

Musicians evening: Why we sing and what we sing.

Friday 13th January 2012 at St John's.

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Christians love to sing. I remember when I became a Christian it was just such a natural thing to want to sing.

In terms of what sung worship means to me, I remember the revival stories that I heard as a child of my Great Grandmother leading missions in Wales at the turn of the last century. This book [the Methodist Hymn Book] was one that my Great Grandma used to lead worship songs. Songs that accompanied miners giving their lives to Jesus. The pages of this book are awash with wonderful hymns, full of Christ exalting words.

So as Christians I recognize that we love to sing and I think it is right we do; we can't help it, you could say.

It's no different at St John's. Music is an important part of what we do. I guess like any church, some of what we do is good and some can be improved. That's why we're here isn't it? We want to try and make the most of the gifts God has given us; to think about how we can honour God in this place.

So, how can we honour God to maximum effect with what we do? Three things I think to begin with...

With **Bible shaped music.**

With **a prepared music team**- making sure we do the music to the best of our ability.

With **a united music team.** Praying for what we do to God, and really having one heart and mind.

All three are critical for the music at St John's. Without either one of these things it will all fall apart.

There are a couple of issues I'm going to take tonight. They are issues that as I've been involved in bits and pieces of music are, I think, the starting point for laying foundations that honour God.

They are: Why do we sing? And what should we sing?

Although on the face of it these may seem quite basic questions, they are actually quite big questions, if we consider that we are here on this planet to glorify God and we want to get it right. Why we sing and what we sing are actually very big questions.

So, why do we sing?

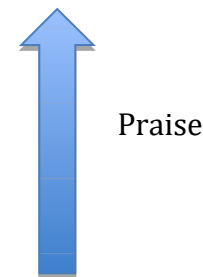
Ephesians 5:19-20

'Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.'

The first reason comes back to that heart response. You can't stop Christians singing.

The first reason we sing is **to praise God**.

Figure 1:



'sing and make music in your heart *to the Lord*'

'always give thanks *to God*.'

So simple and yet in the heat of the moment, or the fear of the moment if you're behind a music stand in a Sunday service, we can forget that. But we ought to praise God when we sing.

And I take it the things we will want to praise him for are all over the rest of Ephesians.

For example, Ephesians 5:8: God has brought us from darkness to light. Or Ephesians 3:12: 'In Christ and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence.'

As a brief aside, I have to say, whether a person does that with their arms in the air or not is irrelevant. I don't think the Bible takes a view on it. Certainly when it speaks of lifting up holy hands (1 Timothy 2:8), it doesn't have in mind singing, but a holy life.¹

¹ To some this may sound a funny argument, but it has been made!

We ought to look like we're happy and like we want to be singing with God's people, but I don't think we can lay down rules beyond that for what a changed heart looks like. And it's the heart we're bothered about.

So singing praise to God is one of the major reasons we sing.

So the first direction of musical worship is, if you like, upwards.

At this point we must challenge one belief that has arisen in a lot of music. And I'm going to spend some time on this.

That belief is that we sing to enter God's presence; a very common but unhelpful idea. This very common idea is that as we sing, we meet with God in a special way and are led into the presence of God. Which we need to be aware

of and careful of, I would say. Not least because of the following verse:

Ephesians 2:6 'And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus.'

That verse is saying that as a Christian we are so joined to Jesus that we are actually seated with him in heaven before God the Father. That is saying that as a Christian you cannot get any closer to God than you are already now.

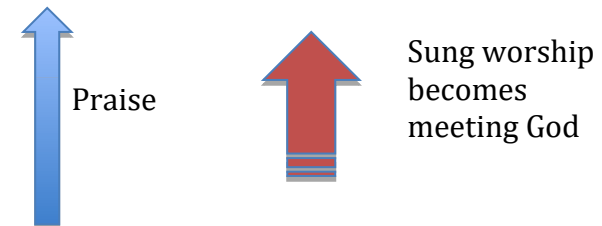
The trouble is, there is a massive amount of Christian music that suggests that as we sing we get closer to God.

For a growing number of Christians, singing is seen as drawing us into the presence of God or the place where heaven and earth meet.

This is built on the unhelpful idea that when we sing we are offering God a sacrifice. We *are* meant to be living sacrifices, but this about *responding* to what God has done & not about trying to offer him something to make him pleased with us.

The up arrow becomes not just praise and thanks in this faulty thinking, but a sacrifice that leads us into the presence of God; a special manifestation of God when we sing.

Figure 2



This is a common idea. And there has been some really good research which shows that this is

the way that a growing number of Christians understand worship.²

Two problems with that view exist.

- we cannot offer God anything (to meet with him)
- he meets with us through Jesus alone.

So if this is the case, how do we address the problem of music as the meeting point?

I think in a twofold way:

- Lots of songs about the cross (the true sacrifice)
- Lots of songs about Jesus (the true way)

² There is a very interesting chapter on this by Alistair Brown in Don Carson's book *Worship: Adoration and Action*. J. Steven has done some interesting research in his book *Worship in the Spirit: Charismatic Worship in the Church of England* which involves interviews with church laity about what they understand is happening in worship.

Ephesians 3:12 says, 'in him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence'

We don't need to sing more or sing harder to get into God's presence, which we are sometimes encouraged to do from the front: 'sing harder', 'let's lift the roof' says the worship leader. We need to hear the gospel of Jesus and believe. God wants repentance and faith.

Listen to these great old words from the Methodist Hymn Book and think about what they're talking about (I'd suggest they're great words):

*'And can it be that I should gain
An interest in the saviours blood?
Died he for me, who caused his pain?
For me, who Him to death pursued?
Amazing love!*

How can it be that thou my God, should die for me?’

Or take this one:

*‘In loving kindness Jesus came,
my soul in mercy to reclaim
And from the depth of sin and shame,
through grace he lifted me.*

*Chorus: From sinking sand he lifted me; with
tender hand he lifted me; from shades of night to
plains of light, O praise his name he lifted me!’*

These are the sort of words I want to sing (maybe with a little modernization of the wording!)

If we keep our focus on Jesus and not the act of singing, one great theme will shape the songs that we sing about: the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

In addition, if we keep our focus on Jesus and not the act of singing one great event will shape the whole of the service time.

The Bible reading and Bible talk will be the main event in the service. Now I know that’s not a surprise to hear me say that, but the Bible is the place where we have the gospel most clearly set out for us.

If everything we do is actually about hearing about Jesus- then the clearest way to hear the gospel is to have the Bible read and preached.

That will have a big effect on the time that we give to singing and the way that we arrange our service. It will also have a big effect on our song choice as well. We’ll want several things to shape our song choice...

1. we will want **songs that are God centred-** that is about God. We have already said lots of songs about Jesus and the cross.

Now that's worth saying because many modern worship songs are what we call reflexive. Pete Ward has done some great research on this. And he has shown a big shift in what is getting sung in many churches over the past 20 or 30 years. Many worship songs are *reflexive*- that is they are about me, my feelings, my desire to worship, my singing, my experience of God. Bit by bit they have become more me-centred than God-centred.³

But if we take the presentation of the gospel as the greatest importance we will want our songs to be God-centred.

³ Ward, P. (2005) *Selling Worship: How what we sing has changed the church* Paternoster

2. Secondly if the Bible reading & sermon is the main event and presenting the gospel is our great concern, we will want **songs full of the Bible and Bible truth.**

Have you ever sung a song and then thought, I'm not sure if that is actually true, if it's Biblical or if that's helpful? I have many times.

The problem is, that we are being offered by some popular song writers vast amount of songs that say things that we would never allow to be said from the pulpit, because they aren't actually true, or are unhelpful. But fortunately there are some modern song writers starting to reverse this trend.

If our genuine desire is the presentation of God as he has revealed himself to us, then we will want to sing lots of music that is full to the brim with Bible truth.

So when we choose songs we will want lots of ideas from scripture contained in them.

I've tried to choose songs that do this; that are focused on God and full of Bible truth. I hope you'll agree.

A question we will want to ask is: Does the song help us grasp better the topic in the reading that's being preached?

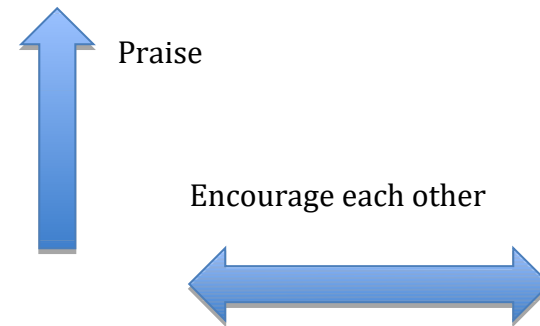
So if the sermon is the main event, we need another arrow on our diagram.

We have the upwards arrow of praise, but we also need a sideways arrow.

That's because songs are for our benefit and those around us. A major reason we sing, is to learn, **remind and encourage each other with Bible truth and who Jesus is.**

As well as upward praise there is the outward arrow of encouragement.

Figure 3



Which means that when we say our singing is 'for an audience of one', I don't think it is strictly true. Yes we don't sing to impress those around us or perform to those around us, but it should encourage them. So if I am in my own world all the time or not considerate of those around us, we have probably got it wrong.

I've been to lots of events, particularly in my early years as a Christian, with people doubled over in worship and adoration and weeping on

the floor and completely detached from what is going on. Now I know that this isn't the sort of thing we see in St John's and isn't a particular danger for us, but we need to know what we think of that, particularly when this is often held up by such churches as 'true heartfelt worship'.

I think the Bible would challenge such worship as too focused on the individual.

We need to be aware that we are singing as part of a body of people gathered together. And everything I do must be for the encouragement of my brothers and sisters.

Ephesians 5:19 'Speak to one another, with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs.' *To one another*, it says. Colossians has a similar emphasis on 'admonishing one another as you sing to God.'

These are big issues, but I hope looking at them will help us think carefully about the kind of music that glorifies God. Because we want to be clear about what it is we're doing and why it is we're doing it.

To summarise, there is an upwards dimension to our music in church- we sing praising and in adoration of God.

And there is an outwards or sideways dimension to our musical worship- encouraging and being reminded of the gospel of God and all he has done for us.

What do we sing? We have seen that we ought to sing Jesus- focused, God- focused songs, cross- centred songs and songs that get the Bible over to us.

Now something I'd love to do is take any questions that spring from what we've looked at

and we will also consider some practical issues of administration relating to Sunday Services.

Recommended further reading:

True Worship by Vaughan Roberts. **Grateful thanks to Vaughan Roberts for this very helpful book which has formed the basis for much of what I have said.**

The Church Musicians Handbook: A Practical Guide to Music and its Role Within the Church published by Matthias Media with foreword by Christopher Idle.

God is in the House. An article in The Briefing magazine by Philip Percival (available online).