

## Sunday 15<sup>th</sup> January 2017, Epiphany 2. Canongate Kirk.

Isaiah 49: 4 *I have laboured in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing...*

The lost songs of St Kilda.

“Lost songs from the evacuated Hebridean archipelago of St Kilda have been discovered and brought to life on a new album featuring renowned composers including Sir James MacMillan”. That’s part of the publicity blurb which accompanied a new CD released late last year and which I bought as a Christmas present for myself last month, partly because I was interested to hear what it was like, and partly because I thought I might get a sermon out of it! The latter of course is for the congregation to judge, but they certainly represent an undeniably interesting story, these lost songs of St Kilda. And theirs is an undeniably ancient story but the story of this album is much more recent, and began in an Edinburgh care home 10 years ago when a resident sat down at the piano and began to play. The tunes were simple, naive even, but memorable and with an extraordinary emotional depth. As a 10-year-old child on the west coast island of Bute during World War Two, Trevor Morrison had been taught piano by a former resident of St Kilda. His teacher had left the remote archipelago in the outer Hebrides when the population was evacuated in 1930. But somehow, a lifetime later and in failing health, Trevor managed to remember the tunes his teacher had taught him. A volunteer in the care home offered to record them, and thus the CD began.

Trevor Morrison died in 2012, but the recordings eventually got passed on to Decca Records, which commissioned a number of top composers to develop the tunes along with the Scottish Festival Orchestra. And the end result is a whole album entitled *The Lost Songs of St Kilda*, featuring some of Trevor Morrison's solo recordings in their pure form, others mixed in with orchestral arrangements and some completely new pieces inspired by the music. The distinguished Scottish composer Sir James MacMillan is just one of those contributors. But it’s in the original recordings of an old man playing a piano and bringing back to life haunting tunes from a different world somehow beyond space and time where the real fascination lies. They’re a bit rough and ready and a bit out of tune but it’s not difficult to imagine an old man sitting at a piano, lost in his own world yet at the same time finding a connection with an otherwise lost world.

*I have laboured in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing...* Not a recent quote from outgoing President Barack Obama, but words from the 49<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Prophecy of Isaiah, words which the prophet might have addressed to the people of St Kilda. “Listen to me o coastlands”, he begins, “pay attention you peoples from far away”. *I have laboured in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing...* words which might have resonated with the people of St Kilda too. It’s reckoned that St Kilda was first occupied during the Bronze Age, about 5 or 6000 years ago, long before Isaiah was setting down his prophecies no more than 3000 years ago. But by 1930 the dwindling population, down to the last 36, agreed to be evacuated. An increasing sense of isolation, and an increasing sense of better opportunities in the world far beyond the horizon had already led a number of its younger folk to emigrate, but how the older folk who had farmed and fished that barren landscape for generations must have felt that they had laboured in vain, that they had spent their strength for nothing, when they eventually sailed away for the very last time. It must have felt as if all was lost, as if everything had been wasted. And that’s exactly how Isaiah felt, that his efforts to fulfil his calling, the calling that had been his own birthright, his mission to call the people back to God had been fruitless. *I have laboured in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing...*

But as it turns out, all is not lost, everything is not wasted. *I have laboured in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing...yet* he continues *yet surely my cause is with the Lord, and my reward with my God.* And as our reading reminded us his role was restored to him. “I am honoured in the sight of the Lord”, he writes, “and my God has become my strength – he says It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.” Centuries later it must have seemed once again as if all was lost, as if folk had laboured in vain and spent their strength for nothing. But in the fulfilment of Isaiah’s prophecies through the birth of Jesus, God lit another light to the nations, that his salvation may reach to the end of the earth, and reconnected to His own lost world. Like our old man playing the piano in an Edinburgh nursing home it was a bit rough and ready and a bit out of tune with expectation, but it resonates down through the centuries, connects us to a long lost world and takes us to the end of the earth. *I have laboured in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing... yet surely my cause is with the Lord, and my reward with my God. He says I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.* And now may God bless to us this preaching of his most holy word, and to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be all praise and glory now and forever. Amen.