

# Comfortably Numb .... ?

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## THE CHALLENGE OF CHANGE

You could call it the Miracle on West 65<sup>th</sup> Street. According to the Houston Chronicle, it happened at that address, in New York's Lincoln Centre, during a violin concerto.

The concert hall was bustling with warm, pre-performance hubbub before the announcer spoke. 'Ladies and gentlemen, kindly take your seats now; this evening's performance will begin in two minutes.' People glanced at tickets and hurried to find their rows. They edged their way down the narrow lines of seats to find, at last, their allotted places. 'Excuse me. Thank you. You're welcome. Is this my seat?'

Miracles often come without warning or fanfare, and this time was no exception. There was no hint that they were all on the threshold of an experience that they would never forget, a moment to celebrate decades later.

The purposeful din of the orchestra's tuning faded and the lights dimmed, hushing a thousand conversations. The audience was eager for the concert to begin, ready to savour the talents of Itzhak Perlman, arguably the world's greatest violinist. Perlman is usually the last person to take his place on stage, for though his fingers are staggeringly nimble, his legs don't work nearly as well. He was struck with polio when he was just twelve, and now he struggled across the huge platform to take his seat, his stumbling, ungainly walk aided by crutches and leg braces.

At last, he sat down, removed both braces from his legs, and placed his violin beneath his chin. He was ready – and in more ways than one. Perlman's brilliance is no fluke. He practices for nine hours daily. And for forty-five minutes before every concert, he is alone in his dressing room, with two security guards at the

locked door. They have explicit instructions to let no one in under any circumstances. Mr Perlman has finished practising. Now he is praying. Do not disturb.

And pray he must. The concerto is considered one of the most important and difficult works in the violin repertoire. Its technical demands on the soloist are huge. Brahms' Violin Concerto in D Major is simply "unplayable" according to one virtuoso. That miracle night, Perlman was set to perform this extraordinary challenging piece that would last over six minutes.

A few seconds into the solo, the sound of a string breaking on Perlman's violin ricocheted around the hall. The unwelcome twang was an uncouth intruder among a myriad of perfect notes. The orchestra immediately stopped playing, their music tapering off chaotically. The crowd gasped. Protocol permits a musician to call for a pause, allowing time for them to hurry off stage to replace the string. It's quite impossible to play a complicated violin concerto a string short.

Impossible, that is, unless your name is Perlman. With a wave he signals the orchestra to continue. And then the unthinkable happened. Instantaneously transposing the music for three strings instead of four, Perlman delivered the piece flawlessly, his dancing fingers producing sounds of unprecedented purity and passion. Six minutes later, spent and soaked in sweat, he lowered his violin. The crowd sat in stunned silence for eight seconds. And then they rose as one to their feet, a wall of wild cheering and thunderous applause. The orchestra joined in, banging their instruments in homage and shouting themselves hoarse. Perlman called for a microphone, motioned for silence, and then the man with two busted legs and one busted string spoke:

"All my life, it has been my mission to make music from that which remains." His brilliance was expressed through something broken. The shattered string, which could have stopped the music, only served to accentuate Perlman's staggering talent. Greater glory came because the melody-maker used a temporarily useless instrument.<sup>1</sup>

“His brilliance was expressed through something broken.” How many of us would in some way describe ourselves as broken I wonder. My best guess – all of us. In one way or another we are all broken – not least because sin infects everything. We don’t need to look very far to see the effects of our brokenness do we? Everyday the news is filled with the dreadful sounds of war or terrorism, deceit and lying, envy and jealousy. Sometimes it’s in business, sometimes government, sometimes individuals. There are the sounds of fundamentalism, commercialism, materialism, and yet, in almost unbelievable contrast, there is too the sound of God’s grace.

We’ve talked about the ‘Songs of Life.’ I’ve asked the question – which song are you singing? Whatever the answer, it’s being sung by a broken instrument – because it’s being sung by you or me! There is another song to be heard by those who have ears to hear it. It is the powerful, transforming song of grace – because that is God’s song. It travels throughout the world and it can be sung by anyone.

Just as Mr Perlman could show his staggering talent by playing a beautiful melody on a temporarily useless instrument, so God in his grace can take broken lives and transform them into a beautiful song. Just as we would be impressed by a musician playing a beautiful piece of music on an unbroken instrument....isn’t there something extraordinary about one who can do it using one that’s broken.

God takes ordinary, broken people and transforms them, working even in and through their brokenness. Perhaps the truth is that today you desperately need to hear God’s song – his song of grace for you. He loves you.... because he loves you..... because he loves you! Perhaps, in truth, you hear the song but you are ignoring it. Perhaps, in truth, you are challenged by it and you’d rather avoid the challenge it brings. Perhaps you’re bored with it – it’s become all too familiar and lost its beauty. Perhaps for you it just doesn’t seem real. Perhaps, gathered here today are lots of prodigals! Maybe you are one of them.

Most of us will probably be able to think of people we might describe as prodigals – people who’ve drifted away from our churches - but maybe too, some of us are still here! Maybe some of us have become comfortably numb to the song of God’s grace. When we become comfortably numb to the song of God’s grace for

ourselves, it's very hard not to become comfortably numb to the song of God's grace for others too! How much do you really hope that the prodigals will come home? Who are you praying for, weeping for, agonising over – that they might hear the song of God's grace again, or maybe for the first time?

Here's a thought – what would happen if they did? What would happen if a whole load of people, who, for whatever reason have left the church, came back? What would happen if the people you are praying for came here – those that could? Friends, truth is, people are always leaving churches, this church. People leave for all sorts of reasons: no friends; no-one who understand me; I don't fit; don't share the worship style; don't share the theology; too loud; too quiet; someone upset or offended them. We've heard here testimony to those kinds of things on occasion. What if they started to come back? Isn't that what we want - isn't that desperately what we want?

There is much pain in waiting for prodigals to return. One of our values here is: 'People matter': "We will share the good news of Jesus with anyone who doesn't know him." That's good isn't it! The reason prodigals matter, is simply because they matter to God. People, any people, anyone, matters to God, and therefore they matter to us!

I've been wondering though: what happens in a church where people have become comfortably numb to the Song of God's grace? Maybe it becomes comfortably numb to them – and others; maybe it stops noticing others, prodigals, and maybe, if it becomes comfortably numb it stops wanting them back because it would be a bit messy! But then I wonder, what would a church that welcomed them back be like? Friends – have we become comfortably numb? What kind of church do we want to be?

I'm hoping that as we live in this parable of the prodigal son, we might see if we are comfortably numb, where that might be and how we might move on. The truth about church is that God only uses ordinary people – broken instruments of one sort or another, and yet, incredibly, God uses what he has – this motley assortment of broken lives. His brilliance is that he can make the song of his grace

be heard here, in this place. Friends, if you are a follower of Christ – then you are not part of the audience listening to the music – you are part of the orchestra.

Now the tax collectors and ‘sinners’ were all gathering round to hear him. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, “This man welcomes sinners, and eats with them.” (Luke 15 v 1 -3)

Perhaps they’d followed him for a while now, gathering their evidence; perhaps they’d hidden in the shadows just to get a glimpse of what he was really up to, but by now they were convinced: he was meeting with the wrong kinds of people. Some of it was obvious because people came to him in broad daylight, talking to them was one thing, but to sit with and eat with them was, in truth quite another. It was taboo – the big no, no! It indicated a depth of intimacy that simply wasn’t allowed. But as they stood slightly at a distance and muttered among themselves – a shock was waiting, without warning Jesus turns and tells them a story.

A story that is deeply and profoundly shocking, they’ve watched him, heard him, followed him and spied on him – but they are simply not ready for this! The story of course is familiar to us but not to them. The story of the son who wishes his father dead, of how he goes in search of the good life and wastes everything he ever had, who finally decides he’d be better off going home and is unbelievably welcomed by his staggeringly gracious father, and yet when the party is in full swing there’s a family fight as the older son refuses to join in. The story ends in a kind of freeze frame – a stand off – the music halted, no-one quite sure what to do or what will happen.

Friends, the question remains: What will happen? This is an unfinished story – and now, here, in this place – we will write what happens next. One of the many truths contained in this story is that people matter, whatever they do or have done. It was a shocking truth when this story was told, and it still, for many of us, is a shocking truth. The song of God’s grace is for all people because all people matter. Yes, all!

A couple of years ago, in the fairly early days of the Rainbow Lounge we had a tramp visit it fairly regularly for a while. He would come into the foyer but no

further. He had his bike with all his worldly possessions on, which he would bring into the foyer with him. But somehow he knew that if he came here at the right time on the right days, he could get food. He wouldn't eat brown bread, so he had his sandwiches specially made! Sometimes he brought another tramp and both would have lunch. And then one day, as tramps do, he disappeared, moved on. Got me thinking though – what if he'd bought 20 friends regularly and the Rainbow lounge got a reputation for helping people like him?

I once visited a church in Brighton where this happened. One night a tramp asked the priest if he could sleep in the church because it was freezing outside and by the end of the week there were 40 of them sleeping there. The priest was so challenged that he transformed his study and offices into washing facilities for these people. Then they made it into a night shelter so there were some beds to sleep on, and in time they transformed the building and built, inside the building of the church, a proper hostel. Now the church has a hostel and a night shelter one at one end of the building, one at the other. It required them to lose half of the space for the sanctuary – and to rip out the pews and re-arrange the whole way they held services. Now they sit in a circle, in half the space they used to have, with either side of them facilities for homeless people. When I saw it and heard the story something burned within me!

Greenfields has been used over this cold spell as an overflow to the Open House. It brings challenge and it brings change when we live as if the song of God's grace is for all people. Out of the new Vision – please come to Vision day – one of the things we want to help ourselves to do, is to encourage and support ways for us to engage with people who are not part of this church. They may be those we'd describe as prodigals, they may not be.

I was swimming at Virgin Active earlier this week and when I'd finished one of the staff, who'd been teaching swimming came and spoke to me. She used to swim for Great Britain and has worked with Great Britain coaches and she wants to start a swim squad! I think it's just to get a group together to swim – bit like the spin clubs they run on the static bikes! I signed up – here's a golden opportunity

to engage perhaps with people outside the kingdom and enable them to hear the song of God's grace.

What if these people, some of whom may be prodigals, want to come here? What will they find? Will they find those muttering because they don't fit; will they find those like the older brother who stubbornly refuse to engage with them, whoever they are? Will they find a community that welcomes them and is willing to change? Or will they find a community that is comfortably numb thank you, and really has no intention of changing anything or accepting people who in truth, are not really like them at all. Perhaps they'll find a community that sings, on broken strings, the melody of God's grace and it is actually a beautiful melody.

Friends, if we want to be kingdom people, people who live the values we say we hold, and if we want to be a transforming community, then maybe we need to be shocked again by this uncomfortable story. And we need to be ready to face the challenge of change lest we become comfortably numb... to the song of God's grace and the people who matter to Him.

1. Quoted in: Lucas, Geoff: *"Creating a Prodigal Friendly Church,"* Zondervan 2008 p. 11-13

Preached in Crawley Baptist Church by Rev. Ian Phillips on Sunday 24<sup>th</sup> January 2010.