

We're in the 6<sup>th</sup> week of our 7-week series looking at some spiritual and theological themes in Broadway musicals. I had originally thought that I would move through this series largely chronologically. And I was planning on talking about today's musicals from the 1960's back in October. But I switched the order up based upon other considerations. So two weeks ago we were in the 70's, last week we were in the 80's, and now we're back to the 60's.

Today I want to talk about two of my favorite plays, *Man of La Mancha* and *Camelot*. Both plays center on idealistic knights.

First *Man of La Mancha*. This musical is a play-within-a-play. In it, Miguel de Cervantes, the author of the great novel, *Don Quixote*, is thrown into prison by the Spanish Inquisition. There in the dungeon his fellow prisoners put him on trial, and their verdict will determine whether or not they burn his manuscript, which we later find out is an early draft of *Don Quixote*. Cervantes, the author, playwright, and poet mounts a defense by putting on a play, using his fellow prisoners as the cast. Cervantes himself takes the lead role, playing Alonso Quijana. In the play within the play, Quijana goes mad, and imagines that he is a dauntless knight errant, Don Quixote de La Mancha.

And in the course of this play-within-a-play, one of the central questions emerges. Is Quijana/Quixote really mad? Or, given the insanity of a crazy and oppressive world, is he the only truly sane one around? Is his madness an escape from reality? Or is it really noble idealism that perceives a deeper level of reality?

Quixote's idealism is summed up in the most famous song from the musical, "The Impossible Dream."

*To dream the impossible dream,  
to fight the unbeatable foe,  
to bear with unbearable sorrow,  
to run where the brave dare not go.*

*To right the unrightable wrong,  
to love pure and chaste from afar,  
to try when your arms are too weary,  
to reach the unreachable star.*

It's a great song. But the even deeper statement about idealism versus reality comes just a bit later. About 2/3<sup>rds</sup> of the way through the play, Cervantes steps out of his Quijana/Quixote character. During the play, a prisoner named, "The Duke" has been Cervantes's chief adversary. The Duke has also been assigned the role of Dr. Carrasco, the one in the play-within-a-play who is trying to cure Quijana of his delusions that he is Quixote.

The Duke accuses Cervantes of being too much like Quixote. He says that both poets and madmen turn their backs on life.

Cervantes replies, "We both select from life..."

The Duke replies, "A man must come to terms with life as it is!"

To which Cervantes gives this extended reply:

"I have lived nearly fifty years, and I have seen life as it is. Pain, misery, hunger... cruelty beyond belief. I have heard the singing from taverns and the moans from bundles of filth on the streets. I have been a soldier and seen my comrades fall in battle... or die more slowly under the lash in Africa. I have held them in my arms at the final moment. These were men who saw life as it is, yet they died despairing. No glory, no gallant last words... only their eyes filled with confusion, whimpering the question, 'Why?' I do not think they asked why they were dying, but why they had lived."

And Cervantes concludes,

"When life itself seems lunatic, who knows where madness lies? Perhaps to be too practical is madness. To surrender dreams—this may be madness. To seek treasure where there is only trash. Too much sanity may be madness. And maddest of all: to see life as it is, and not as it should be!"

That is the spiritual core of *Man of La Mancha*, the desire to see life as it should be, and not as it is. And the character that Cervantes chiefly tries to convince of that fact is the prisoner who plays Aldonza. There's not much background about her, but it's clear from the way this unnamed prisoner stays aloof from the others in the dungeon that life has not been kind to her. Her play-within-a-play character, Aldonza, is the central focus for Quixote. He treats her like a lady rather than as the whore and scullery maid that she is.

At the end of the play-within-a-play, that message has sunk in for Aldonza. When Alonso Quijana dies, she tells Sancho,

"A man died. He seemed a good man, but it did not know him.

But then she adds,

"Don Quixote is not dead. Believe, Sancho. Believe."

The ideal is still alive for Aldonza. The dream continues in spite of the death of the dreamer.

And at the very end of the play proper, as Cervantes is heading up the dungeon stairs to face trial before the Inquisition, it is the prisoner who played Aldonza who begins to sing a reprise of "The Impossible Dream." And as Cervantes continues climbing, the other prisoners join in.

In the midst of their prison of 'life as it is,' Cervantes vision of 'life as it should be' has inspired them all. The dream continues.

The other great idealistic knight I want to talk about is King Arthur from the musical, *Camelot*.

Yes, the play has jousts and a romantic love triangle between Arthur and Guinevere and Lancelot.

But in the play Arthur is also often shown wrestling with ethical issues. He and Guinevere are discussing the purpose of warfare. On the one hand it hardly makes sense to fight over something like an arbitrary border between 2 kingdoms. But, Arthur admits, it is fun. And Guinevere admits, it is exciting to see you knight going off to battle in their armor, knowing they'll be back home for dinner. And Arthur has a realization and says,

"Only knights are rich enough to bedeck themselves in armor. They can declare war when it suits them, go clodhopping about the country slicing up peasants and foot soldiers, because peasants and foot soldiers are not equipped with armor. All that can happen to a knight is an occasional dent."

And then Arthur tries to reason things through by offering a proposition. He says, "Proposition: Wrong or right, they have the might, so wrong or right, they're always right... and that's wrong."

And so Arthur decides to form a new order of chivalry. Where knights use their power only for good. He says,

"Defend virgins, restore what's been done wrong in the past, help the oppressed. Might for right... Not might is right. Might for right!"

And so he conceives of the Knights of the Round Table, a table where all are equal and no one has to jockey for position.

But Arthur's nobility and idealism later run smack dab into the romantic triangle between him, and Guinevere, and Lancelot. And at the end of Act I, Arthur is alone on stage trying to reason through this conundrum.

Arthur feels betrayed. His wife and his best friend are obviously in love with each other. And though they have not yet acted on their feelings, their feelings are clear. And Arthur says,

"I love them—I love them and they answer me with pain! And torment! ... And they must pay for it and be punished! I shall not be wounded and not return it in kind! I demand a man's vengeance!"

And he lifts up the sword Excalibur in the air to punctuate his feelings, as if to strike at them if they had been present.

But then, Arthur's idealism kicks in. He says,

"Proposition: I'm a king, not a man. And a civilized king. Could it possibly be civilized to destroy what I love? Could it possibly be civilized to love myself above all? What of their pain and their torment? Did they ask for this calamity? Can passion be selected? Is there any doubt of their devotion to me, or to our Table?"

And then he raises his sword again, but this time in triumph and says,  
 "By God, Excalibur, I shall be a King! This is the time of King Arthur, and we reach for the stars! This is the time of King Arthur, and violence is not strength and compassion is not weakness. We are civilized! Resolved: We shall live through this together—Excalibur: They, you and I! And (may) God have mercy on us all."

This is the spiritual core of *Camelot*. Like *Man of La Mancha*, we see the conflict between the world as it is and the world as it should be. And Arthur chooses the world as it should be.

But alas, in Act II everything falls apart. Arthur's illegitimate and evil son, Mordred shows up. Mordred sows strife and discord at court. And he exploits the romantic triangle, and Arthur and Lancelot inexorably find themselves at war with each other.

But on the eve of the final battle, Arthur encounters a boy, Tom from Warwick, who stowed away on the boats to come and fight with the Knights of the Round Table. And upon examination, Arthur finds out that the boy came not based upon any experience with knights, but solely because of the stories that have been told about their exploits.

And so Arthur commands the boy to return home and preserve the stories, to live to old age and pass the stories down:

*Each evening from December to December  
 Before you drift to sleep upon your cot,  
 Think back on all the tales that you remember  
 Of Camelot.  
 Ask ev'ry person if he's heard the story;  
 And tell it strong and clear if he has not:  
 That once there was a fleeting wisp of glory  
 Called Camelot...*

And he concludes

*Don't let it be forgot  
 That once there was a spot  
 For one brief shining moment that was known  
 As Camelot.*

And then, unexpectedly, he has the boy kneel before him. And lifting his sword Excalibur, Arthur knights him. Arthur confers upon the peasant boy the title, Sir Tom of Warwick. Then Arthur sends him to run behind the lines and return home safely.

And as he's told that he has a battle to prepare for, Arthur says,  
 "Battle? I've won my battle... Here's my victory! What we did will be remembered."

Arthur entrusts his ideals to young Sir Tom of Warwick.

Miguel de Cervantes entrusts his ideals to his fellow prisoners.

And we have been entrusted with ideals.

On our secular calendar, today is Veteran's Day, when we celebrate and give thanks for those who have served our country as part of our armed forces.

Unlike other countries, we not a country defined by blood and soil. We are not a country based on ethnicity or race. We are a country based on ideals. And we have drawn people from every corner of our globe who wish to live their lives according to our American ideals:

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

And today we give thanks for those who have defended us and our American creed.

But we also have another citizenship, a deeper creed. As Christians we are also charged with preserving and passing on our ideals, the Good News of God in Jesus Christ.

And this creed has drawn "a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, to stand before God's throne and the Lamb."

We live in the real world. But we have a deeper vision of the world, not as it is, but as it should be.

And we have been baptized. We have been "knighted," we have been commissioned by our king to tell his story and carry on his work.

Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. Love your neighbor as yourself.

Break the bread. Share the cup.

'Do all of this,' Jesus tells us, 'in remembrance of me.'

*Don't let it be forgot.*

Live the impossible dream.