

Trinity Sunday C
Pentecost 1

May 30, 2010

St. Andrew's – Jazz Mass! Juan de Fuca Festival

Proverbs 8.1-4, 22-31

Ps 8

Romans 5.1-5

John 16.12-15

I don't think there is much denying that this weekend is all about music in Port Angeles. We had wristbands yesterday and visited 4 of the 5 stages and listened to some amazing voices, powerful lyrics, beautiful instruments, and even some body drumming. I'm guessing the ice cream stand wishes it was warmer, but even the weather could not dampen the enthusiasm all around. And you know, one of the best parts was watching the little ones dance. They are uninhibited, as we all once were (well, maybe some of us still are!) and their bodies respond to music. We seem to be hard-wired that way because it isn't taught to a two year old; it is inherent. It is a thing of beauty to behold.

And today, after months of planning, we have our own piece of the Juan de Fuca Festival here with the Peninsula College Jazz Ensemble. There has been lots of musical thinking going on and I've been thinking about how to stick jazz and music together with Trinity Sunday both of which we are celebrating in the church today. The first Sunday after Pentecost is always Trinity Sunday and the lessons chosen are to help us understand at some level this thing we call the Trinity. I hope you don't mind, but I've decided NOT to preach a sermon explicating the doctrine of the Trinity, three persons in one substance, homoousios and hypostasis and all that. Maybe next year....

There is one thing about which we can be certain when speaking of God: we cannot understand. 1700 years ago, Augustine said that if you understand it, it is not God. The nature of God remains a mystery and I don't think believing that is a cop out, contrary to what non-believers might say. Becky Wright has written that mysteries explained cease to be mysteries, and that it is important for us to have things we do not understand.

Jason Sierra quotes a young woman who had left the church for many years when asked what she wanted from a community of faith. She said, "I want help finding the mystery in all things, embracing that mystery, not trying to explain the mystery out of it." It may do us a service to have to admit there are things beyond our understanding; things outside our reach and control.

But in order to speak of God, we use words, because we think that's all we have: our familiar Trinitarian language of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Or more descriptive words such as creator, redeemer, and sustainer; or earth maker, pain bearer, and life giver. We know that God is more than the limitations of our language can ever express.

Similarly, listen to some dictionary definitions of music:

The tones or sounds employed, occurring in single line (melody) or multiple lines (harmony), and sounded or to be sounded by one or more voices or instruments, or both.

Or:

The art of arranging sounds in time so as to produce a continuous, unified, and evocative composition, as through melody, harmony, rhythm, and timbre.

I don't know about you, but that isn't very helpful or even close to what I think music IS any more than written words can express the depth of God. But we know music when we hear it. Or feel it in our bodies like the children do. We can try to break music down into some component parts, like trying to explain the Trinity. There is musical notation; the written notes on a page. They are two-dimensional symbols for something else. They must be brought to life, animated in time by an instrument or a voice; hands and heart and mind and breath are needed. But an instrument or voice alone does not necessarily make music. When the written notes find expression through sound and in time, we hear and interpret and determine that it is music. None of the components make music without the others any more than God can be God without Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

And beyond that, think of the variety of musical expressions there are! Symphonies and rhapsodies, hip hop and rap (although some might argue about calling that music!), klezmer and country western, rock and acid and new age, jazz and blues and hymns and opera and chant. We may not be able to tightly define it, but we know it when we hear it and experience it.

When we think about music and how it can be so much more than its components I think we might be circling around our experience of God as mystery. Any metaphor we might use for God and our experience of God as Trinity is pretty much always going to be a heresy so I'm not going to go there. But however we try to use words to speak of the Trinity, God in three persons, we are ultimately talking about relationship, equality, sharing, and interdependence.

And that really brought jazz to my mind. I don't know a whole lot about jazz but we do have a jazz trumpet player in the family and one of the things most characteristic about jazz is its use of improvisation. It may be a hallmark of jazz as a musical form. In order to improvise within the group, not just during solos, you must be in relationship with each other in the group or ensemble. You may be able to be a lone ranger during solo improvisations, but to successfully improvise within the group, you must be attuned, attentive, and responsive to your fellow musicians. You must listen, hear, interpret and then create something unique, cohesive, and coherent. The sometimes complex and multiple rhythms and sounds of jazz necessitate relationship, equality, sharing, and interdependence.

Jazz as a music genre is only about 100 years old so is relatively new to worship, but people have long used music to deepen their experience to and relationship with God. The first biblical reference to music is in Exodus 15; a song of celebration by Moses and the people of Israel giving thanks for deliverance from Pharaoh. The psalms of the Hebrew Bible were written to be sung in or in procession to the synagogue or Temple. Our opening hymn this morning was “When in our music God is glorified.” The sometimes wild diversity of musical expression opens another dimension of praise and understanding and experience of that which will ultimately remain mystery. Our bodies and our voices, our hearts and minds and souls, use and respond to music to express our joy, our sorrow, our regrets, and repentance, as well as praise of our great and indescribable God. We sing and play what our minds cannot grasp.

Jason Sierra wrote this week that our ability to embrace mystery is not the opening of a space for a slow, unraveling, ever-incomplete revelation, the willingness to sit with the reality of God as Trinity becoming more complex with each new revelation. We give ourselves over to the experience of embracing the mystery as God is revealed to us; giving thanks that one expression of God’s love and unity is given to and for us is music.

Let every instrument be tuned for praise!
Let all rejoice who have a voice to raise!
And may God give us faith to sing always
Alleluia! Amen.

Gail Wheatley+