

A Sermon Preached by The Revd Vaughan Roberts at St Mary's Warwick for the Folk Festival Service 2018

Exodus 24: 3-10; Mark 4: 35-41

In a moment Rob Halligan's going to sing us his song 'Wild Horses' from the album of the same title released last year. When I *first* saw the title, I assumed it was about four-legged creatures, galloping across fields or moorlands. However, if you know the song already or have read the lyrics in our order of service you'll know that's not the case. The *wild horses* in question are those found in the sea and his lyrics speak of waves crashing against a wall.

This morning I want to spend a little time thinking about the ambiguity of language and the rich textures that metaphor provides for us in art, in faith but also in our everyday life. One of the things I'll be doing is reflecting on Rob's song, which is *potentially* a very dangerous thing to do because in a few minutes he may stand up in front of us and something along the lines of: 'Well, none of that was in my mind when I wrote it!'

But isn't that how art works? To use a biblical phrase, it's like casting your bread upon the waters (Eccl 11: 1). Songwriters and poets, painters and sculptors, composers and novelists produce all kinds of art, which *we* then make of what *we* will. A well-known example is the song by The Police 'Every Breath You Take' which is about a couple breaking up and its creator Sting is amazed at how often it's been played at weddings! What's in the creative mind of the artist isn't necessarily what's in the equally creative minds of listeners or viewers.

So Rob and I have communicated briefly about Wild Horses and he's said about the song: 'It talks about the road not always being easy but there are treasures on the way we can pick up and the last verse looks to eternity with God.' I get that and I hope you do to but one of the other things that jumps out at me are the images of the sea that he uses – particularly the way that the *wild horses* on the shoreline are contrasted with the *sapphire floors* of the sea of eternity.

One of the things that I hear Rob singing about in his wonderful song is the marvellously diverse way in which the sea's used in scripture. There are numerous occasions when it's employed as an image for the forces of chaos and God's presence within such turmoil. We see that in our Gospel reading this morning when Jesus calms the storm. We see it in the story of Jonah and the whale and in many of the psalms – the conclusion of Ps 77 is a good example and it has strong echoes of our passage from Mark's Gospel: *The waters saw you, O God; the waters saw you and were afraid; the depths also were troubled. The voice of your thunder was in the whirlwind; your lightnings lit up the ground; the earth trembled and shook. Your way was in the sea, and your paths in the great waters, but your footsteps were not known. You led your people like sheep by the hand of Moses and Aaron.* God's presence is indicated by the turmoil of sea and nature.

But the Bible also uses water as an image for God's peace and tranquillity. And that image has its roots in moments such as the one in our first reading where the Children of Israel have a vision of God's presence and the blue seas of tumult have been turned into sapphire glass symbolising God's order and harmony. And the use of that image runs through to Revelation and the vision of heaven that St John the Divine sets before us.

Once again sapphire glass is presented as a metaphor for God's eternity where chaos is calmed and resolved.

So, for me, Rob's song captures beautifully both of those ways in which sea is used. But there's one final image that I want to share. It's not *in* Rob's song but it **is** Rob's song – in fact, it *is* the whole of the Folk Festival that we're celebrating once again this weekend – the singing, the dancing, the camaraderie and more.

These words are so well-known I probably don't need to tell you where they come from: *In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters* (Gen 1: 1-2). In that Genesis account of creation God's Spirit hovers over those fluid forces of chaos before God embarks on those wonderful, amazing, awe-inspiring acts of creation.

And when we human beings are creative: in art, in giving birth, in loving, in caring, in serving, even in our daily work, we're joining in that astonishing Divine music and dance of creation. We are joining God's Spirit in brooding over the formless waters to create meaning and to reflect God's grace.

As he closed out the opening night of this year's festival in the Warwick Hall Jon Boden sang a traditional song about faith in a Scottish fishing community. He introduced the song by saying something along the lines of: even if you're not religious like me, this song speaks of the power of singing together.

And then, someone who self-described as 'not religious,' gave a moving rendition of a song that was *full* of references to Christian faith.

And that says a great deal about our contemporary Western culture, which seems to struggle with any sense of formalised religion but still finds the language of faith, the images of faith and the metaphors of faith to be intriguing, fascinating and (dare I say it) enthralling.

So one of the things I always find so powerful about this occasion in St Mary's is that we are bringing together a freedom of spirit alongside the shape and form of liturgy – or in the images that Rob uses in his song we have both God's Wild Horses **and** ... God's sapphire sea.