

Thank you Bishop Guli for the honour, joys and privilege of today— and for inviting me to share some reflections on today's readings.

Just a warning – please make sure you are comfortable – As a Catholic woman I don't get the chance to preach in my own church— so this is probably a first and last so I am going to make the most of it!

Our psalm for today invites us to Sing to the Lord a new song. I have always been perplexed by that invitation Why a **new** song? what is the NEW song? or maybe RENEWED song? this psalm is in the breviary every day in Easter week – its message is important.

While I was reflecting on this, I tuned into a new television series – This Town. It is set in the early 80s in Belfast and the Midlands – Birmingham and Coventry - and features an ensconced IRA family deep into violence as a means to unification. The younger family members are expected to step up to the violent activities and carry on the IRA legacy – yet two of the cousins are reluctant – one is a poet and the other a musician. They want to mould their lives in a new way and use their gifts to promote the possibility of redemption, peace and unity. The older generations put huge pressure on them to continue in their old way and in a moving encounter the two cousins exchange their deepest desire to – in their words – leave the old song behind and sing their new song because that is what the world needs from them. And one says to the other: ' The next song we sing – let's make it about today'

A new song - a relevant song - rooted in the needs of the people around them.

In many ways this is what we did as a Community when we left New Hall some 20 years ago – leaving a prestigious and comfortable institution to go and live alongside people on estates of disadvantage – because we recognised that there was a new song that needed singing – and that perhaps we could give a voice to people who couldn't find their own voice to sing.

That is what we are ALL called to do – find the new gospel song –that is needed and relevant for our world today. A song which relates to the lives of ordinary people – expressed in words we can all understand.

For us and for many in our world it is an election year and we have the chance as Christians to ask what the new song – the relevant song – is for our world that our politicians are proposing to sing. All too often the political song promotes division - America first – anti immigration – white supremacy --- back Britain --- using labels and categories which divide and pull peoples apart.

Politicians piggybacking on extremist views which shout division and difference from the rooftops – It comes also - sadly - from faith groups across the globe as we know all too well today ---- persecution and violence because a certain group is or isn't Muslim – Christian – Jewish.

The world as God made it is good – and the Gospels speak of a world where all are welcome and fed; where there is hope – where there is no hint of injustice or exclusion; a sacred world where impossible though it may seem, we love our neighbours as ourselves.

Our new song for today must be one of hope – of peaceful inclusion and of justice – what could be more relevant?

If we look at today's reading from Hebrews we see what the new song was that **they** needed to sing at **that** time. As a letter delivered to persecuted Jewish Christians, the examples in our reading are of Old Testament figures – warriors and Islamic and Christian prophets who stood up and sang their new song in courage and faith and who died following what they believed to be God's word despite what the authorities and institutions were saying. Their stance was very much a new song of courage and prophecy - needed in their time.

In a not dissimilar way, we too live under the power and authority of structures and institutions which find difficulty in accepting the prophetic stance of those fighting to proclaim gospel truth and

justice. Should our new song as Christians today not be similar to the song our figures from Hebrews were called to sing?

We only have to look as far as Alan Bates' raised voice highlighting the injustice involved in the Post office scandal – or the courageous voices who told the truth amid the lies enmeshed in the Covid enquiry – and further afield to Russia where Alexei Navalny's dedication to truth and justice led him to his death in faith as surely as any of the Old Testament figures or first century Christians. His was surely an inspiring and prophetic stance for us all today.

Like these old and new prophetic figures, Jesus himself challenged the powerful and those who sought to rule by division – the Pharisees – the Sadducees – he challenged values and oppressive ways of being – challenged the very heart of the institution. His indeed was a new song in his time. And indeed he was put to death **by** the institution in order to silence his prophetic cry to favour the outcasts and the unlovable.

In a Lenten reflection Bishop Rose Hudson-Wilkin suggested that we should even consider whether our attachment to an institution might today be preventing us from acting prophetically and courageously; from standing up to name injustices or offering courageous advocacy on behalf of those being oppressed in our world.

And recently Pope Francis cautioned that the Church institution might indeed be stifling the cries of our prophets – Pope Francis said the following - In Revelation, Jesus says that he is at the door and knocks. Obviously, the text refers to his knocking from the outside in order to enter but – Pope Francis continues – I think about the times today in which Jesus knocks from within the church so that we will let him come out. Too often we end up being an “imprisoning” Church, which does not let the Lord out, which keeps him as “its own”,

These are timely reminders for us in Eastertide from the Pope — and from Hebrews - that each of us is called to find her or his new gospel song for today – our prophetic voice and to use it for God’s Kingdom, whatever the cost. A reminder that mostly our biblical prophets operated outside the established political and religious power structures which at times tried to stifle the ‘new song’.

So----- Can the millions of people suffering across the globe today take hope from our reading from Hebrews? that division is not God’s way; that justice **will** be administered; that what has been promised **will** be gained; that the mouths of lions **will** be shut? that prophetic voices **will not** be silenced if we have the courage to use them.

They **can** take hope if each of us takes the opportunity offered to be an agent of our new song needed for today – agents of unity, of prophecy and of resurrection --- called - like the first Christians - to challenge the institution if need be in our cry for justice and inclusion -- called to sing our new song if we CAN sing and if others can’t find their voice, then **we** are called to sing for them.

There was a poignant article in the Catholic periodical the Tablet recently about the many people refusing to leave Ukraine despite the devastation. One woman said very movingly that she felt her eyes could see more clearly through her tears.

The world today knows many tears – as did the early church with all its divisions, misunderstandings; conflicts; jealousies. ---- yet also many stories of people who ‘saw more clearly’ through eyes filled with tears --- and the writer of Hebrews encourages that early church ‘Let us indeed fix our eyes on Christ. For the joy set before him he endured the cross’

We are each one of us given that same encouragement in our own struggles and we would do well to remember that in the darkest of

times Jesus himself wept..... at the death of his friend Lazarus; as he contemplated Jerusalem and also just before his death– and he weeps still today alongside us in our confusion, divisions and suffering, and reassures us that ‘this too will pass’. We should remember in **our** darker moments of division both in our world and in our churches that not only will ‘this pass’ but that ‘our eyes can sometimes see more clearly through our tears.’

In painful times in our churches’ history – in 1850 - there were street riots after the so-called restoration of the Catholic hierarchy and in the Times the event was referred to as an act of Papal aggression. So the very fact that we are here together today from different churches and no church allegiance and that a Catholic woman has been invited to be a Canon of this Cathedral is a celebration of partnership and a sign of unity.

Let us pray that all our churches can all be places of relevance, of inclusion, unity and prophecy where each and every person is empowered to find their voice and sing that new song --- and that today can be a step in that direction as we seek to see more clearly through our tears.