

REFLECTION FOR THE SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY (04.10.2020)

With reference to Isaiah 5: 1-7 & Matthew 21: 33-46

I wonder – what would you consider to be the worst love song ever? Would it be something smaltzy from the 1960s or 70s, a cheesy power ballad from the 1980s or 90s? Or something more recent perhaps? Would you be thinking of works by such artists as The Carpenters or Neil Diamond, Chris De Burgh or Celine Dion? Enrique Iglesias or James Blunt? Perhaps you could name your own nomination for the ‘worst love song ever’...

Obviously, when thinking about ‘the worst love song ever’ we could focus on those songs that we believe to be terrible on every level. There again we could think of songs that are appalling love songs because of their lyrical content. Step forward Meat Loaf with *‘I Would Do Anything For Love (But I Won’t Do That)’*.

When considering contenders for the worst love song of all time, Isaiah 5: 1-7 has to be in there somewhere. And not just because its catchy tune has been lost somewhere in the annals of time or because of its less than snappy opening line: ‘Let me sing for my beloved my love-song concerning his vineyard’.

Isaiah is singing this song on behalf of his friend (God) and is singing of his friend’s love for the vineyard/lover (God’s people). Using this imagery, Isaiah explains how this love is unrequited. In terms of fruit borne by this relationship, God hoped for rich grapes but instead received something altogether less impressive. The people have proved themselves to be a bitter disappointment; they haven’t responded to God’s love as God had hoped and desired. God invites the people to judge themselves and then all but announces, ‘I’ve had enough. I’m giving up. The vineyard can fall into a state of disrepair without me. In the immortal words of Jon Bon Jovi, *‘This Ain’t A Love Song’*, surely? For here we find the language of hurt, abandonment and righteous anger. This sounds for all the world like a break-up song.

When Jesus starts telling the story we heard earlier, much of its opening section sounds very familiar. Setting the scene, Jesus paints a picture of a vineyard with a wine press (or vat) and a watch tower. He then departs from the expected storyline by introducing a new element in which the owner of the vineyard sends people – one-by-one, including his son - to collect the fruit. The tenant farmers kill them all.

Jesus is deliberately taking Isaiah's love song and playing it in a new way. This isn't a bland cover version – this is a creative re-imagining. He uses the imagery of the vineyard much as Isaiah has done but comes to a different conclusion – it's not people of God who are to blame for the breakdown in this relationship (the vineyard in Jesus' story produces good enough fruit) but their leaders. The leaders are killing any chance of this special relationship flourishing by rejecting *him* just as they've rejected the prophets before him. In Jesus' story, God will never give up on this relationship whatever setbacks or disappointments it ensures, however many times God's hopes are dashed.

We know all about setbacks and disappointments. We do anyway, of course. Our lives are littered with them. Think exam failures, unsuccessful job interviews and redundancies. Think unwanted diagnoses, periods of illness, grief and loss. Think strained or failed relationships, broken hearts and shattered dreams. Heck - think sporting failures and losses. Think many other things besides.

And this year, boy, don't we know all about setbacks and disappointments? The year has been full of them. Think about all those concerts, theatre trips and sporting events that we haven't been able to attend. Think about those family gatherings that haven't been possible – significant birthday celebrations, Christenings, Weddings and even funerals. Think about all those little things that we've always taken for granted but this year have been denied – overnight stays, meals and hugs with people we love. And then think about the illness and death that has surrounded us all, but which has brought heartache and devastation to some. Thinking about it, 2020 has been one big setback and disappointment hasn't it? And that doesn't look like changing anytime soon. Vast areas of the UK are back in localised lockdowns. No one knows what Christmas is going to look like – though we have a fair idea. And no sooner had the Government's scientific advisor announced with optimism that some people may get a vaccine this year and mass vaccination start early next year, than a warning was subsequently issued by the Royal Society suggesting that even an effective coronavirus vaccine will not return life to normal in spring. One step up and two steps back, once again, it seems. So, yes, we know how painful it can be when our hopes are dashed.

Our readings today suggest that God more than knows about setbacks and disappointments and is only too aware of how painful it can be when hopes are dashed. Time and time again in scripture we see that, in God's case, we human beings are usually the cause of God's pain by our unwillingness or inability to inhabit this planet, live alongside one another and respond to God in the ways that God had desired, hoped and dreamed.

That's why there are so many protest songs within the pages of scripture – songs that call us all (but particularly those in positions of authority, power and privilege) to different ways of being and living. The book of Isaiah is one of them. Behind the words expressed in the song we've heard today lie disappointment and anger at the lack of justice and righteousness witnessed in the related kingdoms of Israel and Judah. It would be reasonable to assume that God would be similarly disappointed and angered whenever and wherever people act unjustly and fail to live in ways deemed by God to be right. We would all do well then to listen to the words of the prophets and do all we can to work for a fairer more just society and world (and maybe that starts with us all thinking less about ourselves and more about others, as Martin suggested last week). But beyond the words of protest, and for all that it plays like a break-up song, Isaiah is insistent that this is indeed a love song. And Jesus' version makes that explicit doesn't it? Because for all the harsh words to those who'd actively deny Jesus and lead God's people astray, doesn't this story also show us that God will never give up on us; that, whatever the setbacks, disappointments and dashed hopes, God will always love us no matter what; that God will continue to try new things to help this relationship to grow, flourish and bear rich fruit?

And, if so, maybe, just maybe, in the face of our own setbacks, disappointments and dashed hopes, such knowledge will not only help us to keep going but also inspire us to keep working, to keep hoping and to keep loving.

For this is 'The Power of Love' we're talking about, this is 'Endless Love', this is 'The Greatest Love of All'. Is this cheesy enough for you yet?