that tuning is not something an instrument does for itself. We can

tune all the strings on a violin to be correctly set relative to each other, but this will not set them in tune relative to another violin. We need to tune instruments to a lead note which comes from beyond our own instrument or voice. To be in tune, then, is the result of a rather *passive* process. If we are in tune then it is something which has happened *to us*, more than something which has than been done *by us*.

But once we have been tuned up, what then? Is it now our work to play ourselves, so to speak? There's another notable thing about being tuned which will stretch our thinking if we continue with the metaphor. There are two ways to sound a string on an instrument like a violin or a guitar. You can either strike the string in the normal fashion of playing the instrument – which is obvious enough – or you can sound a string on *another* instrument tuned to the same pitch as yours (or an overtone of your string) and, even though you haven't touched it, *your* string will begin to vibrate in resonance with the played string. It's quite an amazing thing to watch!

We might say that prayer is being tuned up for just such a resonance with notes being played somewhere else. This is important, for as familiar as both believers and non-believers might think we are with the things of God, it is in fact rather a strange song which God plays, and one in an unfamiliar key. It is the promise of a future which we do not yet know, such as we heard about in this morning's reading from the prophet Isaiah; it is the unexpected laughter and joy of which the psalmist wrote; it is extravagant outpouring of love and devotion which we saw in Mary's anointing of Jesus. Closer attention to those readings than we can give today would reveal how extraordinarily desirable, and yet also apparently unattainable, are the things promised and commanded in the readings – how familiar and yet strange is the song they sing. If we *are* created to resonate with that song and its freedoms and peace, we are nevertheless *not yet* fit for that purpose. But the practice of prayer about which Vaughan writes – whatever shape it takes for us personally – is part of the process of being tuned, a "becoming fit" to resonate with the song of God.

Now, if you've been keeping up with me you might have noticed that I've wandered a bit from Vaughan's original sentiment, treating prayer now as the *tuning up*, and the *life which results* as being properly "the world in tune".

Prayer is then no escape *from* the world but an escape *to* the world. It is a longing for what we know could be, even *should* be but is not yet – a straining to hear the song which will be our re-creation. And it is a commitment to become part of that song in the whole of our lives.

To get back to the controversy between the religious and the secular which I noted at the beginning, there is no question that we *all* find the world to be in discord and our relationships with each other fraught with dissonance, wherever we might stand on the “God question”. For in fact there are many competing “tunes” which call us to fall into step. We hear them in the rhythms of our family and cultural histories, our education and our religion, our fears and our desires. Each such tune calls us to resound – for better, if we find ourselves among like-minded folk; but too often for worse when we find songs in competition with each other.

Our usual approach to this problem is simply to turn up the volume of what seems to us to be the best music, in order to drown out the rest. Though this is the way of violence, it is yet the way with which we are most accustomed to dealing with the challenges of difference and discord. That someone who is different from me does not simply sing a *different* tune but sings the *wrong* one is the easiest way to account for the dissonance which bedevils our ethics and politics. This way of thinking has the very appealing implication that the problem lies outside of me, for now it is only you who are out of tune.

But as typical as this way of thinking is, it gets us nowhere, and so we struggle on in discord, making some progress along the way, to be sure, but not without great cost. If we were to consider our history, and plot our future on the basis of what we have managed in our societies to this point, we would have pretty good grounds for being pessimistic about getting it right in the future and tuning ourselves to each other.

Which is why it might be worth our while seeking after the strange song hinted at by Isaiah and Mary and the psalmist today, something which calls us out of our own tired refrains. This song does not know the difference between “religious” and “non-religious”; it knows only the destiny of the whole of the world in the love for which it was created. And this song is sung that in prayer, and other ways, we might learn its rhythms and harmonies, begin to resonate them, and so become part of the song ourselves.

For, as wonderful as it is to celebrate music in the way that we do in our preferences for this or that song or style – and certainly in our liturgy in this place – how much more do we need the

whole breadth of our society not simply to be musical but to be *harmonious*?

By the grace of God, may our various ways of prayer be met with just such a harmonising, that the noise we make might indeed be a joyful one – celebrating the victory of God’s song over us by which we find ourselves to be the winners.

Amen.

ⁱ The Morning Watch, by [Henry Vaughan](#) (1621 - 1695)

O joys! Infinite sweetness! with what flowers
And shoots of glory, my soul breaks and buds!
All the long hours
Of night and rest,
Through the still shrouds
Of sleep, and clouds,
This dew fell on my breast ;
O how it bloods,
And spirits all my earth! hark! in what rings,
And hymning circulations the quick world
Awakes, and sings!
The rising winds,
And falling springs,
Birds, beasts, all things
Adore Him in their kinds.
Thus all is hurl'd
In sacred hymns and order ; the great chime
And symphony of Nature. Prayer is
The world in tune,
A spirit-voice,
And vocal joys,
Whose echo is heaven's bliss.
O let me climb
When I lie down! The pious soul by night
Is like a clouded star, whose beams, though
said
To shed their light
Under some cloud,
Yet are above,
And shine and move
Beyond that misty shroud.
So in my bed,
That curtain'd grave, though sleep, like ashes,
hide
My lamp and life, both shall in Thee abide.