

Welcome again to our annual thanksgiving service. For those who don't know me, I am Fr Nick, the Rector here, and compared to some clergy, I have the slightly unusual position of being a self supporting rector alongside having a city job, as a Chief financial officer and head of compliance. I do these two jobs, not because I can't decide which I want, but because it is my calling, in that I love this City and I just want it to be better for all.

So in my passion to explore faith in the public square, my current sermon series is about the parables and what can they teach us about life today. My first talk last week was about foundations, about Jesus' parable of the wise and foolish builders, and his question as to where do we get the strength to do the right thing and also what truly supports us when the storms come. Perhaps very apt today when so many are struggling with the loss of loved ones, of Dame Felicity Lott, patron of the FMC, or other losses and pains that days like today bring to the surface. But at this Annual Musicians' Thanksgiving Service here at Holy Sepulchre, the National Musicians' Church, I want to widen that question.

Not simply, what are the foundations of our personal lives, but what are the foundations of a society? What truly holds a nation together? What enables a culture not merely to survive, but to flourish?

Because every civilisation builds itself on something. Every age, places its trust somewhere. And the danger for any generation is that we mistake the visible structures of society for its deepest foundations. We often speak about foundations in terms of education, qualifications, training, achievement, and professional success. We tell young people: build your foundations at school, study hard, gain experience, get on the career ladder. And there is some truth in that. I don't want to underplay the importance of study. Strong educational foundations matter enormously. They allow some to become the best they can be in their chosen sphere.

Musicians understand that commitment perhaps better than most. Our professional choir arrives for rehearsal, and the hour together is not about learning the notes. That foundation already exists. Years of scales, breath control, repetition, discipline, failure, perseverance, listening and practice have already built that into their body and soul. The rehearsal is about something much deeper. About interpretation. About listening to one another. About bringing together voice, composition, acoustics, emotion, silence, and space, until somehow their music becomes greater than the sum of its parts.

And there is a lesson there for society. Because societies too can become obsessed with technical competence while forgetting human connection.

We can become efficient but not compassionate. Productive but not humane. Connected digitally but isolated personally. And perhaps one of the reasons our world feels fragile at times is because we have neglected the deeper foundations that hold people together.

Not just economics. Not just productivity. but Meaning. Community. Compassion. Caring for one another. Belonging. Sadly though, our educational foundations are skewed towards STEM subjects, ...sorry, I speak to you as a graduate engineer.. Or finance,... Sorry, I am also for my sins, a chartered accountant!

Now I recognise we need engineers to help solve some global challenges. We also need accountants to ensure sustainability, stewardship, and responsibility. We need doctors too, to fix us when we are broken.

But this evening I want to suggest something deeper. Important though those subjects and professions are, they are not the truest foundations of society. The deepest foundations of a society are its culture, its imagination, its creativity, its compassion, its beauty, its memory, and its hope. And that is why music and musicians matter. That is why artists, creatives..... matter. That is why places like this church matter, your National Musicians Church matters. Because music does something no spreadsheet can do. No algorithm can fully explain it. No balance sheet can measure it. Music reaches beneath argument and difference. It reaches beneath policy. It reaches beneath efficiency. It reaches the human soul. And perhaps that is why, in every age, music has accompanied humanity at its deepest moments.

At coronations and funerals. In war and peace. At weddings and bedside vigils. In cathedrals, concert halls, livery halls, pubs, clubs, camps, and hospital wards.

Because music and the arts are not accessories to civilisation. They are one of its foundations. And yet we live in a moment when those foundations often feel under pressure. We know the economic realities facing our country and some others. Schools are under strain. Universities are under strain. Families are making difficult choices. Government and institutions are balancing impossible budgets.

And when societies feel pressure financially, one of the first instincts is often to cut the arts. Music becomes seen as an optional extra rather than something essential. But we should worry deeply about what that says about us. In recent years, entries for arts subjects at GCSE and A-level have fallen dramatically across the UK, 48% and 31% respectively. Since 2010, music GCSE entries have declined by around 35%, and music A-level entries by nearly half. At the same time, many universities across the country have reduced or considering redundancies across music and arts

departments because of financial pressures. And schools themselves increasingly speak about narrowing curricula because small arts courses are no longer financially viable. Now the accountant in me knows of course budgets matter. Choices have to be made. Resources are finite. But we need to ask ourselves a better, deeper question. What happens to a society when it slowly stops teaching its children beauty? What happens when music, the art and creativity is treated not as a public good, but as a luxury item? Because the irony is this, the creative industries and professions are not some minor side-interest in British life. Music alone contributes billions to the UK economy and supports hundreds of thousands of jobs.

But even beyond economics, music and the arts shape who we are. They shape empathy. Imagination. Identity. Social cohesion. The capacity to dream. A society without creativity may still function administratively. But it begins to lose its soul. And I think the Church, this church, your National Musicians' Church has something important to say into that. Not because the Church has all the answers. But because at its best, the Church remembers that every human being is more than their output. More than their earnings or wealth. More than their efficiency. More than their title or successes. Every person deserves dignity. Every person matters, just for being who they are, full stop. And increasingly I think we need spaces in society that remind people of that truth.

That is certainly part of the calling of this place, your National Musicians' Church. Part of our Resounding Future If you haven't read the Historic England paper and our case study on 'A place of living': The role of heritage buildings on community wellbeing in a 'Decade of Renewal', I recommend it to you.

As I look at the work we are doing here at the National Musicians' Church, I see some of these foundations everywhere, seeds of hope even. Some foundations here are physical. Stopping the leaks. Repairing ceilings and drains. Fixing lighting and heating. Restoring monuments and drinking fountains. Rescuing and repairing the Model D Steinway. And restoration of the organ that begins this September.

But our foundations are more than that, they includes promoting creative skills,

- We had a week long stonemason workshop, and one to build a huge dome
- We made 10 short films about the Steinway restoration journey
- We will film and share the restoration journey for the organ
- We will film and share the creative work on the Royal Fusilier window

Each week, alongside amazing choral and contemporary worship, we offer free community activities.. That involve art, music heritage, history and hospitality. Enable intergenerational learning, creative health and wellbeing. Our commitment to

growing our educational work, includes musicians in all seasons, and we hope from late 2027 we might be expanding this to include residential summer courses,

But perhaps the hardest work, and maybe the most important, is something less visible. It is the work of building a culture of belonging, here and beyond our walls. A place where people feel seen, welcomed, valued, celebrated and safe. ..and part of that is to be a place that has a bold voice that speaks up for musicians, for artists, for the investment in these individuals and the professions to ensure we live in a society that all people are seen, welcomed, valued, celebrated and safe.

This place, your National Musicians' church, I believe can be part of that bold voice in our City and in our Nation. Helping to rebuild the foundations of a culture of belonging, And that work is much harder because no one person can do it alone. I cannot build that community by myself. The team here cannot do it alone. The musicians here cannot do it alone. It requires all of us, it requires collaboration. It requires many to recognise that that the sum of the parts is so much greater than each person, greater than individual organisations

And I must say that a collective voice, a symphony of voices matters more than ever in our present moment. We live in a society that is increasingly anxious, fragmented, and weary. People are connected constantly yet loneliness grows. Public discourse becomes harsher. Attention spans shorten. Outrage becomes a currency. And many people quietly carry exhaustion, grief, or fear behind carefully managed lives.

Which is why places of beauty and compassion matter so profoundly. And perhaps this is where musicians offer society a prophetic gift. Because music teaches us mutual listening. And society desperately needs those lessons again. It needs to learn that strength does not mean self-sufficiency. Be reminded of mutuality, that human beings need one another, and are changed for the better by each other, We always have.

And music and musicians know that instinctively. Perhaps that is why music can become such a sign of hope. Why the National Musicians' Church, your National Musicians' Church can be a sign of hope, a place that offers hope through all we are and all we do. Hope through showing that beauty still matters. Hope through showing harmony is still possible. Hope that even amid fracture, something coherent and life-giving can emerge. Hope through showing we have more in common than we first believe.

The foundations Jesus speaks about are never meant to be private, or just for us individually. They shape how we build communities, cultures, and societies. And

perhaps tonight's thanksgiving is partly about remembering this. Reminding others, of what all of us here know, that music and musicians are not extras to society. And so this evening we give thanks.

For composers and conductors.

For choristers and organists.

For teachers and students.

For professionals and volunteers.

For those on great stages and those quietly performing week by week.

And we pray that your National Musicians' church, and all who gather within it, may continue helping rebuild those deeper foundations. for the life of our nation itself.