

Sunday 26 June, 2011; 10 am

125th anniversary thanksgiving service for Royal Dunedin

Male Choir

Readings: Revelation 4:6, 8-11; 5:6-14, Psalm 95

Music plays an important part in worship, as we have been reminded in Psalm 95 -

“Come, let us sing to the Lord, let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation”

(and for those of you who believe you cannot sing, did you notice that the psalms include both singing *and* joyful noise as appropriate ways to praise God).

As we have learned more about the ways our bodies work, and our minds too, we have discovered some of the reasons why music is so important to us. Scientists have observed that when listening to our favourite songs, the pupils in our eyes dilate, our pulse and blood pressure rise, the electrical conductance of our skin is lowered, and the cerebellum, a brain region associated with bodily movement, becomes strangely active – all signs of emotional arousal. Blood is even re-directed to the muscles in our legs and some speculate that this is why we begin tapping our feet. In other words, music stirs us at our biological roots.¹

The beneficial effects of music making are not short-lived, either.

Professor Graham Welch, Chair of Music Education at the Institute of Education, University of London, has studied developmental and medical aspects of singing for 30 years. He says:

"The health benefits of singing are both physical and psychological.

Singing has physical benefits because it is an aerobic activity that increases oxygenation in the blood stream and exercises major muscle groups in the upper body, even when sitting.

Singing has psychological benefits because of its normally positive effect in reducing stress levels through the action of the endocrine system which is linked to our sense of emotional well-being. Psychological benefits are also evident when people sing together as well as alone because of the increased sense of community, belonging and shared endeavour."²

A study of a number of English choirs identified six ways in which singing in a choir may impact on well-being and health.

- Choral singing engenders happiness and raised spirits, which counteract feelings of sadness and depression
- Singing involves focused concentration, which blocks preoccupation with sources of worry
- Singing involves deep controlled breathing, which counteracts anxiety
- Choral singing offers social support and friendship, which ameliorate feelings of isolation and loneliness
- Choral singing involves education and learning, which keeps the mind active and counteracts decline of cognitive functions
- Choral singing involves a regular commitment to attend rehearsal, which motivates people to avoid being physically inactive³

So, before this turns into a recruiting drive for the Royal Male Choir (though I'm sure any of the members would be happy to confirm the scientific evidence I've just mentioned), I want to turn to the reading we listened to from the book of Revelation.

This is an apocalyptic book – apoclypse meaning unveiling or revealing. Apocalyptic writing always appears against a background of persecution and suffering and it is always meant as comfort, encouragement and inspiration for people in times of dire stress and great difficulties.⁴

At the end of the first century, the might of the Roman empire under the emperor Domitian was turned against the small minority group that called themselves Christians. How could these scattered groups of believers hope to survive in the face of such persecution? It was to these threatened communities that John writes from imprisonment on the island of Patmos, bringing them encouragement and hope and a different way to see and understand reality.

1 <http://www.wired.com/wiredscience/2011/01/the-neuroscience-of-music/>

2 <http://www.heartresearch.org.uk/hearthealth/singinggood>

3 <http://www.rcm.ac.uk/cache/fl0020222.pdf>

4 Boesak, A *Comfort and Protest*

What we read today was part of John's vision of the throne of God. Here John is shown the reality that lies at the heart of the universe, the power that sustains all things, the might which is found in sacrificial love.

These two chapters are rich in imagery, visual imagery and sound imagery.

Again and again John says "it was like..." John knows that words cannot express, nor can human minds encompass the splendour, the majesty, the reality that is God. All the time he is struggling to describe the indescribable, using words that paint pictures and soundscapes.

What we read focuses on the sound, on the choirs and songs that fill this vision of heaven. Because, when John wants to convey the worship and praise and glory that surrounds God enthroned in heaven, he uses the imagery of music and choirs to do so.

He begins with a quartet, four living creatures who sing the ancient hymn of heaven, the hymn that Isaiah spoke of six centuries earlier, the hymn with which we began our service -

Holy holy holy is the Lord God Almighty,
who was and is and is to come

The worship of heaven begins with God, focusing on God alone, worshipping God for who God is. That at its heart is what worship is.

But there is more. This quartet is joined by a chorus, a chamber choir of twenty-four elders, surrounding the throne, casting down the crowns they wear before the throne of God as they sing praise to the God the Creator.

God has not remained in transcendent God-ness, but God has acted in loving purpose, bringing into being the whole created order. All that is, exists because God created it, because God willed it into being. All things are created – that includes the power and might of Rome, and the glory claimed by the emperor. Despite their claims, they are not absolute. God the Creator is the one (and the only one) who is worthy to receive glory and honour and praise.

But in chapter 5 we hear a new song, proclaiming that there is another one worthy – not the Roman emperor, but a Lamb bearing the marks of slaughter. This does not sound anything like glory and honour and praise – this is an image of weakness and vulnerability, of helplessness – rather like weakness and vulnerability of the persecuted readers of this Revelation.

But this slaughtered Lamb has been able to bring people from every tribe and language and people and nation to God *through* his death, *through* his vulnerability, *through* his helplessness.

And because all these now belong to God, they will be a kingdom and priests, - political and religious power will be theirs, not the preserve of the power-hungry elites of their time.

Because of the image of the Lamb, we can see that power, real power, God's power, is the power of love and self-giving, not the power of domination and violence and coercion, that God's strength is seen and perfected in weakness, that God uses apparent defeat to bring about victory.

And then the choir grows, as myriads and myriads, and thousands and thousands of angels join the new song to the Lamb -

Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered

to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honour and glory and blessing.

The choirs of heaven sing their praises, but in the end worship cannot be restricted to choirs, no matter how big. When it comes to worshipping God, this is not a place for audience but for participation.

The final hymn encompasses the whole vision that John has laid before us, as everything that is every creature in heaven and earth and under the earth and in the sea and all that is in them – all join in the hymn of praise and honour and glory and power, singing to the one who sits on the throne and the Lamb.

And the invitation to us is to join in the song, to be part of that great choir, to worship God along with the hosts of heaven and everything in the whole creation, to proclaim the power of love which overcomes all, and claims us for God's own.

Let us stand and sing "Blessing and honour and glory and power" Hymn 299