

Water, Spirit, and . . . Music?
Trinity Presbyterian, Tulsa, OK
Sunday, 27 February 2005

Last year, I had the opportunity to talk with you about the language of music on a very special day -- the Day of Pentecost. This year, we're right in the middle of Lent. This presents a small challenge to me because I'm naturally inclined to use music in praise of God. During Lent however, we're on the receiving end of a tradition stretching back at least fifteen centuries to forego the use of the word "Alleluia" in worship, a word transliterated from the Hebrew "Hallelu Jah" which literally means "praise God". Note that this doesn't prevent us from praising God, just from nagging each other about it! Perhaps this is a useful reminder that it's better to show by example what it means to be a Christian than to talk about it.

In any case, today's Psalter reading exhorts us to sing and "make a joyful noise" in praise of God. I hope you'll agree with me that that's just what our wonderful youth choir has been doing in worship this morning, and we thank them. I hope you'll also agree that our dedicated adult choir has done a fantastic job even when the "joyful noise" is "a new song" which the choir director asks them to sing in obedience to several other Psalms. How much poorer our worship would be without their contributions! Let's also not forget the contributions made by those willing to play musical instruments or sing as soloists or in small groups for worship throughout the year.

In considering today's scripture readings, I was immediately struck by the centrality of water in both Exodus and John. I also found Jesus' remark to the woman at the Samaritan well arresting: "God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth". Interestingly enough, "water" and "Spirit" also appeared together in last week's Gospel lesson where Nicodemus asks Jesus how one can be reborn as an adult and Jesus replies that we need to be "born of water and Spirit". And at the very beginning of Genesis, we're told that "the spirit of God swept over the face of the waters".

Well, whenever I find two or more apparently unrelated concepts connected in multiple scriptures, I try to understand why -- especially when those scriptures were written by different authors at different times. So I ask: what is this connection between water and Spirit, and how can it inform our worship of God, especially in regard to music?

Perhaps the obvious connection between water and Spirit is that their worlds seem mostly hidden from us. We know there are vast ecosystems beneath the surfaces

of our oceans, lakes, and rivers, but we usually can see only tiny portions of them (It's amazing to consider how many decades or centuries may pass before we've explored the underwater portions of our planet the way we have its land masses.). Similarly, the world of the Spirit seems inaccessible until we begin to exercise our native spiritual insight through prayer or meditation, study, and (you guessed it!) worship. Fortunately, unlike earth's waters, exploring this infinite realm of Spirit doesn't require lots of money and fancy equipment since, as Jesus told the inquiring Pharisees, "the kingdom of God is within you".

The remarkable thing is that once we begin this inner spiritual exploration in earnest, we begin to crave the peace it brings to our thoughts and aims. We feel nourished by it. Perhaps this is the "living water" Jesus was telling the Samaritan woman about -- or the "water of life" which "the Spirit and the bride" invite us to partake of freely in that marvelous passage at the end of St. John's Revelation.

Now, don't let me mislead you. This spiritual quest won't automatically lead to eternal bliss here on earth, but it does tend to bring inner contentment and peace. We have it on Jesus' authority that we are blessed with fulfillment when we "hunger and thirst for righteousness". And Paul notes that "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" -- qualities which can help anyone find happiness and contentment.

All told, I think it's fair to say that the living water of eternal life is a metaphor for our continuing efforts to understand and live the life of spirit. Jesus tells us to "Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you." Some translators render these commands as "keep on asking", "keep on searching", "keep on knocking" -- never stop. It's a sure bet that the water of life won't remain living water for long if it becomes stagnant. It's no different with our individual spiritual growth and progress.

So what does our ongoing individual search for the meaning of things have to do with worship and music? In a word -- everything! Paul's first letter to the Corinthians spells this out very clearly. He writes: "Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit" and "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good." He goes on to say that this one and only Spirit is expressed in countless ways by each one of us and that collectively we form the body of Christ, doing Christ's work in the world -- and worship (drum roll please!) is our primary means of doing that work. It's how we commune with each other and share the story of our spiritual journeys. It's where we inspire and encourage each other as we each pursue our individual paths.

In fact, I'll go out on a limb here and state that I believe God seeks worshipers in spirit and truth, not because he needs our worship but because he needs us as witnesses to his children of his grace poured out on anyone willing to listen and respond. Remember that passage in Revelation I mentioned earlier? After "The Spirit and the bride say, 'Come.'", it goes on to say, "And let everyone who hears say, 'Come'." This implies that part of our job is to help others find their way spiritually, so to speak. The Psalms are very clear about what God is looking for in worship: "you have no delight in sacrifice", "You desire truth in the inward being", and "Sacrifice and offering you do not desire, but you have given me an open ear."

Don't you think it's interesting that both of these speak of listening? I do (but of course you knew I would say that, didn't you!). Toward the beginning of Revelation, John repeatedly writes: "Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit (there it is again) is saying to the churches." Part of Jesus' response to a question about his teaching methods was "The reason I speak to them in parables is that . . . hearing they do not listen". This brings up an important distinction. Hearing and listening aren't the same thing. Hearing is passive, listening is active. Hearing tends to tune out, listening tunes in. We hear many sounds and noises in our environment, but unless we listen for the doorbell or the telephone, we may miss out on something important. We frequently hear someone speaking to us, but how often are we really listening -- being attentive to them and considering their words?

The sad thing is that God has been patiently asking us to listen for centuries: "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one". Then there's the "I don't get no respect" line: "Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth." Remember poor Peter at the transfiguration so busy trying to be useful that God practically tells him to shut up? "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!"

It turns out that this listening God wants us to do involves more than just using our ears and minds. We're to love (and listen to) God "with all [our] heart, and with all [our] soul, and with all [our] mind, and with all [our] strength." And this is where (perhaps we need a trumpet fanfare for this one) music comes in.

As I said last year, music is a language which speaks to our hearts more than to our minds. In fact, I would go further and say that music is, at least metaphorically, the language of spirit. It provides us with a way to speak about

God and to God which transcends ordinary words. In fact, I believe it's so vital to worship that anyone unable to sing in their heart is literally incapable of worshipping God. (Don't worry, God isn't concerned with what your voice sounds like!) Music works in tandem with the word to reach into the core of our being and uplift both our thoughts and feelings.

You know, there's a portion of a service we use over at Temple Israel that I think captures this partnership of words and music almost perfectly. It goes like this: "If our prayer were music only, we could surely sing our way into the world we want, into the heaven we desire. Each would put his own words to the melody; from every song would pour a hundred different prayers. But our past has taught us words, and though we pray the music, we cannot always pray the words. The words do not always speak for us, nor can we always understand them. Yet once we understood: to speak the ancient words returns us to that simpler time when as children we felt the world was one, and it was ours."

As a Christian and a musician, I've always wondered what it must have been like to sing a hymn with Jesus and his other disciples at the end of the Last Supper. Mind you, this wasn't unusual, considering they were finishing up their Passover celebration. It's just that this wasn't any ordinary Passover. How were their hearts touched? How did they respond to singing these words from the second half of the Hallel: "O Israel, trust in the Lord! . . . The Lord has been mindful of us; . . . he will bless the house of Israel; . . . you have delivered my soul from death, . . . I walk before the Lord in the land of the living. . . . The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. This is the Lord's doing"?

In hindsight it's easy to see the relationship of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection to the Passover. At the time, his disciples were pretty much in the dark. They knew something was up, but weren't quite sure what. Ultimately, the combination of the spoken and unspoken at the familiar yet new Passover-cum-Last Supper was seared into their hearts and minds to become the central observance of those who would later be named Christians. I suspect that the singing of that last hymn had a poignancy we can only imagine.

So there you have it -- our curiosity about spiritual things becomes a never-ending journey which is supported by communal worship, and which in turn reinforces that spiritual hunger by touching our hearts and minds through music and the word. In the last analysis, it seems to me that the ministry of music is designed to embody this notion of "worshipping him in spirit". In any case, without spirit, or the energizing force of God, it would be nearly impossible to do the work of

ministering through music. Johann Sebastian Bach, one of the greatest composers and church musicians of all time had it right. He inscribed every one of his thousands of compositions with the motto: "Soli Deo Gloria" -- to God be the glory.

So to paraphrase the sermon hymn, Every time you feel the music moving in your heart, God's Spirit is there helping you to pray. And now, let's do just that. Dear God, thank you for moving our hearts and minds to seek you, for helping us to do the work of worshiping you as members of the body of Christ, and for your divine gift of music -- the harmony which leads us all to your kingdom of heaven within. To you truly is all the glory, both now and forever, Amen.