

Sermon on „Come Sunday” (Duke Ellington) and Isaiah 43, 19-21, 05.02.2006

The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the Love of God and the Communion of the Holy Spirit be with us all. Amen.

Text:

19 I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. 20 I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people, 21 the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise.

Dear Congregation, usually I have the children's talk in the beginning of the Service. But as you know I have said, that I am going to come back to that later on, and now is the time, that I would like to invite the children to come here for a little chat. (Children's Talk)

Alright, so now we know that if you want to paint a picture you need a canvas or paper, a brush, paint and imagination, because the picture first is in your head before it becomes visible.

I just want to follow this train of thought about painting and colour and imagination and add something to it while we move along.

I want to start with telling you something about the composer of the piece the Jazz band had played a few minutes ago. Can you just give me a line or two of it again? (Music)

The composer of this tune called "Come Sunday" is Duke Ellington. He was one of the most famous African-American celebrities in the 20th century, decorated with the highest civil recognition in the United States, the Presidential Medal of Freedom; a man who had a musical career as pianist and Big Band leader for more than five decades, starting with his first band in 1917 all the way to death in 1974.

He was born in Washington D.C., the capital of the United States. His Father James Edward Ellington was the son of former slaves in the U.S. He worked making blueprints for the U.S. Navy and worked for some additional income as a butler in the White House.

Duke Ellington's father together with his mother Daisy were ideal role models for their children, who taught their son, who's real name was not Duke – that was later on his nickname – but Edward, everything from proper table manners to an understanding of the of music, particularly the emotional power of music.

I do not know if someone is here who had to learn piano because your parent wished so? What happened? Usually you start, but because it is your parents and not your wish you give up pretty quickly and drop your lessons, right? Same thing happened to Duke Ellington. He once said that he missed more piano lessons than he took. He was more interested in baseball and sold peanuts in the stadium.

When he turned 14 he sneaked into a music club where he heard people performing. Some biographers say he got more interested in the piano again, others claim he was more into painting. What is proven is that he attended the Armstrong Manual Training School to study commercial art and started out as a sign painter in Washington. But as I said before he also had started a band in 1917. Before that he was influenced by a few piano players he listened to and who showed him tricks and shortcuts on the piano. While he was on vacation in Asbury Park with his mother he heard Harvey Brooks whom he visited in Philadelphia and inspired him so much, that he took his piano playing seriously. He said: "When I got home I had a real yearning to play. I had not been able to get off the ground before, but after hearing him I said to myself, Man, you are going to have to do it'. This was the birth of his music career. Please, keep this in mind for later.

Between 1918 and 1919 – he was 19, 20 years old, he made three mayor steps towards independence: He moved out from his parents’ home into one he bought himself, he became his own booking agent for his band and was able to book more gigs, also across the Washington area and Virginia, finally he got married to Edna Thompson. They had a son named Mercer Kennedy Ellington, who carried on the musical inheritance of his dad until his own death in the 1990’s.

I will cut a few things short and just tell you, that in the 1930’s and 1940’s he became so famous and toured all over the place. He was the trendsetter for big band music. He played the famous/infamous ‘Cotton Club’ during the prohibition time in New York, in the 1920’. He had taken the risk to move there and because there was live Radio broadcasting from the club, soon everyone knew him and his music.

He had a typical sound of all instruments playing simultaneously; and was always happy when there was some interaction with the audience. “If I hear a sigh of pleasure from the dance floor, it becomes part of our music”, he once said. – Does this apply to preaching as well? I think I wish to hear a sigh of pleasure from my audience, but all I hear is often a sigh of relief when I say the ‘Amen’ at the end of my sermon.

Anyhow, Ellington played 20.000 performances and finished something between 1.500 and 2.000 compositions including a score of a Shakespeare play (Timon of Athens) and religious music, which in the case of ‘Sacred concerts’, which was a project to perform sacred music and jazz-up parts of the liturgy, stirred some controversy because people said he just wanted to do the church a favour to make them more popular. That was in the late sixties when people were not particularly fond of the church.

Now the piece Come Sunday was also part of a more religious composition, recorded in 1943 for the first time, which wanted to tell the history of black people, from their African roots, through the period of slavery in the U.S., their emancipation and the church in their history. It was almost impossible to perform this six part piece live; and after he did so, received bad comments from the critics.

In 1958 he recorded this cycle of pieces with the help of the famous Mahalia Jackson who sung an Acapella version of this piece.

**The blues ain’t somethin’ that you can sing in rhyme,
The blues ain’t nothin’ but a dark cloud making time.
The blues is a one-way ticket from your love to nowhere,
The blues ain’t nothin’ but a black crepe veil, ready to wear.**

This describes the situation of the laborer in the cotton fields, the sadness people felt in this darkest time of their history. Isn’t it terrible that people were oppressed and still are in this world? God’s plan was different, he wanted to have equality between man and woman, races and nations. He called them simply ‘my children’? Who allows us to divide up his family? Religion originally does not make this difference. It is people who cause this pain so that the black veil is still worn every day to mourn our brothers and sisters. But this is not where the song ends nor starts:

**Lord, dear Lord of love,
God almighty, God above,
Please look down and see my people through.**

**I believe the sun and moon
will shine up in the sky.
When the day is grey
I know its clouds passing by.**

Although skies might be grey there is still hope. Clouds are passing by. Sun and moon will shine. Maybe it is grey today, but that will not last. There are better times ahead.

Dear Congregation, I know I have been throwing a lot of information at you. And some might ask, where does this lead to – it is confusing! I know will bring every piece together. It is like music where every instrument has played by itself and it was hard to make out how this creates melody and rhythm. I'll give it to you now:

Duke Ellington was a man with an undisputed musical talent. Asked, whether he was a Jazz musician he always replied: "I am a musician". He created so many different pieces, that it is tough to just narrow this down to one style. And there is a reason for this. He said that Jazz is a freedom of expression. He expressed what he felt through music. Taught by his parents that there is an emotional side to music, he used it to create emotions, to make people feel and think.

Duke Ellington had the rare gift of seeing colours while playing music. What is that good for? Composing and playing music becomes like painting a picture – and he did. He used colours, like we do when we paint on a canvas. And because he was a religious person, too, he did not only use dark colours, but also the light and bright colours of hope and love and compassion – God's colours

As you can see, on the front cover of our program there is this set of watercolours. I used one of those when I went to school. And you may not see it, but most of the dark colours were used by the person who owns this set; the blues, the greens, the black, the browns. The first row, the yellows and orange and reds are untouched. I think this happens because we tend to see most things different from God's perspective.

Every year we have a watchword for the whole year which comes from the prophet Isaiah this time, a prophet who never gave up hope how dark the circumstances were.

19 I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. 20 I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people, 21 the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise.

I am making new things; make a path in the wilderness, give you water in the desert – that's his promise given to us, especially today at the dawn of a New Year.

But God is also asking this question: "Do you not perceive it?" – Don't you see? Don't you understand, that life is good; and even when things are not perfect, you can depend on me, I provide for you, I'll give you hope and my love. I paint the darkness with bright colours. Do not only use the dark ones if you express how you feel and what is going on in your life. Take the first row of colours, see the clouds retrieving, the sun shining, the hope dawning, the joy rising. There will not be just wilderness and desert. There will be much you can praise me for and be thankful.

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I hope we can say as well in response:

Lord, dear Lord of love, God almighty, God above, Please look down and see my people through. I believe the sun and moon will shine up in the sky. When the day is grey I know its clouds passing by.

And the Peace of God which passes all understanding, may keep our hearts and minds in Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.