

Summer Worship Series
Why This Way?
June 14th 2015

SINGING
How Singing Forms Us
Why do we sing in church?

Introduction

Last Sunday Jack talked about our *Gathering* together, and the preparation of our hearts and minds as we meet to together to worship. He referred to **The Psalms of Ascent**, the Old Testament songs which were sung as people went up to the Temple, choosing to enter in to the Spiritual discipline of worship and praise.

This morning we are looking at the subject of singing:

Why do we sing in church? What is the purpose of singing during our services?

In my childhood I was a chorister in Peterborough Cathedral choir, singing high church Anglican worship music, often in Latin. When I lived in London, I was invited to a church where I experienced modern contemporary music styles. I gradually became more aware of the Spiritual dynamic that occurred during times of congregational singing, though I found it somewhat uncomfortable. (I used to arrive late to miss the singing!) God has taken me on a wonderful journey, and greatly increased my understanding of why singing is such an important part of our services.

Throughout church history we see a continually changing pattern of sacred music. From earliest plain song, to Ambrosian and Gregorian chant, through to the development of Polyphony, church music has always grown and adapted. Later styles include the great hymn writers, such as Newton, Watts and Wesley. More recently we witness the growth of contemporary songwriting and hymn writing.

Church leaders and congregations have always had strong opinions about music in worship services (as I know very well!) It created conflict during the Reformation. **Calvin** demanded only unison singing, no harmony, and a very limited use of musical instruments. **Luther** preferred a rich musical repertoire, including popular folk songs adapted to impart the Christian message. He approved of harmony, children's songs and even Tavern songs. **Zwingli**, insisted on no singing or music at all in services. He saw it as a distraction in worship

I heard about a prominent American clergyman who compiled the following ten reasons for opposing the new music styles of his day. He said this:

1. This music is too new, like an unknown language.
2. It is not as melodious as the more established style.
3. There are so many new songs that it is impossible to learn them all.
4. This new music creates disturbances and causes people to act in an indecent and disorderly manner.
5. It places too much emphasis on instrumental music rather than Godly words.
6. The lyrics and words are often worldly, even blasphemous.
7. It is not needed, since preceding generations have gone to heaven without it (!)
8. It is contrivance (by publishers) to get money.
9. It monopolises the Christians time, and encourages them to stay out late.

10. These new musicians are young upstarts, and some of them are lewd and loose persons.

It may surprise you to learn that these ten criticisms and complaints are taken from a statement written in the year 1723 directed against the introduction of Hymns into church worship!

There will always be a resistance to change. How many Anglicans does it take to change a light bulb? Change?!

Part One

What Do We Mean By A 'Time Of Worship'

In contemporary churches, people often call the times of singing a 'time of worship'.

The word **Worship** has its roots in the ancient English language, and is derived from the (almost unpronounceable!) word *weorþscipe*, meaning to *worship*, or *honour*. It essentially means '**worth-ship**'. Giving value and appreciation to someone or something. When people talk about 'a wonderful time of worship', I think perhaps they are referring to having experienced a profound Spiritual connection, a communion with God during the singing. I must emphasise that music and singing is only one part of our worship service.

Zephaniah 3: v.17 says this: "*The LORD your God is with you, (the One who saves). He will take great delight in you; in His love He will no longer rebuke you, but will rejoice over you with singing.*"

Music originates in the heavenly realms. The unseen world is filled with spiritual sounds. The sonic dimension of nature surrounds us in our physical world, whether it is the birds singing, the wind and rain, or rushing rivers and waterfalls. There is also a dimension that we cannot hear because of the limitations of human hearing.

Beautiful music and sound is powerful, and connects with us in deeply personal and individual ways. It is often associated with special moments in our lives; times of joy or sorrow, recalling poignant memories, and stirring our emotions.

How and why does music and singing affect us?

Each of us has a unique life experience that has formed us, and shaped the manner in which we feel loved, valued, cared for and accepted. We have a **heart language**.

Our Heart Language

The way that music touches us is deeply rooted in our personalities. We all have our differences, and music that connects with us emotionally is part of our heart language.

This also applies to our preferences in church music. Some people say they can only draw close to God through sung Liturgy, the singing of traditional hymns, or chanting the Psalms. Others prefer more modern charismatic worship songs that allow space for emotional expression.

As Bishop Sandy Millar once said, "delirious emotionalism is not the chief problem facing the Anglican Church!"

Importantly, it is also through our heart language that we draw close to God and sense His presence, though the reality and truth of God's love for us is not solely dependent on our feelings.

One of the challenges we face in our cultural setting is how to maintain unity and inclusivity within the diversity of gathered worshippers of all ages and preferences.

Part of our 'sacrifice of worship' might include taking part in a worship service and singing music that is not our primary preference. We do so for the sake of unity.

In **John 17:20-26**. Jesus says: *"My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, Father, just as You are in me and I am in You. May they also be in us, so that the world may believe that You have sent me"*.

Jesus' prayer is one of inclusivity, intimacy and unity. When we sing words of scripture and Spiritual songs together, we are drawn into unity. **This is one of the unique blessings of music & singing. It can draw us together and inspire us in ways that no other form of art can accomplish. Psalm 133:** *"How good and pleasant it is when brothers and sisters dwell together in unity..."*

Unfortunately, the power of music can also divide. Divisions due to musical preferences can create rifts and wounds that may take years to heal, and become the cause of painful breakdown in relationships. I visited a church in Augsburg, Germany, which had experienced conflict during the Reformation. The congregation split, and as neither party could agree, or was willing to leave, they simply built a dividing wall down the centre of the building, floor to ceiling, and each congregation met on either side! A sad testament to disagreement.

Part Two **Our Offering Of Worship**

When we look back across church music history, we see a pendulum effect, whereby the admirable desire to offer God the best in worship becomes a perfectionism that excludes the congregation. The clergy, choir and cantors became the only participants. Everyone else listened and observed. It is an echo of Old Testament worship, where only the priests offered sacrifices to God on behalf of the people. We see this trend reversed during times of revival and Spiritual awakening. For example, the revivals of the 17th and 18th century, the Pentecostal movement, the Welsh revival and more recent Charismatic revivals, where singing was once again returned to its rightful place; on the lips, and in the hearts and minds of the gathered people.

However, insensitivity still occurs now, particularly in modern & contemporary music. The musicians can be caught up doing their own thing, often at very high volume, using complicated melodies that make it difficult for the congregation to sing along. Therefore people simply spectate, rather than participate. It can also be a failing of high-church choral music, which has a tendency to become performance orientated.

There is nothing wrong with anthems, performance pieces or instrumental music; it helps us to engage with God. Though primarily, our singing should be participatory. **The Psalms (96 & 104)** exhort us all to take part and make a joyful noise; not necessarily a tuneful one! The nightingales can sing a little louder, and the crows can sing a little quieter!

But is our singing based on Biblical principles? Let's briefly examine this.

Part Three **The Biblical Basis Of Sung Worship**

Scripture reinforces the message that **singing is Biblical**. It is evident throughout the Bible. There is an acknowledgement of the Spiritual dimension and power of music in **1 Samuel 16:23**, which describes the tormenting spirits departing from Saul whenever David played his harp for him.

In **Chronicles 1, 15: (16-21)**, we see the establishing of the complex temple worship system initiated by King David, and the appointment of musicians from the Levitical tribes, along with skilled music leaders such as Kenaniah. Singing during temple worship was given a high priority.

Throughout the Bible we read of songs being sung at significant times during the history of God's people. For example, the Song Of Moses And Miriam (after the crossing of the Red Sea), Mary's Song (The Magnificat) or Simeon's song (The Nunc Dimittis). The book of **Psalms** is essentially the worship songbook of the people of Israel. Many of the Psalms call us to '*Sing joyfully to the Lord*' **Psalm 33:3** says: '*Sing to the Lord a new song; play skillfully, and shout for joy.*'

It is recorded that Jesus and the disciples took part in the temple worship, and in **Matthew 26: 30** we are told that they sang a hymn together before His betrayal.

In **Ephesians 5: 19** Paul says "*be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs (among yourselves), singing and making melody to the Lord, giving thanks to God the Father at all times for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ*"

In the book of **Revelation**, chapters 4-15 (**4:8, 5:2, 14:3, 15:3**) we find visionary descriptions of the eternal worship of God in the heavenly dimension.

Sung worship has a high place in scripture, and we enter into the worship of heaven and history when we sing. This Biblical foundation informs our **Values** and our **Theology**.

Part Four **Our Values And Theology**

Our sung worship is Christ centred. Jesus says, in **Matthew 6: v.33** "*seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all (these) things will be given to you as well...*"

We are called to put God first in all aspects of life and make His love known in the world. As we worship God, we not only grow Spiritually, but also become more fully human.

In **John 4: 23-24** when Jesus was speaking with the woman at the well, He said "*...Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshippers will worship the Father in Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshippers the Father seeks...*" Worship not solely dependent on ritual, music or location, but concerned with the transformation of our hearts and minds in obedience.

Paul reinforces this in **Romans 12: 1 & 2** "*Therefore I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God. This is your Spiritual act of worship*".

St. Paul reminds us that living lives of worship is the foundation of our lives and the primary purpose of the church. Yet without **mission**, that sense of worship will be lost. It establishes our theology, because in worship we begin to discover the priorities of God's heart: To feed the hungry, house the homeless, visit the prisoner, and welcome the stranger. **Worship and mission are integrally linked and held together.**

The heart of Jesus' mission (and indeed the message of the Bible) is the restoration of relationship between God and his people. It is told beautifully in **Luke 15:(11-31)** in the parable of the Prodigal son and exemplified in **John 17:(20-26)** where Jesus prays not only for His disciples, but for all believers who will be drawn to God (and back to God) through their message.

God reveals Himself as compassionate, and kind, loving, and forgiving, full of grace and truth, and we must take these values and principles into the world, in our daily lives.

This has to be learnt. It takes time, and we need to teach about it, which is why this summer series Jack has chosen is vital to our understanding of what we do and why.

Part Five

What We Do And Why: A Model Of Sung Worship

It can take time for us to enter into the presence of God during our times of singing. I know this bristles with Theological implications, because if God is always present, how can He be any *more* present? (!)

Yet I think it is more about how God chooses to reveal Himself uniquely to each of us, and how we respond to that revelation. We read of God's revelation throughout scripture. (The burning bush, the pillar of fire, Jacob wrestling with God, the call of Elisha, Abraham entertaining God and the angels, and so on, as we look toward the many New Testament revelations).

We are often distracted when we arrive at church. So our service music, in line with our Liturgy, begins with a **Call to worship**, songs of encouragement to choose to enter in. Then we move through songs of **Praise, Thanksgiving, Adoration, Supplication, Confession, Receiving to Response in Obedience**. The words of the songs and hymns reflect our journey. We go from singing and speaking in the *third* person, about God, to the *first* person, directly to God. And something noticeably changes as we do so.

Our musical journey, particularly in longer times of singing, can be likened to the journey through courts of the **Old Testament Temple**. Firstly, there were the Outer Gates, then the Barriers, through into the Court of the Gentiles, and the Court of Women. Next was the Court of the Israelites leading to the Court of the Priests. This led to the Holy Place. Only the High Priest could go further. The mysterious central court, separated from the rest of the temple by a veil, was the Holy of Holies. The High Priest could only enter once a year, on the Day of Atonement. The veil in front

of the Holy of Holies prevented access to the presence of God by ordinary worshippers. The priest made the many sacrifices to God on behalf of the people, for their sin, and that of the nation.

However, as we read the accounts of the crucifixion of Jesus in the Gospels, we see that **something profound**, with **eternal significance**, took place. During the violent earthquake that followed Jesus' death, the veil of the temple was torn in two, symbolically emphasising that **we all have access to the Father, by the power of the Holy Spirit, through Christ because of the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross.**

King David, a 'man after God's own heart' understood this personal response. **Psalm 51:16** "*You do not delight in burnt offerings. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit. A broken and contrite heart you will not despise*". A journey from lip service and outward legalism, to inward obedience and mission, born out of love.

Christ offered *Himself* as the perfect sacrifice, once, and for all time, for all people. There was now no need for the high priest to continually offer sacrifices and sin offerings in the temple on behalf of the people. Thus we are all called to take responsibility for our Spiritual journey. Our music and singing reinforces this Spiritual intimacy and informs our journey. And it helps us memorise Scripture!

And the powerful conclusion of this journey is the promise Jesus made that prophecies of Scripture would be fulfilled; God sending us the gift of the Holy Spirit. **Jeremiah 31:33** (...and quoted in **Hebrews 8:10**) Speaks of the New Covenant, and God's love, truth and law being written on our hearts, looking towards the time of the sending of the Holy Spirit, as described in **Acts 2**.

We may feel apprehensive when opening our hearts to the Holy Spirit in times of singing. As we know, Jesus can be the great disturber, preparing us for change and growth! We might experience the healing of memories, or a gentle prompt to our spirits, perhaps encouraging us to put a relationship right. Perhaps we might feel a sense of love and acceptance. We are held in the balance between the **Transcendence** and **Immanence** of God. The *Transcendence* of God; the many aspects of God that exceed the power of human understanding to grasp. But equally, God's *Immanence*. He has invited us into relationship, and calls us His friends.

Conclusion

What does this mean for me?

Our times of singing give space to both **express** love and gratitude to God because of all He has done for us, and to allow time and space in which to **receive** love from God. We sing **to** God and not just **about** Him. And we pray that the fruit of these encounters will result in new vision for our lives.

This prepares our hearts for growth and change, and also inspires us in mission as we go out into the world in the power of the Holy Spirit. We follow Christ's call to show the love, acceptance and forgiveness of God to those around us.

But we are in a battle. Jesus tells us in **John 10:10** that we have a spiritual enemy who seeks to destroy us; and Paul reminds us in **Ephesians 6:12** that our battle is with the dark forces of this age. **Prayer for protection as we seek to do God's will is essential.**

St Augustine said "To sing is to pray twice".

The priests are the leaders of worship in the church, as they officiate and pastor us though strictly speaking, there is only one true 'worship leader': Jesus Christ. My role as a leader of sung worship is similar to that of an usher at a wedding; the focus is on the bride and bridegroom. Or perhaps what I do is similar to a signpost on the interstate as you travel to a beautiful vacation resort; we don't relax on the beach talking about how wonderful the signposts were on the journey, however much we appreciate the guidance! We enjoy the destination.

There is a notice over the West door at the back of a church near where my parents live in Oxford: THE SERVICE IS OVER. LET THE WORSHIP BEGIN.

And finally....

I believe that the most important message that everyone in this world needs to hear and understand, is that God loves them, cares deeply for them, for each of us, and for you, with total love. This love promises that whatever has happened in our lives, we can change, be forgiven, accepted, and given another chance. The promises of Jesus are trustworthy. (Restoration of relationship.)

Psalm 89:1-4 (from The Message)

"Your love, God, is my song, and I'll sing it! I'm forever telling everyone how faithful You are. And I will never stop telling the story of Your love – how You built the cosmos and guaranteed everything in it with Your promise".

Our mission is to bring this message to the people we meet. We sing about it!