

I'd like to start by thanking Reverend Jon for letting me off talking about the Parable of the Sower and allowing me instead to share my passion for singing hymns...but rest assured that I won't be giving you a solo. Hymns were an important and early foundation for my faith – singing in chapel at school was a powerfully unifying experience and it always struck me how even those who had declared their atheism, and were bored throughout the majority of the service, would come alive at the introduction of Jerusalem.

Our readings make it clear that singing is far from just a melodious interlude to our worship. In this part of his letter to the Ephesians, Paul issues a clear command, 'Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord'. Crucially, he refines this commandment ... 'speak to one another, with psalms, hymns and songs from the spirit.' We regularly say as a congregation, that 'though we are many we are one body' and rarely is that unity more powerfully expressed than when we sing together; regardless of the notes that we do, or do not hit, we are not only offering worship to God, but also encouraging each other in a gloriously noisy declaration of our faith.

St Augustin is attributed with saying, 'those who sing, pray twice' and in his commentary of the Psalms, particularly Psalm 72 he observes, 'he that sings praise, not only sings, but also loves Him of whom he sings. In praise, there is the speaking forth of one confessing, in singing, the affection of one loving.' This point can be emphasized by considering the other contexts in which we sing. If you asked the average sports fan to sing by themselves, I suspect you would get fairly short shrift, but put them with fellow supporters at Old Trafford, Twickenham, or the Hollies stand at Edgbaston and together, they will raise the roof in riotous song. On a broader scale, along with territory, language and flags, nationhood is defined by an anthem. And each passing year is celebrated by a rendition of happy birthday, whether we want it or not. Put very simply, when something matters to us, we sing.

But the power of song is not limited to a crowd with a cause. It covers the complex and often harsh realities of life. An American pastor imprisoned in a communist country for his Christian faith recalled, 'When we were in prison, we sang almost every day because Christ was alive in us, chains were put on our hands and feet, to add to our grief, yet we discovered that chains are a splendid musical instrument. When we clanged them together in rhythm, we could sing This is the day the Lord has made.'

None of us will remember the first song we ever heard but in many cases it is likely to have been our mother singing gently to us in the hope it will finally get us to sleep. Although as babies we have little concept of words or their meaning, a lullaby speaks to something within us that calms us and makes us feel safe. I would imagine that one of the first songs many of us learnt off by heart is Away in a Manger. The lyrics are easily lost in the chaos of Christmas, but just consider for a moment the fact that, each year, millions of people, at the very beginning of their lives, sing and learn the words, 'Be near me Lord Jesus, I ask thee to stay, close by me forever, and love me I pray.'

This brings me on to the wonderful pragmatism of singing – hymns and songs of worship are very much easier to remember than the scripture on which most of them are based. If, as a cue, I were to give you just two words, ‘Amazing Grace’, I am very confident that you would all be able to continue with the next line, ‘How sweet the sound’, whereas if your cue was from the book of Chronicles, chapter one, verse twenty, ‘Joktan was the father of...’ I would be immensely surprised and impressed if you came back with ‘...Almodad, Sheleph, Hazarmaveth, Jerah, Hadoram, Uzal, Diklah, Obal, Abimael, Sheba, Ophir, Havilah and Jobab.’

It is also important to remember, I think, the part that singing and music in church has played in times past. We live in a world where at any time or place, the song or piece of music that we want to hear is a just a few clicks away. But this is, of course, a relatively recent phenomenon. In the 19th century and before, church would, for many have provided the easiest access to live music. It brings to mind a line from that famous carol, the Holly and the Ivy, the lyrics of which come from an early 18th century folk song; and that line, ‘The playing of the merry organ, sweet singing in the choir’ which might seem quaint to modern ears, takes on greater meaning when one considers the context in which it was written; in the cold, silent, mid-winter, in a world before super-markets and central heating; just imagine how that merry organ and sweet singing would have lifted the spirit.

And spirit is really the key word when it comes to singing. In the same way that laughter and tears transcend language, music and singing... tell us something, without us having to understand it. It has a power to communicate through mental and physical barriers...and I think, in the end, that is because it is the sound of our souls.

Think back to our reading, ‘Let the word of Christ, dwell in you richly’. Hymns and songs of worship that matter to us are far more than just a memory. I used the words earlier, ‘off by heart’; on reflection this is a slightly odd phrase; surely off by memory, or off by mind would be more logical; but ‘off by heart’ is actually more accurate, because it is in our heart and soul that music and songs dwell. And it is for this reason that our favourite hymns and songs of worship are so very personal and individual.

One of our finest hymns puts it perfectly – ‘Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord.’ True praise comes from our soul - that version of ourselves, that neither age nor disease can touch and that through Christ, defies death; that version of ourselves that Jane spoke about so powerfully a few weeks ago, that version of ourselves that will ultimately see God.

It is described so beautifully in the final verse of my favourite hymn of all, Love Divine. ‘Finish then thy new creation,’ this undoubtedly refers in part to the ‘new heaven and new earth’ described in Revelation but I am sure it also refers to us – ‘pure and spotless let us be’. It goes on to declare how our souls will be ‘changed from glory, into glory’, how we will be ‘perfectly restored’, and having ‘cast our

crowns before' Him, we will be 'lost in wonder, love and praise.'

So let us join together now and sing that wonderful hymn, accompanied by the Welsh male voice choir from Treorchy; and may words from psalm 63 ring in our ears, 'For you have been my help, and in the shadow of your wings, I will sing for joy' Amen.