

“A Voice From the Fringe”

In 1971 Gavin Bryars, one of England’s leading musician-composers agreed to help make a film that had to do with street people. He’d do the audio aspects of movie. Filming took place in the area around Waterloo Station in London. Various people living on the streets were filmed – catching with the camera’s eye their daily rituals, trials and joys. Some were obviously drunk, some mentally disturbed, some articulate and well-spoken, some apparently incomprehensible.

As Bryars made his way through the audio and video footage, he became aware of a constant undercurrent, a repeating sound that always accompanied the presence of one older man. At first, it sounded like muttered gibberish. But after removing the background street noise and cleaning up the audio tape, Bryars discovered the old man was in fact singing.

Ironically, the footage of this old man and his muttered song didn’t make the cut for the film. But that didn’t end the story. Bryars took the rejected audio portion and couldn’t get out of his mind the haunting sounds of this homeless, nameless man. So he did some research on his own into whom this homeless person might be.

From the film crew, Bryars learned that this street beggar did not drink. But neither did he engage others in conversation. His speech was almost impossible to understand, but his whole manner was pleasant. Though old and alone and filthy and homeless, he exhibited a certain playfulness. He took delight in teasing various members of the film crew by swapping hats with them.

But what distinguished this old man from the other street people was his song. The song he sung under his breath was a simple, repetitive Sunday School tune. But for him, it was a mantra. He would sit and quietly sing it for hours on end. “Jesus blood never failed me yet, never failed me yet. Jesus’ blood never failed me yet. There’s one thing I know, for he loves me so...”, (then back to beginning) “Jesus’ blood never failed me yet, never failed me yet. Jesus’ blood never failed me yet...” (and on and on). The man’s weak, old voice never wavered from pitch, never went flat, never changed key. The simple intervals of the tune were perfectly maintained the whole time he sang.

As a musician, Bryars was fascinated. He began thinking of ways he could arrange and orchestrate around the constant, repeated lines the old man sang. One day, while playing the tape as background to other work, Bryars left the door to his studio open while he ran downstairs to get a cup of coffee. When he returned several minutes later, he found a normally buzzing office environment strangely still. The old man’s voice had leaked out of the recording room and transformed the office floor. Under the spell of the man’s quivering voice, an office of busy professionals had grown hushed. Those who were still moving around walked slowly, almost reverently about the room. Many more had taken their seats and were sitting motionless at their desks, hypnotized by the voice. More than a few were quietly crying, tears rolling undisturbed down their cheeks.

Bryars was stunned. Although not a believer himself, Bryars couldn’t help but be confronted by the mysterious spiritual power of the simple voice of this homeless man. It was like it had

touched a lonely, aching spot that lurks in the human heart, in spite of the sophistication of much of modern culture. And it had offered an unexpected message of faith and hope.

Bryars himself started to yearn for the confidence and faith reflected in this old man's song. He began to face what it means to *feel* homeless and alone – even when we may not be physically homeless and literally alone. Bryars pledged to remember this homeless person by creating a recording that would celebrate and accent his simple message that no matter what one's condition, Jesus' blood never fails us, for He loves us so.

It took Bryars, one of England's leading composers, over 20 years (until 1993) to create and produce what he felt was a proper accompaniment to this homeless person's song of faith in Jesus. He finished the work in partnership with one of America's leading composer, Philip Glass. The result is a CD entitled "Jesus' Blood Never Failed Me Yet."

By the way, the old man whose song was recorded died shortly after that film crew left his street-home. It was almost as if, when someone finally heard his song, he could leave for another place.

What convinced these musician/composers to create such a musical framework to preserve the old man's song? Why did an office full of busy people find themselves in tears at the sound of his voice? How did this scrap of audiotape ever survive to live on for thousands to hear?

Maybe there's something universal about him – that his song does touch the aching place, the broken song in each of us. In some ways we all are homeless and alone. Yearning for faith and hope...longing to be loved.

Perhaps some of us have gone through (or are going through) a separation, or divorce. There's so much anger and hurt. A while ago I sat and listened to a lady sharing how her husband had recently left her...told her he no longer loved her...and how worthless she felt...as she cried through most of the counseling session.

Some of us feel the sadness that comes from relationships that just can't seem to be mended. Perhaps we're distanced from a family member – a son or daughter, a parent, a brother or sister. Something happened to cause bad feelings, or maybe things have always been kind of that way with this person.

For others of us, we sing a broken song because of grief: the husband, the wife, the child, the friend, even the pet, who was taken from us. I had a good friend who died in a car crash on route 222 this past 9/11. He was a vital, active man whose life touched many people. I gave the message at his funeral. His doctor was experimenting with a new treatment for his diabetes. Several weeks prior to his death, he had to get up through the night to drink orange juice or eat ice cream because of his blood sugar level. He was driving, and apparently had an insulin issue. His car went out of control and crashed, killing him. I talked recently with his wife, as she shared her grief, trying to hold back the tears, and commenting that she wished she had died with him.

Or maybe we feel homeless and rootless because we've had to move, we're in a place that doesn't feel like home: we're homesick, and feel like an outsider. I read a story in the newspaper of a teenaged girl whose body was found on the street of a small town. Authorities aren't sure what happened. The family was trying to put the pieces of the puzzle together, and commented that this young girl was unable to adjust to living in another town when her family moved.

Some of us have wounds that go way back: a childhood that wasn't a happy child-hood. We experienced rejection, or neglect, or abuse. And there's a wounded child deep inside of us that's still longing for the love and affirmation we never got from our parents or our caretakers.

Others still carry memories of life tragedies. Perhaps it's been years, but the pain is still there. I once attended a prayer breakfast and sat next to a man who had served in World War II. That day was the anniversary date of when he was caught behind enemy lines. A large number of his unit (many of his close buddies) were captured and machine gunned to death. He somehow managed to be one of the few who escaped. With tears in his eyes, he described it like it had happened yesterday, though 50 years had passed since that horrible event.

Some of us have failed in things that are important to us. Financially, we've made poor choices, done some dumb things – and it's been such a long haul to get back on our feet. For others, perhaps we feel we've messed up as a parent. We know we're not the mom or dad we had wanted and hoped to be.

Some of us have failed in our relationship with God. Truth be told, in spite of going to church, we've never felt a satisfying relationship with our Creator. Or maybe we *once felt* a warmth and excitement about our faith, but somewhere along the way, it's dried up. Gone. Oh, we go through the motions, but that intimacy with God just isn't there.

These aching spots, these fragile, broken songs, lie within many of us – buried beneath the surface.

Yeah, we can be pretty good at covering them over, putting on a good face. "I'm fine!" we say. But those broken songs, those powerful yearnings, are there – waiting for recognition, resolution, restoration. Years ago when I was serving 3 little country churches, a group of us gathered one evening for discussion on *euthanasia* - keeping people alive through heroic means, and when to "pull the plug" and let someone die. One husband and wife couple came, a middle aged couple without children. He was a big, burly, heavy equipment operator, kind of blunt and rough spoken. The session unfolded as kind of an academic discussion, not very personal, until this couple began to talk about their baby, who had died. This tough, macho guy broke down and just sobbed, even though their little baby had died many years before.

We've listened to the song, the mantra of a street person. I call this "a voice from the fringe."

A homeless man, on the edge of society, who embodies that part of us which is aching, lonely, needy. *Yet his song is the song of faith, and hope!* “Jesus’ blood never failed me yet, never failed me yet. Jesus’ blood never failed me yet. There’s one thing I know, for He loves me so...”

Do you realize there is another “Voice from the fringe”? A humble, homeless man, on the fringe of society – who sings us a song of faith and hope! I’m talking about Jesus! Jesus’ birth took place in humble circumstances. Listen again to the words of the Christmas story: "Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed wife, who was with child. So it was, that while they were there, the days were completed for her to be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn" (Luke 2:4-7).

Jesus was born to ordinary people, a carpenter Joseph, probably a teenaged wife Mary. After his birth his crib was an animal’s feeding trough – not even in his own home. Jesus spent the next 30 years of his brief life in obscurity, tucked away in the tiny village of Nazareth. When He began His ministry at age 30, he gathered a nondescript group of nobodies, and began his itinerant ministry. He once told a would-be follower “Foxes have dens and birds of have nests; but the Son of man has no place to lay his head” (Matthew 8:20). He was homeless!

He always seemed to be on the fringe. His own family thought He was crazy. The leaders of the institutional religion in Jerusalem grew to hate and despise Him. Eventually, these religious men pressured the Roman authorities to have Him executed, hung on a cross *outside* the city walls. He didn’t even have his own cemetery plot; he was buried in someone else’s tomb

But when all is said and done, this homeless man on the fringe of society, Jesus, is called “Savior”, “Lord.” He’s one of us. He was a man – fully human. He knew sadness, loneliness, disappointment, rejection. He walked among ordinary people, who struggle for hope and meaning in life. *But He was more than a man – He was, and is, God. Walking among us.* Through His life, and death, and resurrection *He overcame our brokenness, and brings healing and hope* to all who seek Him.

“Jesus’ blood never failed me yet, never failed me yet. Jesus’ blood never failed me yet. There’s one thing I know, for He loves me so. Jesus’ blood never failed me yet” As someone has said, “the Christmas message is that one homeless night long ago, in a place called Bethlehem, God wrapped humanity’s broken songs and shattered chords with the music of the spheres.”

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