

HYMNS:	21	“Born in song!”
	731	“When in our music, God is glorified”
	368	“When morning gilds the skies”
	185	“Sing we the King who is coming to reign”

READINGS: Psalm 40:1-5
Ephesians 5: 15-20

“SINGING AND MAKING MELODY TO THE LORD”

Yesterday I watched bits of the commemoration of 70 years since the real end of World War II – the ending of the war in the east against Japan. It was very moving to see the veterans of the campaign, especially of the Burma Campaign who often felt themselves forgotten. Now there they were, many of them in wheelchairs, participating seventy years on in the service in St. Martins-in-the-Fields and the later Drumhead Service in Horse Guards Parade.

Perhaps because I was preparing for this service, yesterday I was very struck by the power of the music and the hymns that were sung. The hymns brought tears to the eyes of some of those veterans, the hymns bound those old soldiers together, brought back memories of 70 years ago and of their lost comrades with whom they used to sing.

The Military Band music was first class, the readings were moving but there was nothing else which bound people together so strongly as their participation in the hymns - chosen especially for their relevance to the commemoration.

Both of the lessons which we have heard read today have something significant to say about the importance of praise and singing. We heard an extract from Psalm 40. It is a thanksgiving for deliverance – “I waited patiently for the Lord, he inclined to me and heard my cry he put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God.”

For many people the most natural way for giving thanks to God is to sing. It is a human reaction, not just a Christian reaction to sing when we are glad, to sing when we are happy and to sing when we have something to be very grateful for.

Psalm 40 is the psalm which spoke to Charles Wesley when he opened his Bible soon after his assurance of God's grace towards him on May 21st 1738 – three days before his brother's 'heart-warming' experience.

Charles read, 'God put a new song in my mouth' and that is what happened from that moment onwards. He started to write hymns – the first of many which were to flow from his pen – over 6000 in his lifetime. Charles, like John, had been impressed by the singing of the Moravians whom they had met on the ship travelling to America and with whom they continued to have contact once on Georgia.

Charles and Joh saw how their hymns bound the Moravians together, gave them the words to express their praise of God and strengthened their faith. When their ship, *The Simmonds*, was in danger of sinking in mid-Atlantic, the Moravians sung of their faith and expressed their trust in God whatever might happen. This made a lasting impression on John and Charles Wesley.

From the time of Charles' experience in May 1738 his life's work was not only to preach of God and his grace but also to give people the words to sing their praises, to offer their thanks and to bring their deepest needs before God.

Congregational singing was quite rare in Britain until the time of Isaac Watts and Charles Wesley – before that there was singing but it was plainsong or chanting or music sung by a choir.

However our reading from Ephesians shows us that singing has been an essential part of worship for a very long time. Indeed pagan worship, Jewish worship and Christian worship from the earliest times all had music as an essential element. Singing is in the DNA of humankind.

Paul, a Jew as much as an evangelist for Jesus and his Kingdom tells the Ephesians, “be filled with the Spirit as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts.” If we had started our Ephesians reading a verse earlier, we would have heard Paul quote from what was, almost certainly, one of the early Christian hymns –

“Wake up, you sleeper!
Rise up from the dead!
The Messiah will shine on you!”

Paul does not see such hymns as decorative - embroidery around the edges of Christian faith and worship – but as essential and central to all true worship. Paul thought that singing was actually an excellent way of practising our faith. That might sound a bit odd but let me try a parallel by way of illustration. If you don't want your garden to be full of weeds, the best way to do that is to keep it stocked with strong sturdy flowers and shrubs. So, if you do not want your mind and heart to go wandering off into less than wholesome thinking, one of the best ways is to keep the mind and heart stocked with words and songs of praise and thanksgiving. And there is no better way to remember uplifting Biblical words than to be able to sing them.

Last Monday in our Sisterhood meeting we had a discussion about the role of singing in worship. There was a general consensus that worship without singing would be dull and boring – indeed worship, at least in a Methodist context, can scarcely be considered ‘worship’ if there is no singing. Some people stated that they looked forward to coming to church primarily because it offered the opportunity of singing. If you think about it, unless we are a member of a choir or are to be found on the terraces of a football stadium, there are few opportunities these days to sing as part of a group of people. Singing in church is powerful, meaningful and uplifting because it is something we all do together. This is the therapeutic work of music which lifts us out of ourselves, out of our sorrow or our pre-occupations, out of our

solitariness in to a new realm where we are carried along by others just as we carry them along.

I was listening to the radio yesterday. I don't know what the programme was – I only pricked my ears up part way through – but it was about music – secular, everyday music. The broadcaster stressed that many singers who had become big names in show business began their singing in church choirs, especially Pentecostal Church choirs in the USA – Whitney Houston, Diana Ross, Little Ricard and Aretha Franklin to name just a few. Their 'secular singing' if that is a proper term, was also a vehicle through which they hoped to lift people out of their loneliness and isolation into a new community of song.

It is not a coincidence that a number of Methodist Homes for the Aged have a music therapy programme – music can speak to those with dementia long after they have lost contact with the world of words.

So, if you come to church looking forward primarily to singing that is nothing to feel bad about. The quality of the sermon may be variable but let us hope and work to ensure that the experience of singing is always uplifting and inspiring.

The members of Sisterhood also mentioned that hymns are a wonderful way of expressing our faith when we feel, quite literally, 'lost for words.' Hymns are based on passages from the Bible, on the composer's own spiritual experiences and also reflect their struggle to relate faith to our day-to-day lives. So, as others have done the work for us we are enabled to understand Scripture in new ways and relate it to our lives as we sing our hymns. New meaning springs out from the lines we sing, deepening our faith and enlightening our understanding.

I hope that I am speaking to the converted but my aim in this sermon is quite simply to commend to you the value of singing in worship and to ask you to think more deeply about it.

Hymn singing is physical and involves our whole being – heart, mind, soul and body in praising God it is even used as a therapy for those with breathing problems.

Hymn singing engages our emotions. Words that seem cold and dull on the page come to life when set to music though we must always be aware of the temptation to be so carried away by the beauty of the tune that we lose sight of the words. Last week Leslie spoke of the importance of loving God with all our heart and our neighbours as ourselves – singing is a way in which we can do this.

Hymn singing is, or should be, thoughtful. It is easy to fall into the habit of just mouthing familiar words without thinking but ideally hymn singing should be a dialogues between the singer and the words - 'do I believe what I am saying?' 'what should I do if this is how I see things?' The words of the hymn then become a vehicle for genuine adoration, petition or recommitment.

Hymn singing is memorable – as it clearly was for some of those VJ war veterans yesterday. A particular hymn may remind us of important events from our own past – our wedding, the baptism of a child, a funeral or special service. But this

'memorability' is much more than that – through our hymn-singing we are linked into the corporate memory of God's people throughout the ages. In this place we are privileged for we can imagine some of Charles Wesley's hymns being sung for the very first time.

Again, as hymns create memories in us, they become a hidden source of spiritual nurture which may come back to us in times of difficulty or give us the words to express our joy and praise at other times.

As we have said already, hymn-singing is corporate – it enables us to share each other's burdens, especially at times of sorrow such as funerals and it enables us to be, that which we are constantly called to be, the Body of Christ – no longer individuals but communally Christ's living presence in the world.

John Wesley took hymn-singing very seriously. One wit has even referred to Methodists as 'a choir gathered by John to sing the hymns of Charles.' John took hymn-singing so seriously that in 1761 he wrote down 'Seven Directions for Singing' which he distributed to all his preachers so that no society of Methodists anywhere in the land should be ignorant of them. In these directions he spoke about the use of appropriate tunes, about keeping to the time of the music and singing lustily not as if one were half dead. He spoke about singing in harmony in such a way that no individual voice should be heard above the rest of the congregation.

But his seventh and last point was and still is the most important,

"Above all sing spiritually. Have an eye to God in every word you sing. Aim at pleasing Him more than yourself and see that your heart is not carried away with the sound but offered to God continually."

Let me end by quoting the recent Methodist hymn writer, Fred Pratt Green, whose hymn we sang just before this sermon,

"When in our music God is glorified
And adoration leaves no room for pride
It is as though the whole creation cried
Alleluia!

Alleluia! Praise to God! Amen.