

The Art of Fugue by J. S. Bach, a work that was unpublished at the time of his death, remains the subject of much discussion among musicologists. *The Art of Fugue* consists of 16 movements of contrapuntal experimentation based upon one single musical theme: a theme given to Bach by Frederick the Great, King of Prussia. Frederick was, himself an accomplished musician and dedicated patron of the art. The resulting work by Bach is dedicated to Frederick, yet it is said to contain countless references which, in a musical language of which Bach was the master, were anything but flattering of the King.

Frederick was not a fan of Bach; either of his late Baroque style of music or of Bach's staunch conservative Lutheranism, he, Frederick being a lapsed Calvinist, a disciple of the liberal Enlightenment and quite probably an atheist. The musical theme which Frederick gave to Bach was deliberately constructed to be so difficult as to make the commission impossible. Frederick's intention was to show his own cleverness and to humiliate Bach publicly. Bach's response, *The Art of Fugue*, is a masterpiece with which Bach "*wiped the floor*" and affirmed his credentials as the genius that he was. The work has profound depths and yet is also very pleasing to the ear.

Our reflection last Sunday, touched upon the subject of judgement; drawing upon Paul's letter to The Romans, Chapter 14 and the teaching of Jesus concerning the imperative to forgive. Two weeks prior, we looked at God's enigmatic description of Godself as "*I am who I am*" – in other words – ***I am who I am and not who you want to make me out to be!*** Alongside that passage from Exodus, we read Matthew's account of the extreme difficulties which Peter had in accepting that God is who God is. God in Christ announced that his destiny lay in death in Jerusalem, and we are reminded by Peter's angry response to that idea that the challenge of accepting that God is God and we are not --- is a perennial one which afflicts us in this age as much as ever it did.

That theme --- the difficulty we all have in accepting that God is not to be made in our image --- but rather we are called to discover God's image in us ----that is a theme which continues today as we dip into the story of Jonah --- a story in which judgement is also right at the heart and centre. Jonah has to learn that despite his own visceral belief that the Ninevites are so

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immoral and sinful that they ought to be destroyed – God has a different view. God is interested not in punishing the Ninevites – but in redeeming them --- saving them from themselves.

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At the start of the story, Jonah runs away from God’s commission to prophesy to Nineveh; to call them away from sin and into God’s kingdom. That, famously, leads to Jonah being cast into the sea to save the boat he is in from sinking; whereupon he is swallowed by the “whale” and then spewed up on land so that he can get on with God’s work. Jonah himself declares that he ran away not out of fear for himself but because of his utter disgust; his revulsion of the idea that through Jonah’s prophesy God will work to save those whom Jonah despises as vile sinners. Jonah sinks into a deep sulk as his prediction comes true and as he, consequently, is made to look foolish in the eyes of the world. As an archetype of humanity, Jonah presents very badly. As we read of him festering with rage in the hot sun, we are all presented with the challenge to see ourselves as we truly are – and not as we like to pretend to be.

As we continue to endure the effects of Covid 19 --- which are universal in their scope ---- so we see that so much which, in the past, we have taken for granted; so much that we have considered constant and fundamental -- so much does not come with a guarantee. That, in turn, has caused most of us to see ourselves differently --- or perhaps more accurately – to see ourselves honestly – maybe for the first time in our lives. That process is --- of course --- a process of judgement. It is the judgement of falsehood by truth. It is plain to see that humanity does not like judgement --- does not like it when the “false truths” --- which in the good times we can so easily delude ourselves into accepting --- that these false truths have no substance or character. We discover in the face of God’s truth that we are not as clever as we think we are --- that so much that we have built up and taken for granted – assumed as our right --- is now shaking on its foundations.

This is a time ---- when the world needs the Church ---- for it is the central and singular commission of the Church to point humankind to God and to God’s Kingdom. That is a wonderful commission. It is work which is of the greatest importance of all --- opening the eyes of humankind to our true destiny. But at the same time; the Church needs the world; we

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cannot separate ourselves from it --- and that not simply because we are a part of it but because it is only in interaction with the world that we, the Church, can learn what our commission really means.

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As is seen time and time again in the Gospels --- the very presence of God in Christ --- which was the presence of truth --- challenged humanity to its very core. As the Church points the world towards Christ, we can expect the same effect. But it is also true --- and how much we need to learn this --- that as we engage with the world in the way God wants us to do --- then we will also find that we ourselves are judged --- made to look at ourselves again. And it is only in doing this that we can hope to discover what it is that God wants us to be. There is no boxed and final analysis of what it means to the Church. The Church is a living organism – or it is nothing at all --- and all living organisms grow and mutate – adapt and develop. Or they die.

Which --- in my head at least ---- takes us back to Johann Sebastian Bach and the commission he received from King Frederick the Great. Frederick gave Bach a musical theme and set him a task of contrapuntal experimentation which he, Frederick believed was impossible. All the received wisdom of the musical cognoscenti agreed. The fact that Bach went on to prove them wrong and to produce a masterpiece which broke all known boundaries was due, certainly, to Bach's innate genius --- but it was the engagement with those whose world was so very different from his own ---- which drew this ground-breaking discovery out of Bach. Bach presented the world with the truth that more is possible. God's truth can do the same for our dysfunctional world --- but it is a truth yet to be fully discovered --- even and perhaps most of all – by the Church.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen