

## **Music in worship**

Readings: Ex 15: 1-11 & Col 3:12-17

### **Introduction**

In many ways I think I have drawn the short straw in this sermon series. What more emotive subject could you get in church circles than music? How many times have you heard after the service things like, we sang the wrong tune to that hymn, the pitch was too high to sing properly, or why do we always sing hymns/songs we don't know? You may even have said something along those lines yourself! Music in church is a very emotive subject, not surprisingly, as we draw together a group of people from very different backgrounds and musical tastes and we expect them all to harmonize!

But thinking more widely about our life today, music dominates our culture, everywhere you go there is music, the supermarket, the petrol station; all tradesmen seem to have to have music playing as they work. Where previously people looked at you in the street and exchanged a greeting, now they are in a sound bubble, lost in their own choice of music playing directly in their ears. We are surrounded by music in a way that previous generations were not, entirely due to the advent of electronic recorded music and radio. Older generations had to make their own music, now it is piped to you wherever you are, often whether you like it or not. On the other hand, music is part of artistic expression, one of the great gifts of God to humanity, but like all of God's gifts it can be gloriously uplifting or corrupted and ugly – just look at the way Hitler used singing at his rallies to whip up emotion and enthusiasm for the cause. Apparently the heretic Arius, who denied the divinity of Christ, used choruses with catchy tunes to spread his message. Even in the Bible, it seems that Nebuchadnezzar had a great worship band but the call to worship was to the wrong thing.

So as we come to consider the place music takes in our worship, I want to split my sermon into three parts, firstly I want us to look at worship itself, then what can we learn about music from the Bible and then put things together as we specifically consider music in worship.

### **Worship**

But before we rush into a discussion about church music, I want us to first of all talk about worship, we have to clarify what worship is before we can see what place music plays. Like the word church, we use worship in several ways, we can refer to a communal act of worship like we are celebrating now, or we can refer to our own individual heart response to God, whether that is in a communal setting or alone.

The words used in the Bible for worship are derived from two words which mean to “bow down” and “to serve”. So worship involves us acknowledging who God is and what He has done for us and in grateful response our worship involves serving Him. Campbell Morgan put it this way: “The attitude of worship is the attitude of a subject bent before the King. The attitude of worship is the attitude of a child yielding all its love to the Father. The attitude of worship is the attitude of the sheep that follows the leading of the Shepherd, and is content in all that pasturage that He appoints. It is the attitude of saying “Yes” to everything God says.” John Leach said something similar “In true worship we have no secrets with God; we withhold from Him no area of our lives, however reluctantly we open up, and He withholds from us no measure of His cleansing and forgiving love.”

Lest we fondly imagine that worship is something we do for God, it's worth remembering the words of John Calvin “Christ is the great choirmaster who tunes our hearts to sing God's praise.” James Torrance expands these ideas of worship, when he says: “An awareness of God's holy love for us, revealed in Jesus Christ, awakens in us a longing for intimate communion – to know the love

of the Father and to participate in the life and ministry of Christ.” Torrance takes that a step further when he says that worship is “the gift of participating through the Spirit in the incarnate Son’s communion with the Father and His mission from the Father to the world, in a life of wonderful communion.” Worship then is a gift of grace, where the Spirit of God comes to us and leads us into the presence of God. We worship not because God needs our worship, but because we worship Him to put Him in His rightful place in our lives and thinking. As humans we have the capacity to worship and if that desire, that longing to worship does not find its object in God, then we find other lesser gods to worship. Sophisticated and educated people like us, however, are not so blatant as to bow down to stone idols, but in our hearts we worship success, power, career, money, possessions or whatever our hearts set their affections on. Christian worship resets our hearts to God, it restores our spiritual perspective. God is always with us, but the Spirit of God makes that presence more vivid, more real to us as He enables us to worship Him. So as Robert Webber said “Worship refreshes the soul, rekindles the spirit, and renews life.”

### **Music in the Bible**

The first mention of music in the Bible is in Genesis, where we hear of Jubal, who was the father of all those who play the lyre and pipe (Gen. 4:21). The first time singing appears is in Exodus 15 after the miraculous crossing of the Red Sea “Then Moses and the people of Israel sang this song to the LORD, saying, “I will sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea. The LORD is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation; this is my God, and I will praise him, my father’s God, and I will exalt him. (Exodus 15: 1-2). God had done something truly amazing and miraculous and Moses and all the people responded in singing praise to God. As James Torrance said “Worship in the Bible is always presented to us as flowing from an awareness of who God is and what He has done”, exactly what we have here in Exodus 15. We don’t know what musical style they used, but it was a **corporate response to what God had done**. By setting it to music it also became a way of remembering God’s deliverance. This is one of the great powers of music, it helps you remember the words. One of the great gifts of the NZ church to the global church was the rise of “Scripture in Song” in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The music helped you remember the words of the Bible - it was simply verses of scripture set to music.

Music and singing actually occur all through the Bible, there are over 200 references to singing God’s praises in the Hebrew Bible plus about 40 references to music or musical instruments. For example, when David returned from slaying Goliath the women came out of all the cities of Israel, singing and dancing, ..... with tambourines, with songs of joy, and with musical instruments (1 Sam. 18:6). There were a special group of singers in both the tabernacle and temple to lead the people in singing. Jehoshaphat even ordered his choir to go before his army as he went to war (2 Chron. 20). In the centre of our Bibles, we have the hymn book of the Psalms with its encouragement and reasons for everyone to sing to God e.g. Psalm 5:11 “But let all who take refuge in you rejoice; let them ever sing for joy, and spread your protection over them, that those who love your name may exult in you.” Even in some churches today the Psalms remain the only hymn and songbook in use.

Into the New Testament, the angels sang at the birth of Jesus, Jesus sang - Matthew 26:30 records that at the close of the Last Supper they sang a hymn (probably Psalm 118) and went out to the Mount of Olives, Paul and Silas sang in prison (Acts 16:25), there are encouragements in the letters to sing praises to God (1 Cor. 14:15, Eph. 5:19, Col. 3:16, James 5:13) and finally the vision of the new heavens and the new earth where there is tumultuous singing (Rev. 5:9-10, 14:3, 15:3-4, 19:1-8). The new song, which is referred to so frequently in the Psalms now becomes a glorious recreated reality – there is music forever in heaven. So when we sing together in church we are joining in with the continual song of praise and worship that is surrounding the throne of God **right**

**now.** Robert Webber refers to the Orthodox Church which believes that “in worship the congregation actually experiences a foretaste of the Second Coming of Christ in glory and comes into the presence of the entire heavenly congregation. That is, heaven and earth, the future and the present, meet in worship.”

Finally in our look at the Scriptures, God sings too. “On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: “Fear not, O Zion; let not your hands grow weak. The LORD your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing.” (Zeph. 3:16-17).

### **Music in worship**

In the light of all these examples and encouragements to sing to God, how then should we use music in our worship together? Music is not worship *per se*, but is one way in which a worshipper gives expression to his worship. I have been in churches where during the service the leader says we will now have a time of worship, by which he means a time of singing, but in saying that, I wonder have we not been worshipping God in all we have done so far in the service? We worship God in praying, in giving, in listening to His word and in serving Him. Music is only one way of expressing the worship of the heart to God. For some, just sitting silently before God, contemplating His goodness is worship. But within our church services, music is part of our corporate act of worship, something we do together. As such, it is quite powerful because we are combining three things - words, which we think about with our minds, music, which also involves our emotions and thirdly repetition so the songs stick in our memories. But because music is the servant of our worship, we must always ensure that the words are true to God’s word, otherwise they cannot help us to put our worship into song. True worship is always true to God’s revelation of Himself. This is more than just being picky about the words, we remember the hymns and songs we sing far more than any sermon because of repetition. So it is hardly surprising that R. W. Dale famously said, “Let me write the hymns of the church and I care not who writes the theology”. Or as Gordon Fee once said, putting it the other way around, “Show me your songs, and I will tell you your theology”.

Recently, at a conference on sacred music, Pope Francis called for an end to the “mediocrity, superficiality and banality” that has entered into Catholic liturgical music. On a more positive note, he said that Catholics should “embody and translate the Word of God in songs, sounds, and harmonies that make the hearts of our contemporaries throb...” I love that, it’s the combination of the word of God with music to set our hearts throbbing. One of the great legacies we have from previous Christian generations is the hymns and songs they wrote. We also need to remember, when perhaps we pour scorn on some modern worship ditty, that the hymns that have been treasured by the church are the few among the many that have been written. For example, Charles Wesley wrote 6,000 hymns but you would find only a handful of them in a modern hymn book. Most hymns and songs have a short life, a few are treasured by succeeding generations. Perhaps it is also salutary to remember that hymns only became common place in the Anglican Church from the early nineteenth century, prior to that hymn singing was the province of the dissenters, the non-conformists and those dangerous, enthusiastic Methodists!

At heart, we sing because God is worthy of praise and adoration, and our songs often encapsulate our own thoughts in a way which we could never articulate, which of course is the power of poetry. The words of our hymns and songs can sum up our own longing to praise and worship our God, but also those songs can stimulate our worship.

If you look at the Psalms and many of our hymns and songs you will notice that many of them contain encouragements to one another to praise and to worship God. So as Vaughan Roberts said

“So when we sing we are just not a collection of individuals praising our God. We are a community addressing one another.” This is of course exactly what Paul was saying in our reading from Colossians “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, **teaching and admonishing one another** in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God” (Col. 3:16). There is a similar verse in Ephesians 5 “be filled with the Spirit, **addressing one another** in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart” (Eph. 5:18-19). You may not feel like praising God, but as the rest of the congregation start to sing a song of praise, you are reminded of who God is and you begin to join in and let the words sink in and reset your spiritual focus.

Music must ever remain the servant of worship, but it is easy to get carried away by the music itself. The English songwriter Dave Bilbrough said this. “As a musician involved in the worship scene for over 30 years, my life has been spent in pursuit of a well-crafted song. I love the way that words form slowly over a background canvas of music. There’s something about the cadence, rhyme, shape and sound of a well-written song that feels so special to me. I used to be satisfied with just that, but now, each song I write entices me towards a more profound experience - the experience of knowing the presence of God in my own life. Beautiful and meaningful songs, great as they are, cannot meet the needs of the world, only God can. Our worship songs are simply vehicles to help us to find our true satisfaction in Christ.”

So, in summary, Christians should be a worshipping people, worship as the total response of ourselves to the God who comes seeking those who will worship Him in spirit and in truth. Worship should be our lifestyle, our motivation for all we do, the attitude of saying Yes to everything God says.

We have been created for the worship of God  
 We have been redeemed for the worship of God.  
 We will live before Him forever for the worship of God.

So let us use all means at our disposal to worship our God, especially the gift of music. Amen.

#### Reflection questions

- 1) Do you find it easy to worship God?
- 2) What do you find helps you to worship God within our church services but also when you are alone?
- 3) If worship involves both bowing down and service, how do you see your worship becoming more a priority in your life?
- 4) How can we encourage one another to worship God?
- 5) Do you have any musical gifts that you feel there are currently no opportunities to exercise? If so, how could you see them being used?