



Hard won hope **Rev Richard Bonifant**

Year C, Pentecost

Acts 2:1-21, John 14:8-17 (25-27)

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I always think twice before jumping into a sermon with a story about a famous person, or an obscure book, or a film that I enjoy but no one else seems to have heard of. The risk of using such stories is that while I am trying to make a connection between these stories and a possibly even more obscure theological idea, is that rather than encouraging you all to listen, the result can be the exact opposite. Only last month I boldly jumped into a Star Wars reference only to see some of you take that as permission for a quick nap. Over the years I've found a few references from popular culture that seem to work better in church than others. For example, for some reason that I personally can't quite understand, Anglicans seem to like the music of Leonard Cohen. That might be something to do with Kim Hill playing his music on national radio for decades, but I'm not sure.

What I'm really pointing to is the death of monoculture. When I was at school, we only had three television channels, a handful of radio stations, and an individual's music collection may have only comprised of a relatively small number of compact discs or even cassettes. Today, however, a smartphone can give you access to thousands of hours of television or movies, and entire libraries of music, instantaneously. I personally think this is wonderful. For those of us who like the weird and wonderful, there has never been a better time for discovering all that this world has to offer. But I do miss the ability to have conversations with a large group of people about that one television program that played last night, safe in the assumption that most people would know what we were talking about.

All of that is preamble because I do want to talk about the music of someone you might know of but may not know well. I wouldn't call myself a fan of the Australian born artist Nick Cave, but I watched an interview with him a few weeks ago that sent me down the rabbit hole of his artist

work. Nick is musician, novelist, screenwriter, and at this point in time, we could even call him an Anglican. At one point in time a band he was a part of was regarded as the most dangerous in the world because of the chaos that surrounded their performances.

The first Nick Cave song I strongly connected with is titled *Into my arms*, mostly because the opening line of that song is, "I don't believe in an interventionist God". It's a line that keeps coming back to me and is one I constantly wrestle with theologically. Do I believe in an interventionist God? My answers remain complicated. Certainly, I used to, part of me would still like to, tradition affirms that God is not uninvolved in human history, but that raises the difficult question of why so much is not right with this world. Then I find myself asking, what does interventionist mean or imply? Perhaps the desire for divine intervention is an immature one, and represents an abdication of human responsibility for the state of our world? And yet, I believe that God is love, and love is not passive or aloof. Love is relational; therefore God must be relational. I could go on like this for days, which is probably why I find myself coming back to that song lyric over and over again. The one line provokes something deep within me, which means it is effectively doing what good art strives to do, which is to broaden our experience of what it is to be human.

Beyond that one song lyric I have had very little connection with the work of Nick Cave. Part of the reason of that was that I perceived his earlier work to have a nihilistic edge, that I chose to avoid. Which is not to say that I avoided nihilism as a younger person, because just the opposite was true, but for whatever reason, I felt that Nick Cave was that one step too far. But we all get older, and wiser. The simple truth is that who we were, is not the same as who we are, or who we might be. Which is my way of saying that the Nick Cave I discovered recently is not the person I thought he was at all.

Since the tragic loss of one of his children Nick Cave has been writing a series of online responses to questions from his fans. In these posts he is trying to bring his full humanity to what he is offering to others. And the results are quite astounding. In response to a fan who wrote that they felt they were losing their faith in this world and in humanity, Nick Cave wrote the following:

“You are right to be worried about your growing feelings of cynicism...Cynicism is not a neutral position — and although it asks almost nothing of us, it is highly infectious and unbelievably destructive. In my view, it is the most common and easy of evils.

I know this because much of my early life was spent holding the world and the people in it in contempt. It was a position both seductive and indulgent. The truth is, I was young and had no idea what was coming down the line. I lacked the knowledge, the foresight, the self-awareness. I just didn't know. It took a devastation to teach me the preciousness of life and the essential goodness of people. It took a devastation to reveal the precariousness of the world, of its very soul, to understand that it was crying out for help. It took a devastation to understand the idea of mortal value, and it took a devastation to find hope.

Unlike cynicism, hopefulness is hard-earned, makes demands upon us, and can often feel like the most indefensible and lonely place on Earth. Hopefulness is not a neutral position either. It is adversarial. It is the warrior emotion that can lay waste to cynicism... hope says the world and its inhabitants have value and are worth defending. Hope says the world is worth believing in. In time, we come to find that it is so.”¹

When we think about the day we remember as Pentecost, we often forget the difficult situation that the early followers of Christ were in. Despite the resurrection stories of the Gospels, these followers of Christ had been through a deeply traumatic experience with the execution of Jesus. This community was also wrestling with thoughts about an interventionist God. Certainly, they were beginning to believe that God had intervened in history through the person of Jesus. But even with experiences of the resurrection the traumatic death of Jesus really called into question just how successful God's intervention had been.

And this is part of the reason why Pentecost was such a significant event. The new experience of God's spirit uniting and bringing this community together, affirmed that the movement of love had not died

¹ Adapted from <https://www.theredhandfiles.com/do-you-still-believe-in-us/>

with Jesus, it had been reborn and would continue to be felt and experienced.

To put that another way Pentecost arrived and brought hope to the early church. Part of that hope was that God was active in their lives in a new way. And part of that hope was that when given the chance humans are able to overcome their worst impulses in order to bring more goodness into the world. This is not delusion optimism. The hope of the early church was hard won.

Today there are many reasons to give in to our cynicism. It is easy to feel powerless when we consider the violence in this world. It is depressing that so many Governments prioritise wealth over the wellbeing of vulnerable people. It is hard to feel that I'm making any sort of difference to our environment when I walk somewhere, or put out the recycling, or add to the compost. And it is actually quite reasonable that our hearts should ache when we hear of discrimination against people because of race, gender identity, or any point of difference. I can admit to waking up some days without the conviction that tomorrow could be better than today. There is so much to be heartbroken about.

And yet, this community of St Matthew has long and proud history of daring to be different. Different to the world we are part of. This is a community that has challenged Aotearoa to be better, to be more loving, to be more radical. Right now, what could be more radical than to say that despite the challenges of today, despite the hardship we see in this world, while we accept that the future may not be as bright as we want it to be, we choose hope. We choose to believe in humanity, and in humanities capacity for good. And that we will strive to keep that hope alive, because being a hopeful people is hard, but it is what this world needs. Amen.