

SUNG WORSHIP IN CHURCH – for 31st July 2011

We're starting a mini series today, looking at why we do certain things in church services. So, why do we sing, why do we take communion, why do we meet together in the first place? We're starting the series asking the question 'why do we sing and make music in church'? Why is sung worship generally part of a church service?

Every day of our lives, there's music and singing. You turn on the radio and hear singing. You go to the supermarket and there's music. Every day people go into recording studios and sing, make music, hold concerts ... we hear it constantly. We even sing and make music ourselves.

Is that something you do? Sing into your hairbrush, ladies? Sing in the bath or the shower because the acoustics are good? Or do you hum to yourself? Or whistle like me?

I whistle a lot, my voice isn't much good so I whistle – and that's OK if the people around you know the tune or can recognise it. It isn't that great around people with hearing aids. But I think I whistle very tunefully – I don't know why my husband seems to think differently - he expresses his appreciation at my whistling by asking me loudly to be quiet ... I don't know what his problem is ...

So music is something that is around us all the time, something most of us enjoy in some form or another. During the icebreaker discussion on what music we like and why, most people enjoy some type of music...

There are different types of music which implies that we respond to different music in different ways – for example, there are dirges or laments – music for times of sorrow. There's lullabies, music to encourage babies to sleep (I guess it depends who's singing them ..). There's rock and roll – our response to rock and roll is to rock and roll to it! The music constantly played in supermarkets is played because businesses know how people react to certain types of music, they want their customers to relax in store and browse and buy.

On a website advertising music licences and music for shops and supermarkets, the advert says:

'Playing music in your shop can:

Attract customers and encourage them to stay longer

Create an atmosphere that encourages repeat visits

Help to reflect your brand.

What I'm getting at here is that music is part of everyday life and from an everyday, out there, point of view, we listen to music because of our response to it. Or music is used by others to make us respond in certain ways, in some cases it's used to get us in the right mood to perhaps spend money on things we don't really want! You can think of TV advertising that use music and every time you hear that particular tune, you think of the product its advertising. What about films and media? Have you ever turned the sound off during the scary bit of a film? The dark woods or house in darkness don't seem anywhere near so scary without the forbidding music. Music is used to make us respond in a way then that we wouldn't normally just watching images.

But we're looking at why do we sing and make music in church. All the ways we use music in the world, in a secular way, generally speaking does something for us – it makes our mood mellow, or cheers us up as well as appreciating the skill of the musician or singer – maybe we admire the musician. But in general, secular music is something we respond to in certain ways and we make choices about what to listen to, based on how we feel at the time or how we want to feel.

I want to start thinking about 'music' we hear in God's creation. There are noises we can hear in nature that are a form of music, what do you think of as natural music?...

– the wind in the trees, bees buzzing, birds singing, waves whispering, whale song – I think about that that natural music.

Is it communicating something? Who is it communicating with? There's a music to life, through natural sound, isn't there?

In the Psalms, the Israelites version of Songs of Praise, I think we get a bit of an answer to that question. Let's read Psalm 98:

- ¹ Sing to the LORD a new song,
for he has done marvellous things;
his right hand and his holy arm
have worked salvation for him.
- ² The LORD has made his salvation known
and revealed his righteousness to the nations.
- ³ He has remembered his love
and his faithfulness to Israel;

all the ends of the earth have seen
the salvation of our God.

⁴ Shout for joy to the LORD, all the earth,
burst into jubilant song with music;
⁵ make music to the LORD with the harp,
with the harp and the sound of singing,
⁶ with trumpets and the blast of the ram's horn—
shout for joy before the LORD, the King.

⁷ Let the sea resound, and everything in it,
the world, and all who live in it.

⁸ Let the rivers clap their hands,
let the mountains sing together for joy;

⁹ let them sing before the LORD,
for he comes to judge the earth.

He will judge the world in righteousness
and the peoples with equity.

There are similar lyrics in Psalm 96

¹¹ *Let the heavens rejoice, let the earth be glad;
let the sea resound, and all that is in it.*

¹² *Let the fields be jubilant, and everything in them;
let all the trees of the forest sing for joy.*

¹³ Let all creation rejoice before the LORD, for he comes,
he comes to judge the earth.

He will judge the world in righteousness
and the peoples in his faithfulness.

So what is all this created natural music for according to the Psalms – it's about nature rejoicing before its Creator, the Lord God, honouring His holiness and faithfulness. And the very beauty and power of nature's song points people to the one God who reigns over all.

Where does that leave us with the question 'why do we sing songs and play music in church?'. How does this help us? What are we doing in church this evening? We're here primarily to worship God, to meet with Him, to honour Him in our lives with others who feel the same way, those who love God – we are putting God first.

We too, as human beings, are created by God, He knows us from before we were born, the Bible says in another Psalm, and He loves us, He loved us from the beginning. And when we recognise who God is and respond to that great love by giving thanks, by rejoicing, by worshipping, it is a natural and God given response to make a noise to the Lord, through singing, making music. That response is to give honour and adoration to our King and Lord and making music together is a gift from God.

Its not only on earth we have the gift of music. There are several examples of heavenly bodies, angels, praising God – the first one that comes to mind is when Jesus was born and the angels appeared to the shepherds. What did they do? Luke 2v13-14 says ‘Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests.”’ The angels only do God’s bidding, they do His will and they worshipped God, giving honour and glory to Him. They’re a great example of how we should praise God.

Hebrews 13 says ‘Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that confess his name.’

A simple illustration of this is when we are naturally happy about something, someone has said or sung something that has meant something to us, we think it’s great or good, then we clap and shout out, we say thank you. Singing and music breaks down barriers between people and encourages unity. People all over the world share the same hymns, or sometimes just the same tunes, but hymn-singing unifies people – shout out any places you can think where singing or shouting out together unifies people?

- football terraces, the Haka (early rap?)

God blesses us when we are united together in His love – Paul encourages the Ephesians in chapter 5:18- 21, saying ‘And do not get drunk with wine for that is debauchery but be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with all your heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.’

A couple of other points I want to make – you might be thinking ‘but not all hymns and spiritual songs are about praise, look at the Psalms, some are about David’s anger with his situation or not understanding what’s happening to Him. Some are about saying

sorry, repenting. I don't have time to read them all now, you can look some up when you have a minute but a couple of examples are Psalm 69 which says 'Save me, O God! for the waters have come up to my neck. I sink in deep mire where there is no foothold; I have come into deep waters, and the flood sweeps over me'. Psalm 51 talks about repentance, it's a song that ask for God's cleansing power to come.

So hymn-singing or singing to God is also a way of praying, a way of communicating with God. I would also say that music itself without voices can be a form of prayer – if you can play a musical instrument well, you can pour your heart out through it, and if you pour your heart to God out through your playing then that's prayer and worship. If you're in the worship group, you'll know how this is, both alone and in public worship and it leads the congregation into worship.

You might say 'well, how can this be about praise and rejoicing – why would we sing of pain and suffering and repentance?' Because we are calling on our Father for help, recognising who He is and that He alone is mighty to save us, He alone can raise us up. It is a form of praise, even when we are not rejoicing, when we go to God with our cares and needs. It is honouring and glorifying to Him because we are recognising Him as Lord and King of our lives.

I want to give you one other thought on this subject. God's music – both voices and instruments - has power attached to it, power to transform and change lives – even to make changes to physical things. Just think for a minute about the story of the fall of Jericho recorded in Joshua 6:

¹ Now the gates of Jericho were securely barred because of the Israelites. No one went out and no one came in.

² Then the LORD said to Joshua, "See, I have delivered Jericho into your hands, along with its king and its fighting men. ³ March around the city once with all the armed men. Do this for six days. ⁴ Have seven priests carry trumpets of rams' horns in front of the ark. On the seventh day, march around the city seven times, with the priests blowing the trumpets. ⁵ When you hear them sound a long blast on the trumpets, have the whole army give a loud shout; then the wall of the city will collapse and the army will go up, everyone straight in."

⁶ So Joshua son of Nun called the priests and said to them, "Take up the ark of the covenant of the LORD and have seven priests carry trumpets in front of it." ⁷ And he

ordered the army, “Advance! March around the city, with an armed guard going ahead of the ark of the LORD.”

⁸ When Joshua had spoken to the people, the seven priests carrying the seven trumpets before the LORD went forward, blowing their trumpets, and the ark of the LORD’s covenant followed them. ⁹ The armed guard marched ahead of the priests who blew the trumpets, and the rear guard followed the ark. All this time the trumpets were sounding. ¹⁰ But Joshua had commanded the army, “Do not give a war cry, do not raise your voices, do not say a word until the day I tell you to shout. Then shout!” ¹¹ So he had the ark of the LORD carried around the city, circling it once.

¹⁵ On the seventh day, they got up at daybreak and marched around the city seven times in the same manner, except that on that day they circled the city seven times. ¹⁶ The seventh time around, when the priests sounded the trumpet blast, Joshua commanded the army, “Shout! For the LORD has given you the city!” ²⁰ When the trumpets sounded, the army shouted, and at the sound of the trumpet, when the men gave a loud shout, the wall collapsed; so everyone charged straight in, and they took the city. ²¹ They devoted the city to the LORD ...

Even at the end of time, Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15, *Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed—* ⁵² *in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.*

At the start of this talk, we looked at how secular music made us feel, why we listen to it, why we enjoy it. It was mostly about us, making us feel better or happy or may be even melancholy.

When we think about singing in church, its not for us primarily although we are blessed by it and we receive peace through it, it is for the honour and glory of God the Father, the Holy Spirit in our hearts worshipping and thanking God for who He is, for Jesus, thanking Him for what He has done for us through His sacrifice on the cross, repenting in response or sharing our prayers with Him – its for the Trinity.

And we’ve looked at how joining together in song and music can and will transform situations, if its focussed on God’s will and His honour – the walls of Jericho fell down and the city was transformed into a city devoted to God. At the last day, the trumpet will sound and we will be changed into the beings that God created us to be for Him.

So when we sing together and make music in church, in whatever way, let's pray that we truly worship God, give Him all the honour and glory. Don't worry about being out of tune to human ears – if your heart is in tune with God's will, if you are singing and playing in love, then God hears your worship in perfect pitch, in pure harmony. The reverse is true. If you can sing in perfect pitch, play a musical instrument perfectly and with huge skill, but if you are singing and playing to honour yourself then the music will not be honouring to God, but like white noise is to a teenager.

We're going to look at some questions now – I actually found it quite hard to find questions to ask but have a go at these or discuss something that has struck you during the talk:

Right, there are two questions coming out of Ephesians 5:19-20 'Instead, be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.'

1. 'Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord' literally means 'playing the strings of your heart to the Lord'. What then is the first 'instrument' we are told to use to make music together?
2. 'psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit' – what benefit do non-church (secular) types of songs or music have?

The next questions relates to Colossians 3:16

Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts.

3. Colossians 3:16 suggests other reasons for singing together in church – teaching and admonishing one another with all wisdom. Discuss.

