

September 28, 2008 20th After Pentecost
Reflection: Come, Let Us Sing!

There's lots of material to choose from in today's readings. But sometimes, something else twigs a preacher's interest, and we go wandering down other paths. I try not to abandon the lectionary completely, because I think it's good discipline to preach on texts chosen by the world-wide church, rather than my own favourite texts. But it just happens that the epistle lesson today, is a beautiful, poetic passage. In fact, most scholars think that this passage is not just poetry – it's a hymn of the early church. It is a hymn sung by early Christians to express what they believe happened in the incarnation of Jesus. It's both a teaching hymn, and a hymn of praise.

That got me thinking about hymns and music in the church. Tim and I spend a lot of time considering the hymns and the service music for each Sunday morning. When the music seems to fit with the theme of the service, that's not an accident!

Music is one of those areas in the church that a lot of people have strong opinions about. Many of you prefer the hymns of your youth – what hymn-writer Ron Klusmeier calls “heritage hymns”. Many others of you enjoy learning newer, contemporary hymns. And still others frequently express the thought that what we need is more “upbeat music” – and the hope that more upbeat music would mean more young people in our pews. Tim and I try to balance all of those different desires as best we can, hoping that we meet the needs of at least some of the people some of the time! But this passage from Philippians provides an opportunity to tell you a bit more about the history of hymns in the church, and where our own tradition of congregational singing has come from.

As you can tell from the Philippians passage, hymns have been part of the church since its earliest days. The Gospels report Jesus and his disciples singing together – probably one of the Psalms. Other New Testament examples include the songs of Mary and of Zechariah from Luke's Gospel. The earliest Christian singing was what we would think of as chant or plainsong: these pieces would seem to most of us to have no recognisable metre or rhyming scheme. This kind of singing persisted well into the Middle Ages. Hymns were even used in theological debate!

During the Arian controversy of the 4th century, “Arius wrote up his heretical views in the form of hymns set to catchy drinking songs, which people could be heard humming or whistling in the streets. Not to be outdone, John Chrysostom responded by taking to the street himself singing orthodox hymns in procession, [...]what one might call “taking back the streets”!” Clearly, what we sing matters, because in singing it we not only express what we believe but we also absorb the church's theological teaching. [Susan Harris, A Brief History of Christian Hymnody]

In the 5th century, there was a debate over whether only songs from Scripture could be sung, or whether it was OK to sing Latin hymns composed on theological themes. This is in a time when Latin was the everyday language of a good chunk of the world. Not everyone approved of these hymns in the common tongue, especially the use of secular tunes. That same debate arose again during the Protestant Reformation, and there are still churches today whose songbook consists only of the Psalms and Scripture songs – no other hymns are allowed.

In the later Middle Ages, hymns used for public worship were generally designed to evoke the seasons and times of the church's life: hymns for Easter, for saints days, for special observances, etc. There was no intention that they express the feelings or thoughts of Christians. They were generally sung by the monks or clergy to Latin plainchant. One of the few plainsong hymns we actually still sing is an English version of a Latin hymn: "O come, o come Emmanuel". **[Have Tim play a line or two]**

Even in this period, though, there were those who wrote hymns with a more personal approach.

With the Reformation of the 16th century, a need was identified to have hymns written in the language that people actually spoke, as Latin was no longer the common language. It was also felt that though the chants of the church were quite lovely, they were not accessible to the average singer, and the music needed to be simplified. Can you imagine singing Gregorian chant every Sunday?

By this time, metrical hymnody – hymns with what we would recognize as a rhythmic pattern - had entered the church's music. Metrical psalms were very popular, and were written in a number of different languages. In the 1700s, more and more church leaders felt that hymns should express and evoke the people's religious thoughts and feelings toward God. The Methodist hymn-writers John and Charles Wesley in particular, as well as Isaac Watts, wrote hymns such as "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling", "Joy to the World", and "O God Our Help In Ages Past" which expressed the believer's devotion and trust in God. The Wesleys believed that both words and music should stir the emotions. As the Canadian inheritors of the Methodist tradition, that's certainly a large part of our approach to hymns. Just look at the hymns that are most commonly chosen in our sing-alongs: "I, the Lord of Sea and Sky" and "Amazing Grace"! **{play a bit of one of these hymns}**

Added to that, in North America there was a religious revival called the Second Great Awakening, in which African-American spirituals played a huge part. **[play a bit of a Spiritual]** Gospel hymns of the early 19th century continued this trend. Many of them used secular tunes and added religious words to them. By the early 20th century, Gospel hymns were flourishing, in the form of the hymns that many of you know and love: In the Garden, the Old Rugged Cross, In the Sweet

Bye and Bye – hymns designed to convert, convict and comfort the wandering soul. By the late 19th and early 20th century, across most Christian denominations, hymns were accepted as ways to teach the faith, reinforce the liturgy, and express devotion to God.

In the 20th century, contemporary praise music continued the trend of the 19th century Gospel hymns. We also had folk hymns, many of them from Catholic folk masses [**play a bit of Eagle's wings?**], and more traditionally written hymn tunes with newer, more contemporary words. Add to that the more chant-like music of Taizé in France or of the Eastern Orthodox churches, the world music of African, Asian, Latin American and Celtic traditions, and bits of popular music that have entered our hymn collections [**play a bit of Morning Has Broken**], and we have a rich store of music to choose from.

Maybe you can see why choosing music for services can be a bit of a challenge! I hope you can also see why repeated requests for the same type of music or even the same hymns can frustrate your church musician! - though we do try to include your favourites as often as they fit the service. We have such a rich treasure trove of music to choose from – why not make use of it?

If you look at our hymnbooks, I would break the hymns down into three general categories: Songs of the Liturgy; Songs that Teach and Proclaim; and Songs that Express Emotion.

Songs of the Liturgy [play an example in the background]

- Songs of Times and Seasons: The Day Thou Gavest; Day is Done; When Morning Gilds the Skies; Morning Has Broken; Sing to the Lord of Harvest; The Spring Has Come
- Songs for Holy Days: eg. Easter, Christmas, Reign of Christ
- Liturgical Responses: Kyries; Hallelujahs; Doxologies; Communion Hymns
- Psalms and Scripture songs: Make A Joyful Noise; As the Deer; This is the Day; Handel's *Messiah*; There's A Voice in the Wilderness Crying
- Chant and Repetitive choruses: O Come, O Come Emmanuel; Adoramus Te Domine; Eat This Bread; Glorias, Confitemini Domino #16 MV

Songs that teach and proclaim: [play an example in the background]

- Creedal Songs: The Philippians hymn we read this morning; Immortal, Invisible; Holy, Holy, Holy; You Lord, Are Both Lamb and Shepherd; Phos Hilaron (O Laughing Light)
- Story Songs: Simon, Simon; or Lord of the Dance; or A Prophet Woman Broke a Jar

Songs that express emotion: [ditto]

- Songs of Praise and Thanksgiving: Come We That Love the Lord; I Can Feel You Near Me, God; Come Ye Thankful People; Asante Sante Jesu; For the Beauty of the Earth

- Songs of Lament and Questioning: Were You There?; By the Rivers of Babylon; Weep for the Dead; Stay With Us; Beneath the Cross of Jesus; Why Hast Thou Forsaken Me?; O God, Why Are You Silent?; What Wondrous Love is This?
- Songs of Trust and Commitment: Just As I Am; Here I Am, Lord; Go Make a Difference; To Show By Touch and Word; In the Garden

I do want to make a comment about that last category: *Songs that Express Emotion*. As you can see and hear, there is more than one emotion we express to God. While in worship we feel it is appropriate to give God praise and thanks, there are other modes and moods of human living. If you look at Jesus' hymnbook (the Psalms) you can see pretty much every human mood. We have hymns available to us that express those different moods as well. If we believe that we can come to God just as we are, then there is no reason to hesitate to express our full range of feelings in song, and in worship. They are all part of the human spirit, and they are all part of what we bring to God.

I also think it's important for children to learn the hymns from this vast treasure store, and not just stick to "children's music". What we sing shapes how we live as Christian people, and how we relate to God. If we never learn the music of mature faith, we will find it hard to mature ourselves. Our hymnody should not only comfort and uplift us – it should also challenge and teach us. **What we sing is who we are as Christian people.** Just as the Philippians hymn simultaneously taught the church about Jesus, urged them to follow his example, and gave God glory, so our own hymns can do the same.

There's a delightful passage in the book of Zephaniah that says, "God celebrates and sings because of you." (Zephaniah 3:17 CEV) As we join in song this day and every Sunday, we join our voices across generations and geographical boundaries, to the Christian community throughout the centuries, to Jesus and his disciples; perhaps, even, we sing with God herself. So, come, let us sing God's song, in all its variety and richness. Amen.