

Sing Noels!

There have been two lead articles in Crosstalk this year which have featured the importance of singing in everyday life, and especially communal singing in church. This was a theme for Sarah Cattell in May and for Simon Watts in November. Judith and I have felt deprived and impoverished during the lack of communal singing in our fellowship.

Singing is universal. Every culture has music-making and singing at its heart. It is likely that it predated language and, certainly, it comes more naturally than language and does not have to be taught. Concerning the earliest times of our species, many tens of thousands of years ago, our knowledge of the evolution of human sensitivity to the beauty of the world can be a matter of guess work. This allows us to imagine that over the vast expanse of time and space in which homo-sapiens developed and migrated from Africa to populate much of the planet, they came to take pleasure in the natural features of their world, the changing skies, the chuckling streams, birdsong, the wind in the reeds, etc. This, I suggest, would lead to their imitating sounds to make music with their voices. The earliest identifiable musical instrument discovered is a flute, dated to 35,000 years ago.

Music expresses feelings more naturally than words. The simple joy of music-making in response to our surroundings is an important part of our love of singing. It lies deeper in our DNA than speaking.

In the Australian Aboriginal culture their world is believed to have been sung into existence by The Ancestors in Dreamtime, that different songs produced the different natural features of their landscape. The central pillar of education is the learning of the 'Songlines', which run across Australia. These inform them how their territory was formed, gives 'ownership' of their area, the ability to find their way around, their community and their identity. Regular meetings are held at special sacred sites. The songs tell of the Ancestors turning themselves into landscape or animals transformed into hills, valleys, billabongs, tracks: Fish Dreaming Hill, Kangaroo Head, Turtle Dreaming, Magpie Goose Dreaming Hill, Rainbow Serpent Creek.

Recently the attraction of Songlines was highlighted for Judith and me as we followed, or not, the instructions of Google's guide along the B1203 in Yorkshire. Or was it the 1302? It occurred to us that there are comparisons to be drawn between the central role of Songlines for Aboriginies and our own hymn singing. We can find the hymns a spiritual road map to follow, a sense of direction, recognising our hopes and fears, reminding us of the love and support that comes from God. Communal singing does much to build the identity of our fellowship and strengthen our feeling of belonging and togetherness.

Christian communal hymn singing, then, is built on a desire and instinct traceable over many tens of thousands of years. But until three hundred years ago, in this country at least, singing in church was strictly controlled. Only psalms and the Book of Common Prayer were permitted. This changed with the Nonconformist movement of the 18th century, especially as spearheaded by John Wesley and his brother, Charles.

In 1735 John embarked on the passenger ship 'Simmonds' for Georgia in North America. Fellow passengers included Christians crossing the Atlantic to settle where they would have the freedom to worship in a style of their choice. Notable among these were Moravian Christians. The crossing took almost four months, during which the Moravians held daily

services, which included the singing of hymns. At first the sea was rough but not dangerously so, but then in the New Year of 1736 the sea burst into the ship, then split the mainsail. John was sure he was going to die. But the Moravians fearlessly kept singing and praising God. This proved a turning point in John's life. He was so impressed with the faith of his comrades that he required his churches to include congregational hymn singing in their services. We of the Nonconformist churches have never looked back, leading the way in composing and singing hymns in honour of God.

We are now entering the time when it is customary for Christians, and non-Christians, to intensify their communal singing in celebration of God's bountiful gift of His Son to live on earth and show the way.

Fond wishes to all our readers for a joyful and rewarding season of Advent, Christmas and Epiphany. Keep singing in praise, thanksgiving and fellowship!

Robert Lock