

**Music**  
**Psalm 150, Pentecost 17, Year C**  
**19 September 2010**  
**By The Reverend Barkley Thompson**

I am in Dieppe, France, standing at a railing overlooking the English Channel. It is late afternoon, though the hidden sun in an overcast sky does not tell me so. I only know because of the hunger gnawing at my stomach. The wind whips at my face, and the rain is as cold as sleet. I am enveloped by an emotion an earlier era would have called “melancholy,” and I feel as far from home as ever I have. And the soundtrack plays George Winston’s piece entitled “Thanksgiving.”

That day was sixteen years ago and usually the memory is vague at best. But the moment I hear Winston’s fingers play “Thanksgiving” —no matter where I am or what I am doing—I am back at that railing in Dieppe. I can smell the salt air. I can hear the lonely waves. The melancholy returns. Sixteen years become scarcely an instant. *Nothing has that power but music.*

With that same semester abroad I connect the music of Simon and Garfunkel. On a bulky Sony Walkman, they accompanied me along the streets of London, faithful companions as I shed my parochial upbringing and became a citizen of the world. And again, I am transported through time and space whenever I hear them:

*And from the shelter of my mind  
Through the window of my eyes  
I gaze beyond the rain-drenched streets  
To England where my heart lies.*

For the last decade of her life, my grandmother endured the devastation of Alzheimer’s Disease. This woman of blessed memory was robbed of hers, as over time she forgot me, my siblings, my mother, and even her own husband of over fifty years. By the end, she was virtually catatonic. Had one mentioned God to her, she would not have comprehended the syllable, much less remembered how meaningful God had been to her throughout her life. But when my mother would hum “Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine” or “Shall we gather at the river,” my grandmother would instinctively hum the tune and sometimes even sing.

Music imprints itself upon the soul. We become, as it were, that which we hear and which we sing. As the proverb says, “As one thinks in his heart, so is he,” and this is truer of our music than of any philosophy. This is why I worry and cringe at the state of popular music today, that to which people—young and old—listen uncritically.

Those who study the brain tell us interesting things about its physiology that lead to the imprinting upon it of music more deeply than analytical thought, speech, or even the ability to walk. Those who study the Scriptures will not deny any of this, but they will point to a specific ultimate cause. We are hard-wired, it seems, to resonate with beauty, and none is more sublime than the beauty of music. But why is this so?

Before we can answer this, we must first discern something about God and God's Spirit. In Hebrew the word for Spirit is the same as the word for wind or breath. The way that God creates, Holy Scripture tells us, is by breathing his Spirit across the face of the earth. And what is produced when breath crosses crevasse, moves through trees, or carries waves onto the shore, but music? Whether creating this grand world or redeeming our individual lives, God *sings his Spirit*, reshaping whatever hears that blessed sound into something beautiful from its surface to its core.

*Our* music is the thing about us that most closely approximates that movement of God's Spirit. When we gather in this holy temple, as the 150<sup>th</sup> Psalm says, and make music when we move air—breath, spirit—through pipe or voice or by vibrating string—we model the work of God. We are created in God's image, and thus we sing because *God sings*.

We live in a world that seems in so many ways deaf to the Spirit of God. In place of beauty, everything including our music, art, architecture, popular entertainment and discourse have given way too often to brutalism, coarseness and venom. Rather than acknowledging these things as part of a fallen world as we once did, our culture now seems to relish topping itself with ever-uglier expression, and this gives import and even urgency to our music-making and our broader affirmation of beauty in the church. The Bishop of Durham, N.T. Wright, recognizes that “when people cease to be surrounded by beauty, they cease to hope. They internalize the message of their eyes and ears, the message that whispers that they are not worth very much, that they are in effect less than fully human.”<sup>i</sup>

The Bishop goes on to say that “part of the role of the church in the past was—and could and should be again—to foster and sustain lives of beauty and aesthetic meaning at every level, from music making in the village pub to drama in the local primary school, from artists' and photographers' workshops to still-life painting classes, from symphony concerts to driftwood sculptures. The church, because it is the family that believes in hope for new creation, should be the place in every town and village where new creativity bursts forth for the whole community, pointing to the hope that, like all beauty, always comes as a surprise.”<sup>ii</sup>

And this, of course, begins with the church's own music. We come into this holy place, and we sing. Though we are here often, it is also often that our hearts leap with unexpected joy at a stanza or a descant we have *heard* a hundred times but may have for the first time really *listened to*. We are surprised again and again by the twinge of hope that rises as its own song within our hearts as the choir or the Gathering band or the child in the pew sings of God's glory and God's love for us.

In *The Architecture of Happiness*, Alain de Botton says, "We seek two things of our building. We want them to shelter us. And we want them to speak to us—to speak to us of whatever we find important and need to be reminded of."<sup>iii</sup>

Over these past few years, we have restored this building in both of these essential ways. It now shelters us anew, both physically and spiritually, and through the power of God's Spirit in music and song, it speaks to us, reminding us of the beauty that envelops us all around and the desire of God to surprise us by reshaping us into creatures who reflect that beauty. And then we go forth from here, singing of these things to the world beyond these walls.

During that semester abroad sixteen years ago, as Simon, Garfunkel, and I walked for miles around London, I'd sometimes take shelter in the gorgeous churches that dot virtually every block of that ancient city, and the juxtaposition of their ethos and the duo's music repeatedly surprised me with beauty. I could almost feel my life being molded and reshaped during that time. It was like walking through London with my own personal church choir, and no matter to whom Paul Simon was singing, to me the song was, like Psalm 150, addressed to God:

*And so you see I have come to doubt  
All that I once held as true  
I stand alone without beliefs  
The only truth I know is you.*

*And as I watch the drops of rain  
Weave their weary paths and die  
I know that I am like the rain  
There but for the grace of you go I.*

*Amen.*

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<sup>i</sup> Wright, N.T. *Surprised by Hope*, 231.

<sup>ii</sup> *Ibid.*, 231-232.

<sup>iii</sup> Guthrie, Suzanne. "Prayer-haunted," in the August 24, 2010 issue of *The Christian Century*, pg .35.