

Music and the Spirit
Trinity Presbyterian, Tulsa, OK
Pentecost Sunday, 30 May 2004

The day of Pentecost which we celebrate today seems to me quintessentially Christian. In this event, which occurred some time before Paul's calling and ministry, we have an unmistakable indication of God's intent that the Christian Gospel is to be universal and inclusive when after the descent of the Holy Spirit all who came to the apostles heard them speak in their own language. Unfortunately, when considering this account it's easy to make the mistake of focusing on form instead of function -- on the speakers in tongues rather than on those hearing and understanding what they have to say. Paul's ringing rebuke of speaking in unintelligible tongues, rather than in ways which edify one's listeners is simply evidence of early Christians seeking to display their own supposed "spiritual gifts" instead of helping deliver God's gifts to God's children in need of comfort. This isn't of course, unique to Christianity. Experts in many fields of endeavor seem incapable of explaining themselves to the uninitiated without using their own peculiar jargon mixed in with everyday language.

So what does the day of Pentecost have to do with music? The old cliché that music is a universal language actually does hold some water. Music however, is a language which speaks to the heart rather than to the head. This makes it a perfect complement to the word, which is why it finds a place in virtually all religious worship. It's also why music has always been regarded with suspicion by some preachers of the word. I of course take the position that music is a valuable partner with the word in communicating and teaching theology.

While there is no record of music as such on that first Pentecost, the descent of the Spirit bears all the hallmarks of people hearing and responding to the language of the heart. The book of Acts tells us the apostles were assembled together almost as if they were an expectant audience waiting for a performance to begin. Suddenly a loud rushing sound fills the house and they are each filled with the Spirit and respond by preaching the Gospel in many different languages.

This account suggests three skills we need to cultivate in order to benefit from an encounter with the Spirit or with music: the ability to be quiet, to listen, and to respond. Let's explore each of these in further detail as they relate to music.

First, quietness. It goes without saying that you can't listen to or respond to music in an environment containing lots of extraneous noise. But it really goes much deeper than this. Our lives are so busy and cluttered that we hardly recognize how

noisy our mental environment has become -- we worry about approaching deadlines or tasks remaining undone, we obsess over how to pacify someone we've angered or the wrongs others have done to us, we try to set realistic goals and measure our progress against them. While some of these mental activities are good and useful in the right time and place, many of us have forgotten where our mental "off" switch is. Like Elijah at Mount Horeb we get so distracted by the storm, earthquake, and fire that we miss the "still small voice" that's been speaking to us all along.

Quieting thought takes practice. Christians would do well to take Jesus' advice to "go into your room and shut the door" when they pray -- to shut out the world and its distractions -- daily in their devotions. This same attitude of quietness is one which allows music to work its magic most effectively.

Once we're quiet we need to listen -- to attend to, pay heed, or tune in. Listening is more active than hearing. Listening implies we're actively focusing on what is heard instead of just letting it wash over us. In fact, the watchword of Judaism -- Christianity's mother faith and the birthplace of monotheism -- begins with the words "listen Israel, the Lord our God is one". It's a command to engage with what was originally a new and difficult concept -- a concept that required and still requires taking a stand against idolatry and selfishness. Finally, listening can only occur if we're truly quiet, for how can we heed something outside of ourselves if we haven't first stopped paying attention to our internal voices?

When we listen to music then, we need to give ourselves over to it, to not only let it speak to us, but to follow its lead, ask questions of it, and align our feelings with it. While this can be difficult with unfamiliar music, we've probably all had the experience of hearing sounds in the natural world that seemed musical in a way which certainly doesn't sound like someone singing or playing a musical instrument. Surprisingly, most of us listen quite naturally to unfamiliar styles of music when watching films, where music plays a pivotal role in making us feel different emotions because most of us aren't paying overt attention to it.

Our listening will never be complete until we learn to respond to what we've heard. In fact, responses grow naturally out of active listening and can range from simple appreciation to vows to change our course to mental and spiritual healing. In any case, our quietness and listening are pointless if we come away from them unchanged. When preparing my students to perform, I explain that applause is an audience's way of responding, of saying "thank you" for their performance.

Interestingly, corporate worship is one of the few places where listeners are expected to respond by participating in making music. Each time you sing a hymn or liturgical response, you play a role in creating a musical experience. What's more, hymns and responses blend the languages of head and heart by combining words and music in a powerful synergy which is virtually unique. And when you consider the subject matter of worship, we have the makings of a deeply moving experience. Is it any wonder then that the Last Supper concluded with Jesus and the assembled disciples singing a hymn?

It's been said that genius or creativity is ninety-nine percent perspiration and one percent inspiration. I dare say most performers and composers would agree with that! Musicians do the hard work of quieting thought and listening in order to be prepared to catch the divine spark of inspiration and respond to or express it in a meaningful way so that it may continue to inspire others who in turn listen to their performances or perform their works. In short, their response becomes the inspiration for other listeners to respond to. Thus, in worship we have the opportunity to become part of this cycle of inspiration and expression every time we participate fully in singing hymns.

To help illustrate this, I'd like you all to turn to hymn 316, "Breathe on Me, Breath of God". . . . We're going to try this in a couple of different ways to help illustrate some of what I've been talking about. First, I'd like you to listen while I read the first verse. [Read first verse.] That's all fine and good -- a verse from a fairly standard late nineteenth century religious poem. Before we read the third verse together, I'd like you to read it to yourself and really think about what it's saying. . . . Now, let's all read it out loud, with feeling. [Read third verse.] It's a little different than just listening to someone else read it, isn't it?

Now here's where it starts to get interesting. It's one thing to read together, it's something else entirely to sing together. I'll play a verse and then let's sing all four verses together (you may remain seated if you like). [Sing hymn.] Did you notice that for this to work we all had to listen to each other at the same time as we were singing? And that the music set the scene for the words by being contemplative and simple?

Now let's try something a little different. We'll sing the same words to the tune for hymn 491 -- one of at least eight which are associated with this text in various hymnals. You'll need to keep your hymnal open to 316 and listen to the new tune once before we sing it -- don't be worried that you haven't done this before -- remember, if you really listen you'll be able to respond. [Sing hymn.] Now, even

though we sang the same words, the music changed things, didn't it? This tune is more active and boisterous, perhaps evoking the rushing wind of the day of Pentecost instead of the faint breeze connoted by the other setting. Mind you, this doesn't make either setting better, just suited for different purposes. Later, the choir will sing yet another setting of these words which has a more primitive yet dramatic feel to it.

While it's possible to explore this subject in much greater detail, I hope we're all beginning to understand the value and power of music in worship. When carefully and thoughtfully applied, this understanding has the potential to deepen and broaden our worship in a uniquely vital way. In closing, may I offer the words of Psalm 100, written by one of the most gifted poets and musicians of all time, the harpist King David:

Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth. Worship the LORD with gladness; come into his presence with singing. Know that the LORD is God. It is he that made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture. Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise. Give thanks to him, bless his name. For the LORD is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.

Amen.