

SERMON FOR THE JAZZ MASS – WANGARATTA CATHEDRAL

SUNDAY 5 NOVEMBER 2017

Matthew 5:1-12

Who here loves Jazz Music? Come on – raise your hands?

No stand up. Let's try this...it's a bit Jazz Rap style.

When I say...Who got the jazz?

You say...We got the jazz

Let's try it –

Who got the jazz?

(We got the jazz)

This time I'll say... Who got the jazz, Come on, Come on.

And you say... We got the jazz, we got the jazz!

Feels great hey? You're not meant to feel like this in Church, right? Isn't it a sin?

Musos – just give us 20 seconds of anything you've got – don't try and co-ordinate – just let it out!

Fantastic hey.

What an amazing few days – heaven – wall to wall Jazz music.

The great Duke Ellington once said that there are 2 kinds of music – good music and the other kind. I think he meant jazz and then everything else – coz all the music I've heard around Wang this weekend has been good music.

Duke Ellington also once said that he never had much interest in the piano until he realised that every time he played, a girl would appear on the piano bench – one on his left and another on his right!

Which leads me to ask the question this morning. "Does Jazz Put The Sin In Syncopation?". Does Jazz Put The Sin In Syncopation? Or put another way...should we be playing jazz music in this Cathedral?

Actually, I'm not the first one to ask it – 96 years ago in 1921 – the Women's Home Journal (sounds like a publication that wasn't read by liberated women!) wrote:

“Jazz originally was the accompaniment of the voodoo dancer, stimulating the half-crazed barbarian to the vilest deeds. The weird chant, accompanied by the syncopated rhythm of the voodoo invokers, has also been employed by other barbaric people to stimulate brutality and sensuality. That it has a demoralizing effect upon the human brain has been demonstrated by many scientists.”

Sounds unbelievable in 2017 doesn't it? But back in 1921 there was an outcry from many parts of society, from religious leaders to music educators, that jazz music had an evil influence on its listeners! Some felt that it led to immoral dancing and promiscuity (heaven forbid!) while others went so far to say that jazz could cause permanent damage to the brain cells of those who played or listened to it!

Thank God, society has moved on – well, most of society – well, maybe not all our politicians in Canberra, or some of our brothers and sisters in the church who still think the world is flat and anything good and fun is bad. But the rest of us have moved on.

From the legendary Duke Ellington's beautiful sacred jazz compositions to John Coltrane's "A Love Supreme". I'm absolutely sure that Jazz music has been created and played for spiritual purposes not evil purposes. In fact, whether you MAKE jazz music like many of our Anglican school students here this morning, or are a FAN of it like me – I suggest to you that both jazz and improvisation are things of a deeply spiritual nature. Dizzy Gillespie said that the church had a deep significance for her musically, and that it was in church that she first learned how music could transport people spiritually. And she was right. Many of those considered the founding fathers of jazz music from New Orleans in the USA - King Oliver, Jelly Roll Morton, and man himself Louis Armstrong – they were all brought up in church, and church music played a very important role in their musical development.

So today I give you all permission to have fun – to live life to the full! I can do this because our Gospel reading from Matthew says I can. Jesus didn't often teach like this – standing up and preaching effectively - we know these words as the Beatitudes – part of Jesus 'Sermon on the Mount. Jesus was telling his friends how he hoped they'd live their life, if they were to make a real difference in society. If I am to be so bold as to take the Be-attitudes from 1st century Palestine and interpret them for us living in Wangaratta in 2017 (or wherever you live), I think Jesus is saying to us:

Be True. Be Loving. Be Fair. Be Forgiving. Be Happy. Let me add a 6th – Play Jazz Music often!

One of my favourite Peanuts comic strips is when Lucy tells Charlie Brown – “I have examined my life and have found it to be without fault. Therefore, I'm going to hold a ceremony and present myself with a medal. I will then give a moving speech. After that, I'll

greet myself in the receiving line.” Then Lucy concludes rather sadly... “When you’re a saint, you have to do everything yourself!” Ain’t that the truth! Hands up all the saints here?

You might be a jazz musician who puts the Sin back into Syncopation, or you might be a fan of jazz music like me who is just a sinner – but the good news is that we are all saints – not a bad reminder on this day the Church celebrates as All Saints’ Day. None of us are perfect – and that’s OK because Christian saints aren’t perfect - in fact we’re far from perfect, but at least we’re pointed in the right direction.

The Sermon on the Mount lists for us the characteristics of sainthood. It’s not based on us behaving perfectly, thank God. It’s based on one thing only – love.

Remember my 2017 version of Jesus’ Be-attitudes: Be True. Be Loving. Be Fair. Be Forgiving. Be Happy... and Play Jazz Music often!

I’ve often imagined God asking us Christians, “Why do you have such a sour face and sad look? Wake up, smell the coffee, listen to jazz music, and start looking around at all that I’ve created for you to enjoy!” The whole earth is full of God’s glory and presence...we need only to open our eyes to see it and enjoy it!

I believe that God doesn’t want us to come into this grand Cathedral to escape the bad outside; so we can be content to gather in our little “holy huddles”, and sing hymns to each other and pat each other on the back! No, God created what’s outside, and God wants us to bring it in to help us worship God! Jazz has a right to be played OUTSIDE in the streets and here INSIDE, in this beautiful Cathedral, because it communicates beauty and truth.

In truth there’s no division between the secular and the sacred, between what’s outside the Cathedral doors and what lies inside where you are sitting: it’s just the one world, a world where God is fully alive and present! God really wants us to be jazzed, totally tuned in and turned on to life, and enjoy the ride!

Bring on all types of music in church, I say. If it lifts your spirits, it is of God.

I hope this great Jazz Mass enables you to connect with God today - through the music, through the Bible readings and prayers, through the bread and wine and through the quiet spaces – God is with us in all these beautiful places of our worship today.

AMEN.