

From Rev. Janis Huggett to the Congregation of Wesley Uniting Church, Canberra on the occasion of the annual Music Sunday of the Royal School of Church Music, 13th June 2010.

Dear Friends in Christ,

I am taking the liberty of writing to you this week in the style of the New Testament epistles for both theological and practical reasons. The theological impetus will become more obvious as my letter unfolds. The practical reason is just that a bad case of bronchitis has left me with almost no voice so someone else is likely to have to read this out to you as I sit nearby in uncomfortable and very unusual silence. I take for my theme and primary biblical reference the advice of another more famous letter-writer to another congregation many centuries ago:

“Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in *perfect harmony*.” [Colossians 3:14, emphasis mine]

I ask us to consider what *perfect harmony* means to us—in our lives, in the church, in the world—and how may it be achieved? And I suggest that some thinking about the relationship of music and worship in Christian tradition may well give us some clues toward an answer to that question.

Those who know me will understand how pleased and excited I was when I learned that I had been rostered to preach for this RSCM Music Sunday. I could hardly wait to get into the planning for this service—working with Graeme and Apelu well ahead of the usual preparation schedule in order to make sure that this would be a memorable experience of celebrating the praise of God in music. How cruelly ironic is it, then, that today I can neither speak nor sing? In a very personal and dramatic way my current 'voice-lessness' only serves to remind me ever more powerfully of how important our voices are in the practice of our faith.

You see, ours is not primarily a silent and individualistic faith—it is faith based in relationships and in community, expressed in speech and in singing. As I write this or as you hear it, of course, exceptions may spring to mind: What about the monastic traditions? What about churches that do not allow music or singing? What about other faiths, don't they have music too? Well, like my current silence, exceptions may only prove the rule:

- Of course other religions have music, but most of these do not involve anything like what we experience as choral or congregational singing.
- Of course some monastic orders emphasised silence—but the great majority were actually the birthplace of uniquely Christian music for worship.
- Of course some other Christian communities do not include instrumental music or perhaps even singing as part of worship practice. But where that is the case, that decision has been taken primarily as a counter-cultural move, a way of opposing the traditional importance of music and singing.

So even such exceptions do prove the basic premise I stated: *ours is not primarily a silent and individualistic faith—it is faith based in relationships and in community, expressed in speech and in singing.* This is a theological principle that is well worth our celebration this day.

The *perfect harmony* we seek, then, in ourselves and in the church—and indeed in the world—begins with this realisation that in our faith and worship we are not primarily soloists; we are rather choristers and orchestral players in the great 'philharmonic society' of God's creation. Now do not misunderstand me; I love nothing better than a beautiful solo (and, after all, I sang my first solo in church when I was just 2 years old and perhaps have not yet sung my last). Again, though, the exception serves to prove the rule: the beautiful solo is sung or played *in relationship to* and *in contrast to* the usual group sound, and indeed is never totally isolated from its role of *playing a part* in the wider community of sound, a *philharmonic* society. And please note (so to speak) that my descriptive words used here are chosen quite deliberately and carefully: *philharmonic*, in its Greek heritage, literally means “loving sounds.”

I believe that St Paul chose his words deliberately and carefully too. When he wrote his epistle to the Colossians he was writing to a community in which there was much conflict and confusion. In fact he apparently feels compelled to solve all possible problems in this one brief letter and, in places, really ties himself up in knots of verbal complexity and theological debate about everything from marital relations to appropriate worship practice. But then, with his usual flashes of insight, some singularly clear and vitally important things are said. Or perhaps it would be equally important to notice what he *does not* say! He does not say, for instance, that love binds everything together in 'perfect unity' but rather *perfect harmony*.

So often we think that what we need is *unity*, with all its connotations of being 'in unison' with each other. Mind you, unison singing for instance has its own beauty and I accept and respect that. But I prefer *harmony*—literally 'sounds that fit together.' I think Paul understood this subtle but important difference. He knew there was no way that all those exuberant, opinionated, passionate Colossian Christians would ever—or should ever—come together in perfect *unity*. And he knew that, if they loved each enough, they could experience perfect *harmony*.

In descriptive language somewhat lost on us but undoubtedly provocative to them, Paul reminds the Colossians of their baptism: that dramatic time when they had come out of the water and then dressed in their new white garments, the special clothing of the newly baptised. He addresses them as they would have been called on that day: “God's chosen ones, holy and beloved,” reminiscent of what Jesus himself had been called at his own baptism. And then he tells them all the qualities with which they ought to “clothe themselves”: compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, forbearance, and forgiveness. And then he says, “Above all, clothe yourselves with love,” as the last and most visible garment of their Christian faith.

It is in and through this context of baptismal identity that Paul then weaves the musical metaphors and images, bringing this section of the letter to a close with this invitation: “with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs to God.” Music—and here especially sung music—is the natural response of a community in which there is real and present love. *Ours is not primarily a silent and individualistic faith—it is faith based in relationships and in community, expressed in speech and, most especially, in singing.*

So let's just consider these things:

- What might it be like if we all just sang more?
- What if all those jokes about singing in the shower actually hide the important truth that we each and all would actually feel a lot better if we began each day with singing?
- What if, instead of 16th century prayers that no one even listens to and the Speaker never reads with any real meaning, each session of Parliament opened with singing?
- What if the world held choral eisteddfods instead of wars to settle conflicts and power balances? (Truth be told, the Americans might still win but the Welsh and Samoans would sure give them a 'run for their money'.)
- And what if the church had more hymnfests and fewer committee meetings?

I encourage you today, just as that other letter-writer did in ancient times, to add your own voices to the 'loving sounds' of human harmony until that day when we all shall sing with the perfection of angel choirs.

Yours in Christ's service,
Jan