

Make a Joyful Noise: A Return to Singing

In the Anglican Book of Common Prayer, the words that occur early in the Morning Prayer service are among my favorite:

“The night is passed, and the day lies open before us; let us pray with one heart and mind. As we rejoice in the gift of this new day, so may the light of your presence, O God, **set our hearts on fire with love for you; now and forever.**”

I especially like the phrase “set our hearts on fire with love for you.” One of the ways that our hearts are set on fire with love seems to me to be through the singing of hymns and other sacred music; at least that is how our love can be expressed, but the singing also can ignite the fire. Sometimes, as we sing, a mystical connection to something greater than we are suddenly comes into our awareness. The joined voices of a singing congregation cannot be surpassed for bringing awareness and joy to a group of people. Ritual and art products work that way: when words run out for expressing knowledge and emotion, artistic offerings and ritual become modes of articulation.

Scholars are fairly sure that some form of singing (or chanting) has been a part of the worship tradition in Christianity from the early days. As I stated in an earlier paper several years ago: Historians of Western church music admit that they do not know with certainty how the early Christians worshipped, but they do have a few theories. One of those notions is that first century followers of Jesus no doubt sang or chanted in their formal meetings. This assertion is based on what is known about Greek and Jewish worship in the first century CE. Historians believe that early followers of Jesus sang, in much the same manner as they had in the Jewish services where they praised through the chanting of Psalms and words from the religious texts.

Reference can be found of early Christians being instructed to praise God in their services. For example, in Ephesians 5:19, St Paul directs the followers “to sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs.” Probably, a good portion of the “singing” would have consisted of chanting (what is known as plain chant) and would not have sounded like singing as we know it today given that during that time and up through the Middle Ages, chant (plain and Gregorian chant) was a dominant mode of musical expression, especially in cathedrals and monastic houses. Plain Chant and the later Gregorian chant are musical forms of monophonic, unaccompanied sacred song, especially used in the western Roman Catholic Church. Plain chant was and is also used in the Eastern Orthodox services.

Sometime In the Middle Ages, though, polyphonic music began to be used in some church services so that today, it is the dominant form, with chant being in the minority position. Polyphonic music has harmonized parts and is the form used in the majority of our hymns today. Most hymns are based on a Psalm or other scriptural passage, and they are set to a tune, many of which are named for their place of origin or for their composer. Others are named for their composer only. You can note these designations in our hymnal. For example, on page 546, the tune is St. Clement as noted under the title; below that on the left is the author of the words and on the right is the name of the composer of the music. The 9.8.9.8 after St. Clement refers

to the meter of the hymn: the words to this hymn can be sung to any other tune in the hymnal that also has 9.8.9.8 as its meter.

Hymns are a vital part of other religions, such as Hinduism, also. Therefore, I think the claim can be made that singing forms a vital part of religious services, and during this past, long year of not being to meet as a congregation and then not to sing together has seemed like a drought. Our hearts are eager to join together in congregational hymns, forming a bond between us and with God. This upcoming Sunday, then, should be a joyous occasion because of the reinstatement of congregational singing at Walnut Hill. I look forward to being a part of that joyful noise!

Peace, love, and joy,
Angela