

Sunday 16 August 2015

John 6:51-58 and Ephesians 5:15-20

I wonder how many of you have experienced an ear worm? It's a wonderful word which describes a song that sticks in your mind and which will not leave. And it's often just a phrase of a song, going round and round on a never ending loop.

I don't think there is easily memorable word for the other messages we find lodged in our minds. Those phrases that tell us how rubbish we are; or how scared we are; or how sorry we are; or how stupid we've just been. Or those phrases which point out the irritating habits of others. Or those phrases which falsely puff us up with pride. But for the sake of these next few minutes, let's call them ear worms too.

They are all things which occupy our thoughts or form a background to our inner lives. Sometimes they are merely an annoyance. Hearing Freddie Mercury sing 'I want to break free' as a background to a particularly boring telephone conference is simply a distraction. Hearing a narrative that undermines or denigrates the boring person on that telecon, can be harmful to my relationship with that person and can prevent me listening to them properly. Hearing a narrative that tells me I am cleverer or know better than that person can stunt them and line me up for a fall. Hearing an ear worm that tells me I'm rubbish can prevent me fulfilling my true potential and line me up to fail.

Paul's letter to the Ephesians advises them, and us, to be careful about how we live. He encourages wisdom and to understand the will of the Lord. He discourages time wasting and drunkenness, though we know from other letters that he doesn't discourage all alcohol. We know too that we should value rest and that being encouraged not to waste our time, can't mean being so obsessive that we cannot relax. If we have over-organised lives maybe a review of them will give God the chance to give us some peace.

Paul recommends that we should be open to the Holy Spirit, indeed filled with the Spirit. And interestingly he recommends the singing of psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. While we do that as part of our worship (at 9.45) I think Paul could also be suggesting a sort of spiritual ear worm. I have one particular involuntary ear worm from a hymn that often pops into my head. It's one of the phrases from 'And can it be'. We sang it a few weeks ago and I'm aware that for some people its theology is a bit dense. It's a great Wesley hymn. My ear worm is the phrase: 'my chains fell off, my heart was free, I rose, went forth and followed thee'. I have no idea why that bit of it in particular has stuck.

But I do know that if I stop and properly listen to it, then I am reminded of the choice I made to follow Jesus, the real sense I have of being called and a freedom from fear. It lifts my heart and my spirits and it leads my mind from places of darkness into light.

I said it was involuntary. I didn't choose it. I don't actively search it out. It just pops into my mind from time to time. Its appearance doesn't coincide with singing it in church. Maybe it pops up at the prompting of the Holy Spirit.

But I do have other ear worms which aren't so enlightening or encouraging. And I'm interested that some of the research on those ear worms that we don't want to listen to suggests that the best way to switch them off is to actively replace them with something else.

I wonder if that might be what Paul means when he also recommends making melody to the Lord in our hearts. I know that there are plenty of Bible verses that help me to bat away those voices that denigrate others or that denigrate me. I have learned some of them, others can pop up. I find that Phillipians 4, helps me in particular. It encourages me to rejoice and to think of whatever is honourable, just, pure, pleasing or commendable, to praise anything worthy. The Psalms are rich with phrases that can fill our heads and hearts with the sort of thoughts that will enable us to give thanks to God. Seeking out and learning those songs, psalms and scripture verses that encourage us will give us the opportunity to do away with those voices and niggles that cause us to struggle. We can actively replace those unhelpful, unedifying ear worms with word and melodies that will enable us to grow as Christians and to connect us to God and with each other.

So my prayer for each of us this week is that when our minds are wandering into well worn grooves that are unhelpful to us, we turn our thoughts to images, words and songs that instead make melodies. May we hear phrases from the rich liturgy we use each Sunday, may our minds eye see glimpses of glory, may we take blessing from the bread and wine. So that we are then better equipped to face the daily ups and downs; the fears and the temptations and be better able to be God's hands and voices in the world.

Amen

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