# 06 Music in worship

*Readings: Exodus 15:19-22a; Ephesians 5:8-20; St Mark 14: 22-26*
*Psalm 150*
[ The metrical version found at *Church Hymnary: Third Edition* no.347 was specified on this occasion (ed.) ]

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

“Sing to the Lord, for he has risen up in triumph; the horse and his rider he has hurled into the sea.”

So sang Miriam the day the Israelites received their freedom, and I remember being told at College that this is one of the oldest fragments in the Exodus story, indeed one of the oldest fragments in the whole of Scripture. Scholars seem to be agreed that it is almost certainly authentic, contemporary with the events of the Exodus itself. Just before it, there’s a lengthy Psalm attributed to Moses, starting with the same couplet but clearly written far later, for worship in the Temple at Jerusalem. Miriam’s vigorous little jingle, though, backed up by dancing and accompanied on tambourine, is probably the oldest song of praise surviving to us. Would that the tune she sang had survived too, although it might have sounded strange and primitive, not very edifying to us.

Our theme this morning is music in worship – something with a long and honourable history, reaching far further back than Christianity itself. Music is in a different category from the Scriptures and the prayers that we’ve been thinking of for the past two Sundays. Scripture governs and affects the whole of a service, as well as being an indispensable part of it; prayer provides the atmosphere within which worship happens, and the service is hardly a service without prayer. Music, however, is an option. There can be very meaningful graveside funerals, house Communions, and small services in church without any music at all.

Yet putting it into the category of a bonus doesn’t mean that it is unimportant. Far from it. Music brings into worship a non-verbal dimension, a link with that yearning for beauty which is always a part of humankind’s aspiration; and it is the key to a whole area of emotional expression and emotional release which is much less accessible through words alone. People are not often moved to tears or enormously uplifted by prayer or by sermons; occasionally they may be by the words of Scripture; but it usually takes music to express the longings or release the tensions which – especially in Scotland – are normally kept under tight and even tense control. It is no accident that Songs of Praise is far more popular than Late Call or The Quest [The former is a long-running BBC television programme of congregational singing, Late Call was an epilogue shown later evening on STV led by a single speaker, while an epilogue shown later evening on STV led by a single speaker, while *The Quest* was a series investigating aspects of religious belief made by BBC Scotland religious television and involving several contributors (ed.) ], or that church members show remarkable forbearance if the preacher’s having an off-day, but go out feeling cheated and annoyed if all the hymns were unfamiliar. When the Word and music come together, each can reinforce the other. For many of us sacred music is supreme both in itself as music and as a medium for the Scriptures. Far more people in this country can quote from Isaiah because of Handel’s Messiah than because they have absorbed it from their Bible reading.

It is arguable that the distinctive contribution of the Reformation to Church worship was to give back to the people a musical part in the services. Throughout the Middle Ages which led

up to the Reformation, the whole universe was perceived as being held together by music – each star emitting its own song, and all of them revolving quite literally in harmony. It was entirely consistent with their view of Scripture and with Church tradition that the Psalms were seen by the Reformers as the basis of all praise. The Psalter has a paramount importance – which is why we use one as a gradual between readings every week, regardless of what others may be used in place of hymns.

It was central to the aims of the Reformers both in Geneva and in Scotland that the Psalms should be available to congregations in a form they could easily sing. This was the basis for the metrical Psalms which have been central to the Church of Scotland's praise for more than four hundred years. Many members now would be surprised at the musical variety of the first Scottish Psalter, which appeared in 1564 – just four years after our Reformation – and was re-printed in around seventy editions until 1644. There were 105 tunes attached to that book, and in the 1596 edition doxologies were added, one for each metre used in the verses: 32 of them, from which we know that there were 32 different metres. This rich variety was swept away after the Westminster Assembly of the 1640s, to be replaced by the 1650 Psalter that we are all familiar with: a book whose origin in fact owes much more to the English Puritans than to the Church of Scotland. Those 32 metres were now reduced to one. Every single Psalm was now versified in common metre. Even more deadening was the reduction of the 103 tunes to only 12.

In imposing that restrictive framework on the Church's praise, those Puritans were not true to their own insights. For they found in the Bible a wonderfully varied anthology of public praise and private prayer, triumphant songs and sad laments, ceremonial anthems and teaching material, and they squeezed them all into one common metre and twelve tunes, all sung unaccompanied because instruments of any kind were not allowed. It is interesting though, especially for us here with a Highland congregation [ Greyfriars in 1979 united with the Highland Church Tolbooth St John's where the Gaelic-speaking congregation worshipped, with the Greyfriars building being used by the English and Gaelic congregations (ed.) ], that the Gaels, with their creative and artistic flair, developed those tunes in the most inventive way possible, with so much embellishment that a staid four-square tune turns into a great cataract of music in the hands of a West Highland congregation. There is still, I think, no form of praise quite so distinctive as a fervent Gaelic Psalm.

The tradition within English-speaking congregations was more sterile. A few of the shorter Psalms which had adapted happily to metrical form became a precious part of our inheritance, indeed of Scottish culture and identity, and have been taken out again from Scotland into the worship of the whole English-speaking world: The Lord's my Shepherd, I to the hills, All people that on earth do dwell. For the most part, though, Scotland had to wait until the mid-19th century when – largely from this building – Church music broadened out again. It was at last recognised that composers and hymn writers in the two thousand years since the Psalms were finished might have insights and contributions that were worthy of inclusion in worship; hymns had been part of Christian worship from the first generation onwards – as the fragment in our reading from Ephesians showed. It was acknowledged, too, that many of the Psalms themselves show a development of thought that can't be encompassed in five or six stanzas, which are all we can sing at one time of a metrical Psalm.

Dr Lee's Greyfriars Service Book of 1864 was probably the first in the Church of Scotland to include a selection of Prose Psalms, and it was admitted in those days of the liturgical revival that the human voice is not the only means of praising God. The use of instruments is not just tolerated but encouraged in the Scriptures. From the time of Miriam, God has been praised

through playing as well as singing. And it has to be conceded that in Scripture reference to instruments is often coupled with a summons to praise God by means of dance as well. I think, though, he'll excuse us if on most occasions we in Greyfriars leave the dancing to more extrovert, more youthful, congregations, and confine our movement to the slower and more measured rhythm of processions.

The organ which is being built here in the autumn is just two removed from the harmonium that Dr Lee installed in 1860. There is no good reason to use organs for worship to the exclusion of all other instruments, but its sheer range of sound makes it the most appropriate of single instruments because it is adaptable to every mood and nearly every kind of music. After Dr Lee's time there was a tremendous growth of organ and choral music in Scotland. Now, sadly, there is a desperate shortage of trained organists, and of Church members willing to give time to steady practice of choir music. It may be that in small parishes and rural areas the praise of God is better served by a piano or a group of instruments. But it would be a great loss if the wide horizons opened up a hundred years ago were just to disappear into the mists again; and we here are extremely fortunate in having the resources to keep those horizons in view. The fact that by coincidence we also have the other strand of Scots tradition represented in our Gaelic worship makes our position unique. I am sure that it was right for the Kirk Session, then the congregation, to decide that our inheritance should not be dissipated on the easy options of an electronic organ or a third-rate instrument. Worship should incorporate the best that we can offer; if the means of doing this also builds a bridge between the church and the community, so much the better.

The Reformers were quite right in seeing some praise by the congregation as the basis of the Church's music. It's questionable whether those who followed the Reformers were right to react quite so strongly as they did against the role played by the mediaeval choirs. If music is restricted to what all of us can sing, it is severely limited in scope. There is benefit in having some parts of our worship led by the more musically able, so long as these aren't seen as entertainment but as part of worship (like the spoken prayers and the sermon) which the rest participate in silently. When worship is planned and prepared in an integrated way, it is amazing how often sermons can be deepened (or sometimes retrieved) by the anthem with which they are followed. And the same thing is true of the organist's contribution. If the organ is being played by a reluctant pianist because it is thought to be a point of principle to have an organ in Church services, the effect is uninspiring and it might be far more helpful to seek out a different medium, a different type of music altogether. When the man is master of the instrument and not the other way round; when hymns are accompanied with sensitivity in ways that make you think about the words in a new light; when voluntaries are in keeping with the rest of worship and are not just seen as background music for our chatter and our coming in and going out, the effect of instrumental music is a far far richer thing than keeping the people on pitch.

Music in our worship is a bonus; but there is ample evidence in Scripture that it is a God-given bonus. The only record that we have of Jesus singing is before Gethsemane, on the night of the Last Supper; but beneath that is assumed a lifetime of musical praise both in Temple and in synagogue. Our preview of heaven in the Book of Revelation is of multitudes all singing round the throne of God. There's a danger in all worship, that it settles into comfortable mediocrity. To prevent this happening in the prayers and the preaching has to be the minister's responsibility. Responsibility for music, though, belongs to all of us; and often it has the more lasting impact. We will not remember many sermons that we've heard in the course of a lifetime; but the Psalms, the hymns, the anthems that make up the Church's praise stay with us and become a part of us.

Above the organ that is soon to be built here, matching the gold lettering above the pulpit and at the east end, will be the last line of the 150th Psalm – Let everything that hath breath praise the Lord. That is what all music in our worship is about. The theme of our praise is more edifying than Miriam's – a song not of vengeance, but of love's great revelation to the world and of trust in the renewal of the world. I hope our new resources will empower us to render it more eagerly, more movingly, more worshipfully, than anything we have been able to offer to God thus far.

To the God who has given us the gift of music, and the Son who is the mediator of all worship, and the Spirit who brings life to what we do here, be all honour, dominion and glory and power through the Church for ever. Amen.

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