

Homily for people and parishes...

Bishop Cam Venables – Sunday, 18th August 2024, Pentecost 13

Readings: 1Kings 2:10-12; 3:3-14

Psalm 111

Ephesians 5:11-21

John 6:51-58

In early 1994 I was visiting my parents in the UK, and my late Dad asked if I would like to attend a Five Nations Rugby Union game between Wales and France. He assured me that Wales had not beaten France for twelve years, so there was little hope of winning. So, I went to Cardiff Arms Park with my Dad, and I sang with thirty thousand other people ‘*Land of My Fathers*’, and the hymn ‘*Cwym Rhondda*’... and, at the end of the game, to our astonishment and joy, Wales had beaten France 24 points to 15. It is a warm memory for me, not just because Wales won, but, because I was singing beside my Dad in a huge crowd who were not ashamed to sing their hearts out!

Songs can lift the human spirit and looking back I wonder whether those Welsh players were encouraged to dig deep and prevail simply because people were singing in support of them. The following year a South African crowd in Johannesburg repeatedly sang the great song, ‘*Sho’sholoza*’, during the Rugby World Cup final of 1995, until David beat Goliath! Or, to be clear, the South African Springboks beat the undefeated All Blacks from New Zealand!

Some cultures seem to have a stronger singing tradition than others, such as the male voice choirs of Wales, the freedom songs of South Africa, and the harmonies of Melanesian and Polynesian singing. Within indigenous Australia, songs have been used to pass on wisdom and knowledge from one generation to another for thousands of years, and the music festivals that proliferated before COVID indicate a great love for community formed by music and song. The success of Pub Choir, which started in Brisbane, is another example of people gathering to be uplifted by singing together, and through this feel better, bigger, and more deeply connected to others.

Is it too much to suggest that music and song have the potential to create within us an interface between intellect and emotion? Because, a combination of good lyrics and melody can express and evoke emotion in ways more powerful than words alone. It may be a hope we have, like ‘*we shall overcome some day...*’; or, an experience like ‘*I can see clearly now the rain has gone...*’; perhaps, an affirmation, like ‘*all you need is love...*’; or, a deeply felt emotion like, ‘*It feels like home to me...*’ Somehow songs can give these things expression, and the words become anchored in our memory.

Just how deep can often be seen when playing music to people whose minds have been overwhelmed by various forms of dementia. For when music is played from a period in

which they were young and in their prime those people often light up, sing along, and remember every word.

The author of the letter to the Ephesians understood the power of song to express and nurture Christian faith and embed it deep within the human mind, for he wrote *'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...'* I think it is a great encouragement!

So, what are your go to songs of faith? What are the songs you sing, or listen to, that remind you of God's grace and love? What are the songs you sing that help you express gratitude? And, what are the anthems that lift you up when you're feeling discouraged, tired, or lonely?

The response to these questions will be different for each of us because we have different musical tastes. There are songs that express Christian faith which have been written in all musical genres from classical to hip-hop; reggae to rap; and jazz to rock. Because of personal bias we may think the genre of music we favor is better than any other, and when we do this we need to remember that God's Spirit inspires all of it?

Lyrics are helpful in identifying songs that will nurture Christian faith, while recognising that no song will say it all. Lyrics combined with a good melody can remain in our memory for many years, even a lifetime. Lyrics can also draw heavily from, and help us remember, sacred writing. Think of the different musical settings for Psalm 23 – in which God is affirmed as our Shepherd, as well as the joyful settings of the Magnificat in which we sing, *'Tell out my soul, the greatness of the Lord...'*

Songs can help us collectively sing when we sing 'us' and 'we', and individually when we sing 'I' and 'me'. Compare the use of the plural pronoun 'us' used in a Welsh hymn: *'Love divine all loves excelling, joy of heaven to earth come down, fix in US thy humble dwelling, all thy faithful mercies crown: Jesus, thou art all compassion, pure unbounded love thou art; visit US with thy salvation, enter every trembling heart...'* with the personal pronoun used in a different hymn: *'Take MY life and let it be, consecrated, Lord, to thee. Take MY moments and MY days, let them flow in ceaseless praise...'*

In the gift of our life's journey, some songs will resonate more than others – and some will evoke a particular time and place and people. It's almost like we develop an internal play list! An example for me is the hymn, *"The day thou gavest Lord is ended, the darkness falls at thy behest; to you our morning hymns ascended, your praise shall sanctify our rest..."* Often sung at Evening Prayer this hymn evokes personal memory of a particular funeral so that when I sing it there is a sense of thankfulness not only for the day, but also for human life.

I wonder what hymns and songs have been significant in your life? If you had to choose three of these to be sung at your funeral what would they be? I invite you to consider this, what three songs would you choose for your funeral? Once you've identified the three please think about why you have chosen those particular hymns or songs? What do they express for you about life and faith, love and hope?

I think we can be enlivened by the direction in Ephesians to be filled with the Spirit, and sing the Psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs which express and nurture our sense of life lived in relationship with God. Singing in church, and at home; singing in the garden, and in the shower; singing out loud, and in the quiet voice of the heart. All the while offering our intellect and emotion to the One who makes each breath possible.

Would you please join me, as I close in prayer now:

Holy God, we give thanks for the lives you give us to live, and the songs you give us to sing. Through your Spirit help us to sing our melody, encourage those we share life with to sing, and in your grace make harmony with them enough to make a difference for good. We pray in the name of Jesus the Christ. Amen.