



THE ARCHBISHOP
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Archbishop Stephen gave a talk as part of the [Church Times Festival of Faith and Music](#) at York Minster. This follows in full

When I was ten years old my parents bought me a guitar for my birthday.

We were on holiday in Spain; the first time I had ever been abroad. We were with another family, and the Dad in that family played the guitar. In fact, he bought himself a new guitar on almost day one of the holiday.

I was already taking piano lessons at the time so had a little bit of musical knowledge (though, sadly, no great aptitude for the piano and no great passion to practice). But the guitar enthralled me. I watched him play. He sat outside the tent strumming away. I sat outside the tent listening.

He taught me a few chords. Somewhere, I still have the bits of paper that he tore from his notebook to write out the shape of the chords.

Now the guitar is probably the easiest instrument to play badly. Almost anyone with a reasonable sense of rhythm can soon learn how to play a few chords and start to make a half decent noise and even, if others are prepared to sing along, bang out what passes for a tune.

Like every instrument, skill, practice and commitment is required to play it well. But there also has to be desire. What made the guitar different to the piano for my ten-year-old self was that I wanted to play it. I wanted to play it all the time.

My birthday fell during the last few days of the holiday. I badgered my parents. Could I have a guitar for my birthday present? Fearful that it might be a fad, a sort of holiday romance that would wear off when I got home, they resisted. But I kept on at them. And with the helpful encouragement of their guitar playing friend, they gave in. I got my first guitar.

Fifty-five years later, hardly a day goes by when I do not pick up my guitar and play. I never got to be much of a guitarist. But it's hard to think of any other thing in life that has given me such joy.

However, when I got home, armed with the few chords I'd already learnt and eager to learn more, I quickly made another alarming and significant discovery. In order to play the guitar, you first have to know how to tune it! And in order to tune it, you need something to tune it to.

The bass string of a guitar is tuned to E. Therefore, a standard way of tuning a guitar is to play E on a piano and then twist the knob at the end of the neck of the guitar where the E string is secured until the two notes, guitar and piano, are playing together. In tune with each other. If you have no piano (we did) then you need what's called a tuning fork which, when tapped, unfailingly produces its note in perfect pitch. Now you can buy electronic devices or download an app which do the same thing (and even tell you when the string is in tune). But for the most part, all this is done by ear. You listen carefully to the note you need to reproduce and then adjust the string of the guitar accordingly. Once one string is in

tune, all the others can be tuned from it.

The will of God, the good purposes of a good and loving God, God's good purposes for the whole creation, for this earth and for everyone and everything in it, is like a single beautiful, clarifying note played and resonating throughout the universe.

Everything else is tuned to it. Or at least it can be and should be. Making it so is the missionary challenge of the gospel and the invitation of God's kingdom.

Consequently, we observe and delight in the astonishing beauty and harmony of the created order, and even find ourselves speaking of the 'music of the spheres' and don't find it difficult to use a word like 'harmonious' to describe the universe.

And as I'm sure you will have observed at an orchestral concert, as the players come on stage there is, at first, a cacophony of noise as each player tunes their instrument individually. Then the person playing the first violin ascends the stage. She plays a single note. Everyone else in the orchestra tunes to it. Then from the unifying simplicity of this single note, the most amazingly, beautiful and complex music is played.

So, what I want to say to you this morning at this Festival of Faith and Music is that the universe and all creation are held together in harmony by the single note of the will of God, played throughout the ages by the Holy Spirit and from which everything else is tuned. The music is complex and beautiful. But it is held together, it is held in tune.

We are part of this, and our lives only find their full meaning and purpose, and we only find the fulfilment we long for, when we are in tune with God, playing our lives in tune and in time with God's life.

We are, in this sense, the orchestra of God, each with our contribution to make, whether we play the trombone or the kazoo.

But unlike everything else in creation, we have choice about this. The trees, the rivers, the mountains and the stars are in tune with the God who made them because they just are. So too the simplest and most complex animals. An oyster or an octopus. Even animals that, like us, feel pain and even fear, do not have the moral choices we have to choose to inflict pain for no reason, to create fear. We are different. We can hear the note of clarifying beauty and ignore it. Or stick our fingers in our ears. Or deny its existence. Or explain why it is just one of many notes and not to be taken so seriously. We can play our own music instead.

This has consequences. We can see them all around us. But God gives us the yardstick, the plumb line (and the tuning fork) whereby we can measure life.

This is liberating. We can be set free from thinking our own will, and our own stubborn and selfish desires are the be all and end all of life.

We even come to understand that life is supposed to be lived in harmony with others. Primarily with God but also with each other. We are therefore called not only to be in tune – but to play! As I say, we are God’s orchestra, called to play the music of heaven on earth. So, with the help of Bruckner’s 9th symphony, let’s explore this idea a little further.

Bruckner never completed his 9th symphony. It was to be the summation of his life’s work, but he died in 1896 before it was finished. The first three movements were written, but only fragments and sketches of the 4th movement remained. He told friends that the symphony was to culminate in a triumphant Alleluia, and was to be a hymn of praise to God. Indeed, the whole symphony carried the dedication, Dem lieben Gott: ‘to dearest God’.

These same friends and colleagues found piles of papers that were the beginnings of this fourth movement. This included some passages that had been fully orchestrated, but of the crucial finale, they found nothing.

Most orchestras, performing this work, usually just play the first three movements. Several composers over the years have pieced together a fourth movement from what remains. However, if there were to be a serious attempt to construct the missing movement what would be best the best way to do it? Would we just ask one person? Or wouldn’t it be better to gather together an experienced group of musicians, scholars and conductors who loved Bruckner’s music, and knew it intimately, and ask them. They would then so immerse themselves in the first three movements, and remaining faithful to them, from their knowledge of Bruckner, produce the fourth. This fourth movement would be consistent with what is already written, but at the same time entirely new.

The task facing the church today is analogous to the writing of this fourth movement. But we don’t usually notice. The first three movements are written. They are the unfolding story of God’s involvement with the world he has made. You could say the first movement is the Old Testament, telling us how God chooses a people to make his purposes known and demonstrate his goodness. The second and central movement is the story of Christ, God’s disclosure of his nature and the story of how God reconciles the world to himself through the death and resurrection of Christ. And the third movement is the outpouring of the Spirit in the life of the church and for the transformation of the world from Pentecost till yesterday.

But the fourth movement is not yet written. It is the song of God’s love for the world today; and in order for it to be sung, and so that it can be heard in the culture and circumstances of the different and very varied communities in which the church serves, God is calling together a band of players, musicians, scholars, conductors - those who play the violin and those who play the spoons – and he is asking us to so inhabit the beauty and the purposeful melodies and rhythms of the first three movements that we will, for our day, produce the fourth. It will be entirely consistent with what has gone before. It will be startlingly new.

And by the way, the task of the priest is not to be the lead player, not the first violin or the concert pianist, but the conductor, harmonising and utilising the gifts and creativity of the whole.¹

But it is the music that all of us serve: the beautiful music of the gospel of Christ that is being written and played in and through the great orchestra of his Church. And this beautiful music must be sung and proclaimed within and for the sorrows of the world, telling the tale and singing the song of God's love.

Some scholars say that Bruckner never finished his 9th symphony because he couldn't. He just wasn't able to find the music to express the vision of glory that had seized him. It was inexpressible, beyond human conceiving; and therefore, they say, it is fitting that it ends in a silence, an absence of conclusion. But surely this is – as it were – the 5th movement, the eighth day, the life of heaven, the great promise of the gospel to which we must always point. In the meantime, as God's orchestra, we aim to love the music, wield the baton, play and compose with others in the life of the church today, the fourth movement in that great symphony of which God himself is the gracious composer who has enlisted us. This music is dedicated, as all Christian ministry must be, to *Leiber Menschheit* 'Dearest Humanity'.

So let me end with another piece of music and an Alleluia chorus that was completed: Handel's Messiah.

Mixed in with other words from scripture which describe who Jesus is: 'Mighty counsellor, Prince of peace' about two thirds of the way through the shout of praise which is the Alleluia chorus, there is a shift in the music. For a moment its note of triumph is offset by a moment of profound solemnity as the chorus sings these words from the Book of Revelation –

'The kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our God and of his Christ' (Revelation 11:15).

This one verse from scripture sums up all that I want to share with you this morning. Echoing the music of the heavens, the song of the angels, and that single note from God to which the whole universe is tuned and in which we are called to play, all God's purposes, and the whole biblical narrative, and the whole Christian faith is declared as the work of God to restore all things in Christ so that the kingdoms of this world become the kingdoms of God. These same ideas are summed up even more succinctly in the Lord's Prayer: 'Your kingdom come on earth as in heaven.'

In Christ, God is gathering everything together into a new creation.

In Christ, everything about heaven comes to fill the earth, like light flooding a darkened room, like the most beautiful music – a single note and a single voice and a whole great orchestra and choir.

"God's kingdom has been launched on earth as in heaven, and the way it will happen is by God working through people like us." says Tom Wright.

So, a question to end with: do you love the music?

Was it not the beautiful music of the gospel that first drew you to Christ and through Christ to your participation in his church and your longing for his peace to come on earth?

And where are you listening to this music today? And how will you carry on listening to it tomorrow, and in all the tomorrows that lie ahead? And what new rhythms and harmonies do you hear? And what variations will you play? And how will you invite others to be part of it?

Make the words of the psalmist your own: “O sing to the Lord a new song; sing his praise in the assembly of the faithful.” (Psalm 149.1) “How good it is to make music to the Lord...” (Psalm 148.1)

A few years ago, a piece of footage of people singing the Alleluia chorus became something of an Internet sensation. It was one of those flash mob, pop-up events. It got millions of views.

If I remember correctly, it begins in a crowded shopping centre. People are milling around. There are cafés and restaurants. People are sitting at tables, eating and chatting. Others are shopping, looking in windows, going about their business.

Then someone stands up.

From somewhere – a recording? – we hear an organ play. The person starts to sing. The opening line of the Alleluia chorus. Just that repeated word: Alleluia.

The someone else from across the shopping mall stands and echoes back that single word. Alleluia.

At an adjacent table, others stand and join in.

Then more and more.

People who are passing by stop to enjoy the music.

A parent reaches out for their child’s hand.

An elderly woman wipes a tear from her eye.

I myself remember watching it for the first time and weeping.

Others rise up.

The music builds and builds.

Soon, amid the ordinariness of everyday life, and arising from it, seemingly without any prearrangement or rehearsal, as if it's just happening, as natural as the rays of the sun and the movement of the breeze, a whole choir has emerged, has risen out of the crowd, and has, at the same time, made the crowd into something else, and is singing this great hymn of praise.

In this beautiful bit of impromptu, but of course, actually, very carefully prepared musical theatre we see a lived-out demonstration of what it means for the kingdoms of this world to become the kingdoms of our God and of his Christ, and of the world hearing, as if for the first time, the music of God: joining in and being deeply moved by it. Moved to tears, and so moved that we long to hold the hands of those we love, because we see, in the ordinariness of everyday life, something bigger and more beautiful and more meaningful breaking in and breaking out. The world as it is, is transformed into the world as it could be.

- ¹Gregory Nazianzen famously suggested that a priest must be like a skilled harp player able to play many strings at once. But I think conductor is a better image.
- ²Tom Wright, *God and the Pandemic*, Pg. 34

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