

Hymns: **443** “Come, let us sing of a wonderful love”
 158 “Lord, you sometimes speak in wonders”
 529 “Prayer is the soul’s sincere desire”
 “it is well with my soul”

Readings: **Psalm 95**
 Matthew 7:15-27

“OUT OF THE DEPTHS”

Yesterday, Margaret and I made a train journey to visit friends. Whilst she queued for our tickets, I went to get some cash. I did all the usual things. I inserted my card. I heaved a sigh of relief when the machine told me that my card was acceptable. I put in my pin number. The screen smiled at me and told me that my transaction was successful. It invited me to take my card.

If only! I could have done it if I’d had some tweezers with me or, perhaps, if my fingers had been razor thin. The card was stuck inside the machine – visible but tantalisingly impossible to get out. The machine flashed increasingly urgent warnings at me. In the end, super excited, it gave up on me and announced “your card has been retained”. “On my gawd”, said the lady next in line who’d witnessed this amazing event. The words I uttered were not repeatable. They were not a part of my normal vocabulary. Indeed, I asked myself, where on earth did they come from? Where do they normally lurk? The air was blue for a second or two. The lady in the queue was shocked.

Where do those words come from? “God only knows”, I said. And I stomped away.

Ah, those deep, deep, cavernous places within us. As deep as ourselves. They’re not places at all really. They’re better described as aspects of our being, or our psychological DNA or the secret places of the heart, or the ground of our being. None of these phrases captures those visceral parts of our inmost selves perfectly – but together, perhaps, they hint at those areas of our lives that I want to explore today.

The previous two sermons I’ve preached have explored our emotional life – we’re urged to love God with all our heart; and our mental state – we are to love God with all our mind. Today, we must dig deeper, find bedrock, build on something solid as we seek to love God with all our soul.

In many ways music could carry this search further and to better effect than mere words. Let me give just two examples from the many which could serve to illustrate what I’ve just said.

The BBC came up with a very conveniently timed programme – the first in a series, on Radio 4 Extra which goes out on Fridays at 6.30pm. It’s called “Soul Music” – not

a reference to the 1960s crossover music from gospel; nor Ray Charles or Otis Reading or Aretha Franklin. The title of this series refers simply to music that emanates, exudes, rises up, overflows from somewhere (we know not always where) deep, deep inside us.

Friday's programme featured Elgar's Cello Concerto. It was very moving. "Forget the notes and the technique" Elgar is said to have uttered to Beatrice Harrison when she performed this piece of music in 1920, "give them the soul – that's what's important."

Many of us will associate this piece with Jaqueline du Pré. Her story seems inextricably bound up with the magisterial performances she made all those years ago. I heard various witnesses on this programme say words that touched on this morning's theme directly. "It's too deep for tears – it goes beyond that," said the father of a child who'd died of cystic fibrosis. "It hints at a strength that goes beyond loss, suffering and fear," said another. "Those themes," said one man, referring to the surprise introduction of violas very early in the piece, "seem to drift across the hills." "It's like air from another planet", said yet another witness. "These are the inner sighs about life," one person remarked.

All these ways of responding to this sublime piece of music hint at dimensions well beyond normal scrutiny, communication from a profound and intimate inner self, they seem to refer to the soul.

In order to love God with all our soul, all needs to be well with our soul. There needs to be a dearest freshness deep down things. Elgar found those levels from which he released energy and imaginative colour.

And then, my second example, a visit I made to Zimbabwe in 1994. What a wonderful country. I shall always treasure the vivid pictures and experiences that fill my mind. At the time I was there, the country was ruled by a dictator-in-the-making. The land was lovely and so were the people.

But I'll never forget that church service. It was in an Anglican church on the edges of Harare. We had Matins from the Book of Common Prayer. The vicar had told me I was to preach – a message he conveyed to me as he shook my hand and welcomed me! He didn't tell me what scriptural passages were to be read and I hadn't a clue what I was going to say. There were 60 people, white people, on one side of the church and twice as many as that, black people, on the other. Thomas Cranmer and King James were making an appearance in that service. It was drab, perfunctory, anachronistic, lifeless. Except for one blessed moment when colour flooded in. The Venite (Psalm 95), one of the Canticles that appear in Matins, was sung.

It was sung, not in English, but in Shona – one of the languages of Zimbabwe.

For a moment, I was translated into a different realm. I felt I was standing on another planet. At last, I felt I had something to preach about. Without understanding one word of Shona, I knew that we had come to praise the Lord, to rejoice heartily in the strength of our salvation. The words of Psalm 95 stood up and were clearly visible, audible, tangible, palpable. I knew that the Lord is a great God,

a great King above all gods, and that we had come before him to give him thanks and to show ourselves glad in him.

All this I knew without understanding the words. These were truths beyond words. A people I'd never seen were giving me from the depths of their collective being truths that are as old as the hills and as mighty as fortresses. They were being sung not from the lips alone, not even from the hearts or the minds, this was not the sum total of cognitive expression or mental construction; it came from somewhere altogether deeper. This experience, conveyed through music, surpassed all mere understanding. Here was loving God with all your soul. This was a moment when all was very well with my soul.

I'm pretty sure that Jesus is pointing us to these hidden depths in his Sermon on the Mount.

Near the beginning, he makes a distinction between faith and religion. Religion is about rules and regulations. However important rules, commandments, the law may be they are simply vehicles for carrying the deepest messages from our inmost selves into the social order where we live our lives. Indeed, this act of transmission of material from our essential selves into the light of day is what alone can enable us **to live** our lives rather than merely to endure or exist.

Jesus reminds us that saying our prayers, fasting, giving to charity, must never be done to impress people or to tick boxes or to show how upstanding we are. We should never forget that our heavenly father, who sees what we do in secret, who knows the secret places of our heart, who knows us through and through, wants us to do these things (pray, give alms, fast) as a natural consequence of being the person he has made us to be. There's no need to show off. There's no need to be "religious". Faith, even when organised for the sake of a group of a people within a church or confessional body, has to give expression to all that is deepest within us. It must never be allowed to petrify, to ossify, to become a mere superficial set of requirements. And if Jesus strikes that note at the beginning, he certainly hits the same nail on the head as he concludes. A good tree bears good fruit, he reminds us, simply and naturally. You don't have to be a religious bigot or fanatic to know this. The mere fact that you shout "Lord, Lord", entitles you to precisely nothing. You simply have to let the example, the teaching, the wisdom and the inner strength of Jesus seep under your skin, into your heart; you need to let it drain down, down, down into the most irreducible, utterly visceral, deepest ground of your being. Jesus needs to be within you viscerally. He must be the star by which you guide your life, the strength that underlies your everyday, the rainbow you can trace through the rain, the love that will not let you go.

And if he is, then be sure, all will be well with your soul. Like the good tree, your life will bear fruit and you will know the joy of being able to love God with all your soul.

Many years ago I was assistant head of a large school in a French speaking country. It was one of my duties to lead the staff in prayer. Every morning. Before classes began. I speak French reasonably well but I found it difficult, once I'd closed my eyes for prayer, to find words that followed in a logical sequence. It was exactly the same when I sought to control an unruly class with a witty word, an admonition, an

accusation, an exhortation. And I also found the same difficulty when it came to telling jokes. All these activities somehow come from levels within us that are outside the reach of mere cognition. They are instinctual. They are embedded within our inmost selves. They are so intimate. They have taken root within us culturally, psychologically, spiritually.

And it's out of these deep places that we draw energies that can be found at no other levels of our being. And it's from these deep places that we can know and proclaim (again in the words of Psalm 95) that "he is the Lord our God; we are the people of his pasture, the sheep of his hand. O come, let us worship and fall down, and kneel before the Lord our maker."

Let us love God with all our soul.

Amen.