

Improvising Faith

After Easter we went on an unusual retreat led by a small group of instrumentalists.* In place of a retreat leader providing reflective inputs during joint sessions, we were led by a few highly proficient musicians – many of whom had played in leading orchestras – who improvised skilfully out of their personal and collective prayer, with only minimal verbal inputs. They did not perform pieces from any composers' scores. Emotions, spirits and imaginations were engaged, bypassing the rational mind. It was not only beautiful, but powerful and liberating, allowing us space to reflect during sessions and in times of personal silence. And personally it released emotions that had been held within for many months which I hadn't realised I was carrying. What was at work here? Why did it have such a strong palpable healing effect?

As I've reflected on the experience it has given me an insight into the nature of healthy living. Life itself should be, and can become, an ongoing improvisation in which we are drawn to trust in God, ourselves and others, to develop life-giving practices without fear and for blessing of others as well as ourselves. Such multi-faceted trust is an essential dynamic within any act of improvisation by a group of people whether it be music, drama, or as I'm suggesting, just ordinary day to day living. The Christian life is better described not in the imagery of a performance of a previously composed musical score or scripted drama; such images are too binding, too limiting. Rather it is continual improvisation, as this captures with greater accuracy qualities and habits required by any participant. Someone must seek to listen and join in with melody and harmonise with other people's contributions. This requires awareness not only or primarily of one's own contribution, but also an observant listening, a humility to give way to the lead given by others, a confidence to offer our own contribution at the right time and place, a balance of yielding and asserting etc. etc. There is more a sense of faith, flow and flexibility in such improvised performance as we offer our own contribution.

As part of this reflective process I re-read Richard Rohr's book on the Trinity, *The Divine Dance*, which underlines that the whole of creation is grounded in and arises from the full and ongoing improvisation of Father, Son and Spirit. Our Christian understanding is that through faith we are invited to participate in this divine improvisation. And following Pentecost the Acts of the Apostles is full of early Christians improvising as they applied their faith in the risen Christ to the new circumstances of the gentile mission. And so it has been ever since, with plenty of contrary examples of discordant, jarring tones when failing to improvise.

And I like to understand our Stilling Prayer group as a shared time when we consciously place ourselves in that space that Rublev so beautifully creates for the viewer of his famous Trinity icon. Prayer is the grounding of our human lives in the divine improvisation of Father, Son & Spirit. The impact may be dramatic on rare occasions, as it was for me on our retreat, but more normally a quiet, joyful awareness of life held in the community that is God – this is how human life can be fostered as improvising with the God beyond us, beside us and within us, to the glory of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

* Do explore the ministry of *Epiphany* or even plan to go on one of their retreats! We might even meet at Ashburnham Place where we went! <https://epiphanymusic.org.uk/home> 5* recommendation



Leading into silence

O God the Father,
graciously give us
all that we need
for body and soul.

O Son of God,
deliver us from sin,
be gracious to us,
and give us your Spirit.

O God, Holy Spirit,
heal, comfort
and strengthen us
against all evil,
all that is misguided,
and give us endless victory
and resurrection from death.
Amen.

Martin Luther, 1483-1546 (slightly adapted)

Leading from the silence

God of all grace
keep us open to you,
conscious of your presence
in the midst of all of our activities.
Grant us a spirit that is true to you, others and ourselves
in all the opportunities and challenges of our lives,
so that we live to your praise and glory.
Amen

