

LAST SONGS

'Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you.'

St. John 14.27

In 1948, Strauss was nearing the end of his life.¹ His career as a composer had been tremendously successful. And it had been successful under the most daunting of circumstances. Think of what he faced up to in Germany in the twentieth century - the First War, the Depression, the rise of Hitler, the Second War, the carpet-bombing of Hamburg and fire-bombing of Dresden, the unimaginable horrors of Dachau and Auschwitz and Flossenbürg. Perhaps most personally devastating, he had been accused of collaboration with the Nazis. Although he was exonerated by Allied authorities, suspicions persisted. All of it must have weighed heavily on his mind. You get the impression that, by 1948, Strauss wanted it done with, to finish his career and creative life with some great *Grand Finale*. And he did. In 1948, he composed the *Four Last Songs* for soprano and orchestra. They are stunning. What makes them even more stupendous is the fact they fulfill his life and life's work completely. In 1889, he had composed *Death and Transfiguration*, a magnificent tone-poem. And it's what he came back to in 1948. He wove into the *Last Songs* lines and phrases from *Death and Transfiguration*. The final notes of the final song are exactly the same as the final notes of *Death and Transfiguration*. It was as if he were saying, 'This is what I want you to hear before I'm gone.'² And they take your breath away. Sadly, he never lived to hear them performed publicly. He died in 1949. They were first performed in 1950. But everything was finished, everything fulfilled and completed, on one brilliant last note.

The point may be obvious. I am not a great German composer. And I am certainly not nearing the end of my life. I have miles and miles to go before I sleep. But I am beginning to 'Face West.' And lately, like many people my age, I have been in a reflective mood and getting ready to finish things, not just 'dabble' at retirement, but really finish the 'race,' finish the course, finish the 'upward call.' I have even been writing my own *Last Songs*, in a sense, improvising on themes that have become clear over the years. I could think of at least six songs, mostly about the relevance of history and relevance of hope right now. But there isn't time. Instead, I reduced everything to just two things that have emerged. They are my *Two Last Songs*. They may resonate with some people. And they may possibly be a starting-point for songs waiting to be written by someone else. After all, we don't have to be retired to be reflective. We don't have to wait until the end of a career to see connected themes. Songs can be written the end of a season or week or end of a day. Whenever they are written, they give clarity and meaning. It's why we write them. And this is where my improvisations have taken me.

II

I Last Song Number One, *the influence of people and the relational life*. Christianity is a deeply relational religion. It is based on relationships. Christianity isn't a system of theoretical principles or theological propositions. It isn't a code of moral laws or ethical rules. Christianity has all those things, but at the center of everything, Christianity is rooted in relationships. It isn't so much about an abstraction. It is about an attraction to Jesus, an attachment to Jesus, an affection for Jesus.³ Relationships are everything. And every relationship is significant. But relationships here, inside this sacred space, are usually the ones that count in the long run. Jesus reflected that. He said to his friends on the night before he died, 'It is you who have stood by me through my trials.' Relationships, relationships, relationships. St. Paul reflected it too. He wrote to his friends in Philippi near the end of his life, 'I thank my God in all my remembrance of you.' Relationships, relationships, relationships.

These days, I carry two small symbols. One is a medallion with the Roman numerals XXXVI. And the other is a coin with the image of Susan B. Anthony on it. Susan B. Anthony was one of the greatest saints the nineteenth century produced. Her bravery and stamina were incredible. Historians reckon that she spent forty years leading the move toward universal suffrage. Many of the suffragette leaders refer in their letters to fatigue and weariness. 'Have I not served out my sentence?' one of them asked.⁴ But Susan B. Anthony kept moving. She had enormous resilience. They faced opposition everywhere. And they faced the most formidable obstacle of all, namely, how to get the vote without already having the vote to vote for people who would help them get the vote.⁵ But they did it. Susan B. Anthony

persevered and persevered and persevered. She did it, partly, by drawing on the strength of her spirit. She went to church every week. She liked good preaching. Sermons filled the well when the waters were running low. But she also drew on the support of colleagues in the Movement. She spoke at a gathering Washington in 1906.⁶ She was eighty-six. She looked around the audience and said, 'With the people like we have in this room, failure is impossible.' Relationships, relationships, relationships. It was her last public speech. She died a month later. Failure was impossible. And when women vote, it is a testament to Susan B. Anthony. She knew the influence of people and the relational life.

2 And Last Song Number Two, *the influence of grace and the spiritual life*. If Christianity is based on relationships, it is built on grace. What is grace? Grace is the love of Jesus in action, in visible and practical and tangible ways. It is universal and unconditional. And it always carries the day. If you read the *Book of Revelation*, you will see that at the very end, the closing line is, '*the grace of the Lord Jesus be with you all.*' That's it. It's the last line of *Revelation*, which means, the last line of the New Testament, the last line of the Bible. Grace has the final word. Grace is the dependable, indispensable gift of the Spirit. John Baillie, the great Scottish divine, said that our spiritual life is 'the only precious thing we possess.' Notice the words. Not the greatest or finest thing we possess, but the *only* precious thing we possess. It is our '*treasure in earthen vessels.*' It is the reason why we are here, why we come here week after week, season after season after season. Grace upon grace upon grace.

Recently, I had the privilege of participating in the first annual 'Fosdick Lecture on Preaching.' William Kent Krueger, the renowned novelist, was the lecturer. It was about the drawing power of stories. Kent Krueger is as good as they get. But it was also about drawing on Dr. Fosdick. Harry Emerson Fosdick was the greatest preacher of the twentieth century. Period. His sermons were unbelievable. And the range was unbelievable too. Also, he was one of the greatest communicators of the twentieth century. He wrote fifty books. He wrote three hymns. And he wrote one book review that saved millions of lives. And, he was one of the greatest spiritual figures of the twentieth century. He was an Encouraging Presence in great movements for equality and dignity and peace. And there was that book review that he wrote. In the late nineteen thirties, a man came to him with a book he had just finished. Reviewers seemed skeptical, even cynical, about the book's spiritual principles. Dr. Fosdick gave it a stunning recommendation, largely *because* of its spiritual principles. Or should I say, its *Twelve Steps*? I can't say that Dr. Fosdick put *Alcoholics Anonymous* on the map, but he showed alcoholics that it was there; he showed alcoholics how to get there; and he showed alcoholics how to get sober when they got there. I wouldn't be here today if it weren't for Bill W's *Twelve Steps* and Harry Emerson Fosdick's one book review. Grace upon grace upon grace. He wrote a hymn that said it all, '*God of Grace and God of Glory, on thy people pour thy power.*' He knew the influence of grace and the spiritual life.

III

If we began with Strauss and *Four Last Songs*, that is where we come back to close. All of us will some day write our own *Songs*. Some of us may be doing it right now. Don't be daunted. *Be thankful*. Be thankful for the influence of people and grace, our relational life and spiritual life. Take five minutes in the morning to be grateful for someone who has guided you along. *Be 'tendful'* too. Tend your relationships. Take five minutes during the day to tend them. Tend your Friendship with Jesus. Before you read the '*New York Times*,' read the New Testament.⁷ Go to the gospels. Go to the Fourth Gospel. Listen to Jesus, '*I will not leave you desolate. Peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled.*' Plow that into your *Songs*. The whole world will open up. And 'all will yet be well.'

1. information from internet sources.

2. Muggeridge, *A Third Testament*, page 148.

3. Stewart, *The Gates of New Life*, page 125 - 126.

4. Burns, *The Workshop of Democracy*, page 442.

5. *Ibid*, page 442.

6. Lamb, *Book Notes: Life Stories*, page 104.

7. Ferris, *The News in Perspective*.