

CONGREGATIONAL SONG – shaping faith, making disciples

Week 2

David MacGregor / Indooroopilly Uniting Church 22 November 2009

Pre-teaching readings

Amos 5:21-24; Micah 6:6-8; Mark 12:28-31

... Music, especially song, has also evoked and sustained our prayer in Christian worship from the beginning. It touches us to the bone and shapes how we talk to God and how we perceive God talks to us.¹

These were the thoughts of writer Michael Hawn a few years back on the power of music. Last we reflected on how Christianity is a singing and musical faith, how music helps us find our place in the world. How music helps us get in touch with who we are and who we are called to be. It tells other tribes who we are. Music ultimately helps us get in touch with God.

Last week we reflected on congregational song – in terms of praise, prayer and purposes ... almost sounds like an old John Denver song!

We finished up with me sharing how in worship, “far too often we try to paint a happy face on God”², and in the process fail to declare the whole truth of the human condition. I asked the question:

Where in this “happy-faced” worship, is there the place – and music can so often best give voice to this – which allows room for lament, for intercession, for connecting with a broken world, for connecting with folk whose relationships are disintegrating, for sending people out in Christian service – to name but a few instances?

Today we begin addressing that question – we do this through the experience and insight of various peoples, a few thoughts of mine and especially through the practice of congregational song itself. Let’s sing ...

SONG ***Community of Christ*** TIS 473 [8 am]
 A place at the table [10 am, 6 pm]

¹ C. Michael Hawn, *One Bread, One Body*. (Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 2003), 113

² Martin Tel, “Truthfulness in Church Worship in *Princeton Seminary Bulletin*, (Vol. XIX, No. 1, New series, 1998), 34

3. SONG AS CONFESSION & LAMENT

CONFESSION

Our words, thoughts and feelings of confession – the naming of our human condition – they can be expressed in song. Repeatedly in our worship, God’s forgiveness in Christ is celebrated in song – from the grandest “Doxology” to the catchiest praise chorus. Thomas Troeger comments:

“Congregational singing is a witness to our belief that worship is based not on the adequacy of our efforts, but on the saving, gracious character of the One we praise. God who forgives sins certainly forgives wrong notes! ... Our music is a sign that the saving grace of Christ is freeing us to do what we were created to do – to give ourselves with complete abandonment to God.”³

How often though, do we put our *confessional* words ... our words of frailty and weakness ... in the context of song – ‘telling like it is’ before God, who is grace?

Sing confessional song: **Lord have mercy** – cantor in verse

LAMENT

A sorely ignored aspect of our worship song is the song of **lament**. Despite significant portions of the Psalms and prophets being devoted to the cry of lament, it is something sadly lacking in much of our worship in these early years of the 21st century. Where is the “space” in worship for acknowledging that each of us in some way carries pain - individual or communal.

The psalms of lament need to be read far more in our churches. These ancient words offer us a prayer language for our times; they offer a prayer language which we of ourselves might not dare offer to God.

JOHN BELL - LOST TRADITION OF LAMENT

Five years ago, I met in Grand Rapids, Michigan, a woman who had grown up in a Roman Catholic family in central Scotland and left home in the 1960s to travel in the Far East. She eventually became the partner of a young American man who took her back to his home town.

³ Thomas H. Troeger, “For God Risk Everything: Reconstructing a Theology of Church Music” (*Reformed Liturgy and Music* 33.3), 6

Not long after arriving in Grand Rapids, she - Shona - went along to a Protestant charismatic church where she was converted. All were thrilled for her. Soon after, she brought her partner and he was converted. Everyone praised the Lord. Six months later they decided to get married in church and the congregation were head over heels in Hallelujahs. A year after their marriage she gave birth to their first child, and the church could not contain its joy at how God had blessed this favoured and chosen couple.

A year later she had a miscarriage, and the following year she had a stillborn baby. And the church kept back, and some began to conjecture whether this might not be God's way of recompensing them for their earlier years living together out of wedlock. At that time she could not go near her church. She could not participate in an orgy of charismatic fervour when her heart and soul were laid low.

I asked her what had kept her in faith - for she was clearly a woman of faith. And she spoke of how one day in her darkest despair, she remembered words she had learned in Latin as a child growing up in the pre-Vatican II Roman Catholic Church: *De profundis clamavi*. And remembering it was a psalm, she turned to the Psalter and found at number 130:

Out of the depths I call to you, O Lord.
Lord hear my prayer, and let your ear be
attentive to the voice of my pleading.

And she discovered other psalms which spoke of where she was in language which she might not have dared to offer to God on her own behalf. For her the truth became real that sometimes we will never be able to sing Hallelujah unless we have cried out 'How long?' and 'How long?' and 'Why have you turned your back on me, O Lord?'

It is not so much that the articulation of this sense of despair and abandonment will bring an automatic answer. The assurance comes much more in knowing that such things can be said by us and are heard by God.

SONG *How long?*

LAMENT LITANY⁴

O Lord, how long shall we cry for help,
and you will not listen?
Or cry to you, 'Violence!'
and you will not save?

⁴ Uniting Church in Australia. National Working Group on Worship. *Uniting in Worship 2*. (Sydney: Uniting Church Press, 2005), 125,126

Why do you make us see wrong-doing
and look at trouble?

Habakkuk 1:2-3

In faith and hope, we respond:

‘How long, O God, how long?’

O God, you have rejected us, broken our defences;
you have been angry with us; now restore us!

Psalm 60:1

In faith and hope, we respond:

‘How long, O God, how long?’

Where is your justice, God?

Where is your purpose?

Where is your reason?

Where is your compassion?

**Do you not care for your people,
your creation, your reputation?**

Your purpose is hidden from our eyes.

Your reason is absent to our ears.

Your compassion is not discerned by our hearts.

We have no hope.

We are lost.

We are afraid.

In faith and hope, we respond:

‘How long, O God, how long?’

AFFIRMATION OF HOPE

Look, listen, in the silences
of your own hearts.

Hear the gentle sound of my rising
within you.

Come, Lord Jesus, come.

Look, listen, in the silences
of your common humanness.

See the wonder of the power for healing,
my gift to you for the journey.

Come, Holy Spirit, and heal us.

Habakkuk 1:2

In 1996 in Dunblane, Scotland, 16 school children and their teacher were senselessly massacred at the hands of a gunman. In an attempt to offer words to those overwhelmed with grief, pain and confusion, Iona's John Bell and Graham Maule provided this song:

*We cannot measure how you heal
or answer every sufferer's prayer,
yet we believe your grace responds
where faith and doubt unite to care.
Your hands, though bloodied on the cross,
survive to hold and heal and warn,
to carry all through death and life
and cradle children yet unborn⁵*

Sing: ***We cannot measure how you heal*** (from verse 2)

4. SONG as voice for intercession and community

Congregational song is in many ways *the* communal activity – humanly speaking during a time of worship. It is *the* ‘community joining together’. Robert Gribben agrees, saying: “Music is an essential part of a shared activity. When people gather to sing they in fact form themselves into a fellowship, a *koinonia* ... enabled to join together in unity with the single object of praising God.”⁶

Intercession forms a vital part of this opening to God. In these “Prayers of the People”, we hand our prayers – our praises and our pain over to Christ, the great High Priest, who – in the words of Torrance,

“... takes what is ours (our broken lives and unworthy prayers), sanctifies them, offers them without spot or blemish to the Father, and gives them back to us ... He takes our prayers and makes them his prayers, and we know our prayers are heard ‘for Jesus’ sake.”⁷

Think how our intercession can be enhanced as we sing to God in prayer – for the needs of our community, world and ourselves.

⁵ John L Bell and Graham Maule, “We Cannot Measure How You Heal”, in *Common Ground* (Edinburgh; St Andrew Press, 2003), No. 138

⁶ Robert Gribben, “Music in Worship: the Set Liturgies”, *Occasional Paper of the Uniting Church in Victoria Committee on Church Music*, (1981), 3-3

⁷ James B. Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace*, 15

SONG: *Christ be our light*
Shine in our hearts
Shine through the darkness
Christ be our light
Shine in your church, gathered today

In peace, we pray to you, Lord God.⁸

For all people in their daily life and work;
for our families, friends, and neighbours,
and for those who are alone.

For this community, our country, and the world;
for all who work for justice, freedom, and peace.
Christ, be our light ...

SONG: *Christ be our light ...*

For the just and proper use of your creation;
for the victims of hunger, fear, injustice and oppression.

For all who are in danger, sorrow, or any kind of trouble;
for those who minister to the sick,
the friendless and the needy.
Christ, be our light ...

SONG: *Christ be our light ...*

For the peace and unity of the Church of God;
for all who proclaim the gospel,
and for all who seek the truth.

For the Uniting Church in Australia,
for Alistair, president of the Assembly,
for Bruce our moderator and for David, our presbytery minister,
for our elders and members of the church council,
and for all who hold office in this congregation;
for all who serve God in the church.

⁸ Uniting in Worship 2

For our own needs,
and for others for whom you have called us to pray.

Christ, be our light ...

SONG: *Christ be our light ...*

Silence

Gracious God,
you have heard the prayers of your faithful people;
you know our needs before we ask,
and our ignorance in asking.

Grant our requests as may be best for us.

This we ask in the name of your Son,

Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

5. SONG as the voice for justice-making & justice proclaiming

VIDEO: Eyes on the prize

Congregational song has a justice-making role. Terri McLean maintains that we have assigned the music the role of ‘truth bearer’: “We have assigned music the important task of bearing the truths we hold dear, and of celebrating that which is important and central to many. Congregational song must always have a prophetic voice ... a prophetic edge – to speak out, to warn, to cajole, to mobilize.

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann notes the number of psalms which major on protest or complaint. In bemoaning the ‘praise’ fascination in so much of the modern church’s worship he comments: “ ... at least it is clear that a church that goes on singing ‘happy songs’ in the face of raw reality is doing something very different from what the Bible itself does.”⁹

Much study has been made of the transformative role of music in the racial struggle movements in the United States and South Africa, over recent decades and past centuries.

⁹ Walter Brueggemann: *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary* [Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984], 51-52

Don and Emily Saliers point out that:

*Whenever human beings are caught in oppressive suffering, songs emerge. Some of the songs voice pure lament, whereas others express the resiliency of humour and escape. Sometimes those who hear these songs in the public arena ... forget that ... the songs ... have roots in religious tradition.*¹⁰

Brief mp3 snippet: **We are marching** ... quietly as soundtrack while I speak.

The song: *Siyahamba/We are marching in the light of God* is a wonderful example. Don and Emily Saliers reflect that the first time that the two of them sang *Siyahamba* was in a church gathering when Nelson Mandela was still in prison. The effect was immediate.

Michael Hawn reflects on this song in several ways. He comments:

- *This song wells up from the wretched abyss of an oppressed people ... throughout history, singing has been one of the most important ways of uniting an oppressed group ... the need to find hope in the face of oppression is the social context for “Siyahamba”*
- *Like African American spirituals, many African songs contain an implicit code within ... that communicates to the initiated while avoiding offense to those in power*
- While the text seems a simple statement of joy, there’s more to it than this:
 - “We are marching” – a statement of unity. Few could stand up to the wrath of apartheid alone
 - “marching” is a verb of action – *not a verb for silent victims but one of defiance and hope*
 - “the light of God” provides direction for those marching together .. it is code for a future hope ... *free from fear and full of promise.*¹¹

SONG ***We are marching***

SHARING – song/hymn that speaks to you

¹⁰ Don E. Saliers & Emily Saliers, *A Song to Sing, a Life to Live*, (San Francisco: Josey-Bass, 2005), 137,138

¹¹ C. Michael Hawn, 120

NEXT WEEK:

1. We will explore how congregational song can
 - Enhance our celebration of the sacraments
 - Send us out as disciples of Christ in service
 - Help in the role of teaching the faith – a faith-formation role
2. Full notes from today's/tonight's teaching, along with the next two Sundays will be available for free, non-profit download from two places:
 - The “sermons” page on our own church website
 - My Music.Musings,Meanderings blog

Details for both of these are in today's notice-sheet

AT END OF SERVICE/FINAL SONG: *Now thank we all our God* TIS 106

This hymn comes out of a context of misery, war and oppression. In fact it was written during the Thirty Years War – in a time of utter devastation, starvation, famine and disease. [READ VERSE 2 ... comment]. The author Martin Rinkart would have performed the last rites for thousands of people, including his family.

When we sing this hymn, we join in solidarity with Christians who have struggle through some of life's greatest horrors, survived in the shadow of death and found hope (the hope of God's love and abiding presence) in the face of hopelessness.¹²

¹² C. Michael Hawn, 119