

Singing our Way into Life

A sermon on Ephesians 5:15-20 by Nathan Nettleton, 18 May 2024

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Message

Worshipful singing together helps shape our communal identity as a people who can live for love, joy and reconciliation in a world of hostility and oppression.

Sermon

Up until Thursday morning, I was planning to revise and re-preach an old sermon that dealt with the fascinatingly gruesome cannibalistic imagery that Jesus employed in the gospel reading tonight when he talks about our need to eat his flesh and drink his blood if we are to have eternal life. It's so bizarre and confronting that it is hard to hear it in our worship service without then talking about it, so now that I'm not going to talk about it, I will provide [a link to that previous sermon](#) in the online version of this one, so that you can go and read it if you need to grapple with that stuff.

What I want to preach on tonight will not be nearly as weird or confronting, but it's something I don't think I've ever preached on before, and I hope it will still be helpful. I want to preach about singing together in worship.

Our reading from the letter to the Ephesians exhorted us to "be filled with the Spirit, as we sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among ourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in our hearts, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ."

So on Thursday morning, I read a little media piece about the kinds of music that are played to you when you are stuck on hold, waiting for someone to take your phone call. That sparked off a hundred thoughts about the ways that music is used and abused and about what that might mean for the ways we sing together in worship. Of course, for us in this congregation, that is changed again by the fact that we now gather to worship online. Singing is a very physical thing, but we are no longer physically together as we seek to sing together. I'll come back to that.

There is probably no one who is completely immune to the power of music to evoke our memories and impact our emotions. Even people who are deaf can often feel music in their bodies, and be moved by it. This article I read suggested that companies can and do make choices about their on-hold music in order to either increase the likelihood of people waiting patiently, or to deter them from waiting and make them want to hang up. Hello Centrelink, Telstra, and Insurance company claim lines!!

There are the really obvious things, like choosing music that is calming and pleasant, versus music that is annoying and agitating, but there is also things like having music that goes on continuously without beginning or end so that people on hold can't start thinking "I've been here for six songs already!"

It went on to comment on how a restaurant might play more upbeat music to prevent people from relaxing too much and to keep them moving to make way for the next sitting, or a supermarket might use music that encourages people to linger and end up buying more, and

public toilets might use insidiously repetitive music that would make it unbearable for a homeless person to consider locking themselves in and sleeping there for the night.

None of that is about us singing together, but it does shine a little light on the ways that music can affect our emotions and our behaviours. The article acknowledged that this manipulative intent is far from an exact science, because everyone's music tastes are different, so what soothes one person may annoy others.

I have also heard it said that the music that most appeals to people and has an instant impact on their feelings is the music they were into when they were seventeen. There have even been studies on the therapeutic power of music with people in advanced states of dementia, and it seems to be the music they most loved in their late teens that most reopens temporary bridges of coherent conversation. It's an important reminder that these people have not "lost their mind" as is too often said. They are still all there, but the bridges of connection have become much harder to find.

Lots of aged care chaplains report on how particular classic hymns – Amazing Grace being the most often cited – can awaken a roomful of people who previously seemed distant and lost in their own inner worlds. Music therapy has become a whole specialist branch of health care, not only in dementia care and palliative care, but in all sorts of health care.

When it comes to singing together with others, there are quite a few of us in this congregation who are quite passionately involved in it. Ian sings in the chorus of major opera productions and in the Essendon Choral Society. Acacia's live theatre work includes a particular passion for musical theatre. James is married to a prominent choir director in the Melbourne gospel music scene. Samara, Shelley, Margie, and Glennys all sing in community choirs. I don't think John does anymore, but he did. And there's sure to be a few of you I've missed.

A brief online search would find you any amount of social science analysis of the powerful benefits of singing together in choirs. It has measurable impacts on both physical and mental wellbeing, and it is that sense of euphoric wellbeing on top of the fact that it is just good fun that keeps people coming back.

Singing together in churches has always been a part of this phenomenon. Apart from any spiritual benefits, churches have been places that have launched many great musical careers. It is no accident that many of the world's greatest and most loved singers first learned to sing growing up in churches.

But singing together is not just about sounding good and feeling good, and as we edge closer to the the specific question of the role of singing together in worship, it is worth noting how singing can bind us together in a strong sense of unity and group identity. If you watched much of the Olympic Games, you'll have noticed the significance of singing national anthems during the medal ceremonies. Most Australians are not even big fans of our national anthem, but we can still get caught up in the emotion of it as Jess Fox or Arianne Titmus get yet another gold medal draped around their necks and we all feel joyously united as proud Aussies. The singing helps bind us together.

You might also have observed how important singing the club song is in footy club culture. It's seldom the height of musicality, except in some of the pacific islander rugby clubs, but it is an

important ritual that binds the team together in a powerful sense of common identity and common purpose.

This sense of common identity and common purpose is hugely significant in more important contexts too. The community singing of South African freedom songs helped bring down apartheid. It was important in the freedom struggle in Timor Leste too, and Shelley has been sharing some clips of our friends there singing for us. Without the singing of Palestinian freedom songs, the Palestinian people may well have been obliterated by the brutal oppression they have endured for decades. Listen to the choirs of any of the many Burmese churches in our Baptist Union, and you'll understand a little more of how they survived as strong communities amidst the horrors that have been perpetrated against them in their home country.

Oppressive regimes around the world have often moved swiftly to lock up or eliminate the poets and folk singers, because they recognised the crucial role they played in keeping hope alive and resistance strong.

All of these things inform and contribute to what is going on when we gather to sing together in church; when we gather to, in the words of our reading, “sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among ourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in our hearts, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

A few preachers and biblical scholars have tried to make distinctions between these three things, psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Most though have concluded that there is nothing in that idea. The writer to the Ephesians has quite the habit of piling up synonyms – why use one word when you can use three? – and these exact three words occur frequently and interchangeably in the titles in the Greek version of the book of Psalms that was in use in the first century.

An almost identical verse can be found in the letter to the Colossians (3:16): “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God.”

So that one reminds us that singing together is linked to teaching one another. And there is no doubt that singing helps embed words and ideas in our minds. Those of you who were around back when we first switched from speaking the Lord's Prayer and the Apostles Creed in unison to singing them together will probably remember that many of us went from needing to read the words to knowing them by heart in just a few weeks.

Some of you will remember our Muslim friend, Nur, who was a hafiz, which means that he had memorised the entire Quran. It doesn't make it any less extraordinary, but Nur would be the first to admit that every hafiz does that by learning to sing it, not speak it. Many of you know the experience of hearing a song that you haven't heard for decades, and finding that you still know all the words. Melody creates the hooks that embed the words in our minds.

The early Baptists, 400 years ago, were very aware of this, and initially were opposed to singing anything other than psalms and other biblical texts, because they wanted nothing but scripture having that power in their minds. That hard line attitude gave way within a

generation, and the Baptists were soon up there with the Methodists as the most enthusiastic adopters of hymn singing and hymn writing.

Of course, this power to embed words and ideas in our minds means that it is important to pay attention to the quality of the lyrics. This can be an issue, particularly in the modern praise songs of neo-pentecostal or contemporary praise and worship churches. In their liturgies, music serves a different function. It is more sacramental than instructional. That is, it functions to facilitate an emotional and spiritual experience of the presence of God. That sacramental function means that it is the sound and feel of the songs, and their ability to influence our feelings and experience, that is more important than the words.

There is nothing wrong with that. It is a perfectly good and valid thing. But it does sometimes mean that the songwriters give insufficient attention to the quality of the words, and that matters because even if the words are not the primary focus, they are still being embedded in our hearts and minds, and that's a bad thing if they are conveying bad images of God.

For example, there is a worship song that's been hugely popular in the last fifteen years called "Come, Now is the time to worship" (by Brian Doerksen, released 2008). It's a great piece of music, and very enjoyable to sing in a big crowd. I love it. But it also explicitly teaches that the biggest rewards in heaven are kept for those who come to Jesus first, and that's a flat out contradiction of what Jesus himself said in his parable of the workers in the vineyard (Matthew 20:1-16). But I have no idea how many times I had sung that song before I noticed what it was saying and impressing on my mind. If you've wondered why we never sing it here, that's why.

I hope you're not hearing that as a criticism of the style though, because it is not. And it's not a criticism of choosing music for its emotional and social impact on us. That's always a factor in music, and it is only a problem if it is exploited to manipulate people unfairly, or if it is not recognised and understood and so is working randomly and chaotically.

Feeling good is almost always one of the benefits of singing together. Feeling good, feeling united, feeling affirmed in our common faith, feeling strengthened in our group identity, feeling strengthened in our common purpose, our shared mission; these are all good things that singing together contributes to. And these things really matter amidst the challenges of living faithfully and courageously in a hostile and divisive world.

The gospel is all about these things. It is all about breaking down the walls that divide us and uniting the whole world as one beloved people in Christ. And as a simple tool, there are few things more effective in making people feel united and at peace with one another than singing together. Combine that power with good lyrics that proclaim a thrilling vision of God's love reconciling us all in a world made new, and it is no wonder that the followers of Jesus have been singing together ever since he first walked among us.

As our reading from Ephesians frames it, it is a basic expression of being filled with God's Spirit, and it is a normal means of collectively "giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ."

But before I finish, I can't neglect the elephant in the room. Does any of this still work for us when all our liturgies are online and we are not physically gathered in a resonant room where we can blend our voices and feel the full energy of that?

I'm not going to pretend that nothing has changed and nothing has been lost. To put it bluntly, we are now singing along to recordings, and that can never perfectly replicate the experience of full gathered congregational song. But it is not 100% lost either. I've heard visitors to our worship service say that they are surprised by how much more real the singing feels than what they have experienced in online worship elsewhere, and they are often confused as to why.

It's not hard to explain though. It is because the recordings are actually of us, and we are all singing along in real time. We are not singing along to recordings made by professional musicians or choirs. And actually, in some physically gathered churches, the music has become so professionalised that most people are doing little more than quietly singing along with something that has been totally taken over by the band or the choir anyway. Even our present experience may be more authentic than that. Because what we are hearing is actually us, it sounds more real and feels more real. Especially if you turn it up loud enough that you can sing with full gusto and blend in with the other voices you are hearing.

There have been [studies that have shown](#) that when people are singing together, their heart beats begin to synchronise with one another, and because that is attributed to the structure of the music rather than the physical proximity, it is entirely possible that the same thing still happens when we sing together in this way online. If you get fully into it, the singing itself may be physically connecting us.

If you love singing and want to take it a step further than that, you could put your hand up to become one of the people who contribute their voices to those recordings. Contact me, and I'll let you know how.

I'll be the first to admit that singing together this way can never be as good an experience as being in a community choir or in a physically gathered singing congregation. But as we have discussed before, there are things we'd lose and people we'd lose if we went back to physically gathered worship, and that's life; we can never have everything, and choices need to be made. And by all means, go and join a community choir too!!

“Be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”