

A Sermon Preached by The Revd Vaughan Roberts at St Mary's Warwick for the Folk Festival Service 2016

Deuteronomy 34: 1-9; Mark 13: 1-8

The Unthanks took to the stage at the Warwick Folk Festival on Thursday evening and began by saying something along the lines of: We're a band from Newcastle which is and always will be a small city in the northern part of Europe. And there was strong applause around the tent. We know that after 23rd June we're a nation (or nations) divided on how we relate to Europe. I don't want to spend time this morning raking over those coals – important as that subject remains. Instead I want to explore briefly the relationship folk music has with a sense of nationhood and the land – because there are particularly strong ties between folk and place, just as there between religion and place.

We only have to look at our readings this morning to see that. In the first passage we heard: *The LORD said to Moses, 'This is the **land** of which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, saying, "I will give it to your descendants."*' For the Jewish people that sense of land and place became particularly focussed in the city of Jerusalem and most especially in the Temple, so when Jesus says to one of his disciples as they're leaving the Temple: *'Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.'* He's not making a statement about architecture or civil engineering, he's making a powerful statement about Jewish religious, political and social structures.

So what about folk music and place? Some historians of folk locate its origin in the 18th century Romantic theology and philosophy of Johann Gottfried von Herder who encouraged classical composers to draw upon *Volkslieder* (folk songs) in their work. Herder was a supporter of the ideals behind the French Revolution and any search for the songs of the people is bound to have political and nationalist implications.

The musical challenge articulated by Herder was met by such classical composers as Liszt, Dvořák, Bartók, Kodály and more. However, there isn't a simple link between nationhood and folk music. Composer and historian of music Howard Goodall (probably best known for his theme tunes to *The Vicar of Dibley* and *Blackadder*) has observed: 'The flaw in describing [folk] as "nationalist" is that, while it was sometimes identified with political movements seeking self-determination, as in the case of Liszt's *Hungarian Rhapsodies* or Sibelius's *Finlandia*, in other cases it was merely an excuse for inserting ethnic sounds into salon or concert hall with no national or political motivation whatsoever. And he continues: 'Likewise, the magpie-like composers of the nineteenth century sometimes even made use of such material from regions that were not their own, or, as members of the imperial ruling class, found inspiration in the music of subjugated tribes and communities within their empire's domain – in which cases the term "nationalist" is, surely, highly inappropriate'. So place has an important but ambiguous role in folk music.

Perhaps the most significant British example of this quest for ethnic songs was Cecil Sharp, noted for his late 19th and early 20th century collections of folk traditions from the West Country and Northern England, as well as the USA. Sharp was part of a widespread movement in England which included Anglican clergy such as Sabine Baring-Gould and Charles Marson; and internationally by people like Percy Grainger, John Lomax and his

son Alan. So folk can represent a sense of nationhood – on these islands a sense of what it is to live in England or Wales, Scotland or Ireland. It can represent what it means to have a sense of regional identity and even British and European identity. It can reflect the rural life of these nations, the industrial life of the British Isles and the nautical life around our coasts. And of course it extends beyond the UK.

With the US Presidential election in full swing a good example of folk music and national identity can be found in Woody Guthrie's 'This land is your land' written in 1940 as a response to Irving Berlin's 'God bless America' and covered by many artists – perhaps most significantly by Pete Seeger and Bruce Springsteen at the inauguration of Barak Obama in 2009. The melody is similar to that of a Baptist hymn recorded by the Carter Family as 'When the World's on Fire'. 'This land is your land' continues to be a folk marker in both the national identity and civil religion of the USA and, strikingly, other nations – for example, a British reworking of it has been produced by Billy Bragg who sang at last year's Warwick Folk Festival.

So where does this leave us? Folk music is clearly rooted, grounded, earthed in a very strong sense of place and land. The same is often true of religion, as we heard: *'This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, saying, "I will give it to your descendants"'* But even the same faith will take on different manifestations in different places: Judaism will be different in Jerusalem and New Jersey, Catholicism will be different in the Vatican and Venezuela. Yes, there'll be family resemblances but striking differences too.

And we can see that religion is a significant thread within the story of folk music – in this brief account we've moved from von Herder the theologian, to vicar's collecting songs to a Baptist hymn becoming Guthrie's protest song, and there are many other examples. Let me be clear, I'm not saying that folk music is just 'religion' in another form or with a different name. The relationship here is much more dynamic and vibrant than that. And here we come back to Jesus' observation about the Jerusalem temple: *'Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.'*

Yes, both folk and faith are about place and identity but they also contain within themselves a vital sense of critique, comment and questioning. Throughout his short ministry Jesus was asking his listeners: What does it mean to be the People of God? And although his vision of God's Kingdom was securely rooted in a specific place, he was constantly saying it's more than that. Being part of God's family transcends being Jewish or Samaritan; it transcends temple worship or attendance at synagogue; it transcends the land given to our descendants. Being the People of God is about living by the values of Kingdom which can't be found in a specific place or a building made of stone. And that dynamic exists within folk music as well – rooted in a place but often singing about values which extend above and beyond their immediate location.

For us human beings a sense of place is really important, whether that's Warwick or Newcastle; the British Isles or Europe. That sense of place manifests itself powerfully in folk and faith, but we always need more – folk and faith are also about embodied values, many of which overlap and they too are God-given gifts which nurture us as individuals and communities.