

THE SPIRIT WILL BE WITH US ALL THE WAY

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Camrose United Church
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Isaiah 50:4-9a - The suffering servant

Luke 19:28-40 - Jesus enters Jerusalem

Sydney Carter (1915-2004), author of six hymns in *Voices United*, died in March of this year. He was a British hymn-writer, author of some 500 hymns, perhaps the best known of which is *Lord of the Dance*.

When I thought about Sydney Carter's death, and then looked through the songs he wrote and which have been part of my life, I realized that in some ways his music has really reflected, at least for me, the tone of the last thirty or forty years in the church as well as in the world. And considering when I could do a tribute to him, this Sunday seemed to make sense. At first, however, I thought it doesn't really fit with Palm Sunday--Passion Sunday--and then I realized that it really does because one of the most central motifs or themes in Sydney Carter's music is the sense of journey. We've already sung "One More Step Along the World I Go," and after this message we have the song called "Travel On." It's that sense of journey about life--"from the old things to the new, keep me travelling along with you"--that has made a real difference to so many of us. In a sense perhaps it has even changed the way we think about our faith and our lives, from a sense of establishing something that will be constant and stationary, to the journey of life and the movement. We now look for the meaning of life not so much in the destination or a particular location or stance in life, but rather in the journey itself, in the travelling.

So I thought, well, this is Palm Sunday. We celebrate and re-enact the processional movement of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem with the people cheering and the energy of that movement. We have just been through the whole story of him having been in Galilee. And now we have his travelling toward Jerusalem, his changing from the teaching and the growing support, toward his talk of how the son of man will be put to death, and to the confusion of the disciples. His entry into Jerusalem seems to be somewhat crazy because at this time Jerusalem is such a dangerous place. And so Palm Sunday is a bit of a snapshot of this very in-motion, in-the-midst-of-the-journey kind of moment in Jesus' life--"from the old things to the new."

That was perhaps the greatest old-things-to-the-new moment in all of history, at least in the Christian view of history, because this was the moment when the old-way age passed away and a new age came into being. It was the time when this new covenant was brought into being in Christ, in Christ's blood, in Christ's sacrifice. So we look at our history. As a matter of fact we count our years around the Christ event. What a changing time, what a journeying time that history was, Jesus on that donkey making his way into

Jerusalem and about to enter into all of those events that played themselves out during Holy Week--that story we call the Passion of Christ. And we have all been invited by the Sunday School to experience, following the service, the adventure of the walk through Holy Week. So there's the journey of life in a sense in all of its glory with Jesus just taking one more step along the way, and all of those disciples following him on that way into Jerusalem.

Sydney Carter also represents for me a change in the way of understanding faith. To illustrate that I want to quote from him:

Faith is more basic than language or theology. Faith is the response to something which is calling us from the timeless part of our reality. Faith may be encouraged by what has happened in the past, or what is thought to have happened in the past, but the only proof of it is in the future. Scriptures and creeds may come to seem incredible, but faith will still go dancing on. Even though (because it rejects a doctrine) it is now described as "doubt". This, I believe, is the kind of faith that Christ commended.

Carter's music lifts up the experience of doubting as a part of the journey of faith. There are times when we feel sure and insightful about our faith; there are other times when we feel unsure, and if we saw faith in static terms that would be seen as a failure. But in the dynamic terms of the life journey and the dance, doubt is seen as just part of the dance, part of the ups and downs and the ins and outs of a normal healthy journey of faith and life. That's the way faith goes, and that's the way life goes. So when Carter writes a song like "Lord of the Dance," he is using the image of the dance as a way of capturing that sense of movement and dynamic of our faith--of our *faith*, not our theology, not our doctrines, not our beliefs, not even our scriptures, but our *faith*. And in a way that image turns things around for me because I had an early impression of faith being primarily about a set of beliefs, and believing the right beliefs. And then if we believed hard enough we would feel it inside.

But Carter's view turns that around and says the foundation of faith is the experience, not the ideas, not the understanding, not the beliefs. The foundation is the experience, the encounter with Christ, the encounter with the sacred in our lives. The foundation is knowing God. That comes first. Later on, then, we come with the believing in God, or the beliefs we have about God, the doctrines or the understandings. And those tend to become static. Faith doesn't. Faith keeps dancing on, it keeps journeying on, and when it comes to the point where those old doctrines don't fit any more, we begin to feel some doubt and some alienation. But we feel that not because there is something wrong with where we are; rather, because the doctrines and the beliefs now need to be rethought, re-expressed. We need to be re-articulating our Christian faith in every generation, not because there is something unstable about it, but because faith is that experience of knowing and feeling life as it is. And that's not a dead, static, thing; it's a live thing that is journeying and dancing.

I remember back when "Lord of the Dance" came out. There were some people who struggled with that in the church, who couldn't quite picture Jesus dancing. I think it has challenged us to grasp that sense of the artistic about our faith. To illustrate, I want to read one of my all-time favourite little stories. This is from Anthony de Mello whose

books are short vignettes of wisdom, and is the title piece from the volume called *The Song of the Bird*.

The disciples were full of questions about God. Said the master: "God is the unknown and the unknowable. Every statement about God, every answer to your questions, is a distortion of the truth." The disciples were bewildered: "Then why do you speak about him at all?" "Why does the bird sing?" said the master. "Not because it has a statement, but because it has a song."

The words of the scholar are to be understood. The words of the master are not to be understood; they are to be listened to as one listens to the wind in the trees and the sound of the river and the song of the bird. They will awaken something within the heart that is beyond all knowing.

This points us to that more foundational level of faith that is deeper than the words and the understandings, but is more like the song of the bird or the dance--the dance of life and faith. It transforms our understanding of Christ, in Carter's words, "to an understanding of Christ as the Lord of the dance," as the one in whom we truly hear that song of the bird, and we in our hearts are truly moved to the dance.

Another of the significant changes that has occurred in the last few decades in our world, as well as in our faith, is alluded to in the hymn "When I Needed a Neighbour, Were you There?" which we are going to sing after the prayers later in the service. When we look at hymnody earlier than the sixties we see a lot about the big statements of faith and expressions of faith, or a lot about individual piety and one's own sense of God, but we don't see much about the community and the relationships among people. That's a new thing that has emerged since about the sixties. I think it is a reflection of the world in which we live, that there was an earlier time when we were more connected with each other. Institutions like family and church and school and neighbourhoods brought people together, and people had a connectedness with one another that we have lost in the latter half of the last century.

We've become a world, a community, a society, in which one of our most difficult issues is loneliness and isolation--the struggle truly to connect with one another, and to find community and intimacy and friendship that supports us in our lives. We hear allusions to this in stories and drama and music, and so a song like "When I Needed a Neighbour, Were you There?" expresses that sense of understanding of our faith, that there is a way by which in Christ we come together and we are turned to one another such that we learn how to become neighbours to one another. So it suggests that in our faith--this faith which Jesus centred in that command to love one another, the love at the very centre of life, at the very centre of our faith--life is essentially relationship. It suggests that this faith of ours contains the clue to breaking through that soul-destroying isolation and alienation and estrangement that is in our world. It contains the key, the breaking through, to enable us to reach out and touch the life of the neighbour and to achieve that sense of community of relationship of love that is at the very heart of our faith. So Carter represents for me that shift, that movement that has occurred over the last half a century in our understanding of faith as well.

All this means that the journey of life is not static. It's dynamic. It's a moving sort of thing that plunges into the depth of the pain and the difficulties of life, as it also rises to the highs. Last night I was watching a movie--actually it was my son Josh who was

watching. It was a comedy, starring Steve Martin, about parenthood and I caught just a couple of bits of it. Steve Martin plays the part of a father with kids, and he's just not keeping up; he's having such a hard time with the ups and downs and the craziness of family life and he just can't get it. He wants everything to get in control and not be such a mess all the time, and so there's a growing distance between him and his wife as he struggles with this. In the one scene I caught, Martin's mother is there and she's a cute, doddering, old lady. She was overhearing the conversation and walked sort of innocently into the room. Out of the blue she started telling about the time when she was young and had her first roller coaster ride which at the time seemed to her to be very disconnected. She says: "I remember that roller coaster ride and it was up and down. I couldn't believe how one could be so thrilled and so terrified all at the same time; but I loved it, I just loved the ride. Some people don't like the roller coaster; they ride the merry-go-round which just goes around and around and around. But I liked the roller coaster." She then walked out of the room.

I think that is what Sydney Carter is trying to tell us, that life has that roller coaster feel to it. There's not a part of it that's wrong and a part of it that's right; rather, it's all right, it's all part of the ride of life and faith. It's a good illustration because the purpose of the roller coaster is not to get to the end, it's not to arrive at a destination, because you actually end up right where you started. The purpose of the roller coaster is the ride, it is the journey. And so it's a dynamic view of life in faith, and it's also a view in which we're not travelling it alone. We're with one another, and we're with God. And the spirit is with us all the way on that journey. That's what makes it possible for us to keep our hearts and minds open to that wonderful journey of life, just knowing that the spirit is with us. And that's the central motif in the hymn we are going to sing now: "Travel on, travel on . . . [and] the spirit will be with us all the way."

Transcribed by Sue and By Reesor