

The Rev. Wayne Nicholson
St. John's Episcopal Church, Mount Pleasant
9th May 2010
Evensong in Honor of Church Musicians
1 Chronicles 16:19-28
Romans 15:7-13

My brothers and sisters, this evening we celebrate the ancient office of Evensong in honor of church musicians everywhere – and in honor, especially, of She Who Must Be Obeyed But Not Named. It is an honor for me – and for many of us – to observe this special day with prayer, instrument and song, and to bring to mind the special place of music in the life of the church.

Music and faith have a history entwined through centuries. Our forefathers and mothers praised God in song and with cymbal and lyre – the Psalms of Holy Scripture were, in fact, once *songs* – their musical settings are lost to the ages, but we know from the stories of Scripture that they were sung in procession, in praise, in supplication, in lament. They themselves tell stories – of victory and defeat, of promise and of hope, of love and of loss. Tradition has it that David, King of Judah and Israel, won over the heart of his predecessor by singing to him – and that same tradition has it that some of our own Psalms were sung by that very same King.

The angels sang at the birth of our Lord – Glory to God in the highest, and peace to God's people on earth. Their song frightened the shepherds – and then it led to their rejoicing and their sense of wonder. And I don't think it is idle speculation to imagine Jesus being entertained as he dined with tax collectors, disciples, and the scores of men and women who followed him to picnic and to hear his wisdom.

In the church we have on record stories of the early church, when followers of Christ would gather in households for a communal supper and the early Eucharist. They would sing hymns – quite possibly Psalms – and their voices would join to give thanks to God and to praise his Son.

Throughout the history of the church great music has been written for and in the Church. Liturgies set to music – the Bach B Minor Mass, Mozart's Requiem, the polyphony of Palestrina, right down to (excuse me, You Who Must Be Obeyed But Not Named) Andrew Lloyd Weber's Requiem – liturgies set to music have lifted the rest of us beyond our complacent selves, pulling us out of the Zen state into which we may fall during a desultory service or sermon, taking us into a new realm, opening a new portal to the Divine.

St. Augustine said that when we sing, we pray twice. Monks and nuns chant the Psalms and hymns day in, day out. Their prayer is enhanced, not burdened, by the musical settings sung for centuries, and their voices are lifted as the evening incense, lifted toward heaven and lifted toward God. Our hymns – whether they are Bach, John and Charles Wesley, Ralph Vaughn Williams, or David Hurd, or (excuse me again, YWMBOBNN) Marty Haugen -- or Gospel or

shape-note, or canon – our hymns bring us together as a community of faith. They *express* our faith and our common theology. Sometimes they express it well, sometimes, well, not so much.

But I can tell you this: When I enter the full church and the congregation is singing “We, the Lord’s people,” or “O Come, o come, Emmanuel,” or “King of glory, king of peace,” or any of about a zillion other hymns that we know and sing with enthusiasm, I can tell you that I am so deeply moved that I cannot doubt that the Spirit of the living God is here. Of course, there are a few of us (hello, Elizabeth) who also are touched by Hallmark commercials – but this stirring in my heart is deeper, and there is a sense of holiness about this place that I cannot, would not, ignore.

Music has been an important part of worship at St. John’s, I suspect, since we opened our doors back in 1884. In fact, the newspaper records of our opening day tell us that there was music. An organ was installed early on. The Boy Choir at St. John’s back in the 1940s was an integral part of many young men’s lives as they grew up in Mt. Pleasant – including at least one of our members and a man who now lives in Alma but told me his Boy Choir stories. A new organ was installed. A choir was revitalized. An organist came and stayed. And stayed. And, blessed be She Who Must Be Obeyed But Not Named, she stayed. Clergy come, clergy go – but music directors seem to hang on through the best and worst of times.

Back when I was in the church-search mode and I saw St. John’s profile, I was struck by one point you made in writing: Quote, “We are searching for a priest who can sing.” Well, on most days you got one. But what that made me think was, “Hey, these people have *thought* about this rector search, and they’ve determined that this was a priority.” Little did I know that the Director of Music was on the Search Committee! And little did I know that when I made it to the interview stage I was asked to *audition!* Our vision statement says, “St. John's Episcopal Church, with the help of the Holy Spirit, will be a dynamic fellowship of Christians seeking greater understanding of faith and service through programs of spiritual growth, education, and the arts.” The arts! I’ve never seen such a thing in a parish vision statement!

And isn’t that swell? Isn’t it truly marvelous that a church acknowledges the many artistic gifts present in the community, gifts of grace which are to be shared, gifts of music and song which enhance the church’s worship as offerings to God?

Because, my friends, all gifts are from God. All music is, at its deepest source, from God. Yes, even next Saturday’s rock music has at its core the music of the Spirit – music which lifts us up, sets us down gently, tears at our hearts, and renders us speechless.

Sort of like how I sometimes feel around She Who Must Be Obeyed But Not Named.

Truly. What an incredible privilege it has been to be in a collegial relationship with SWMBOBNN. I have learned, I have been challenged in ways she probably doesn’t realize (and no, I don’t mean figuring out how to best put together a bulletin that makes sense). I know that I’ve been prayed for, and I know we have prayed together. It has been an honor. And it will be an honor to continue to be counted as a friend by SWMBOBNN.

Because we're both on the same page: We want the music of St. John's Episcopal Church to reflect the best in the Anglican tradition, the best that can inspire our congregation, the best that can praise and give thanks to God, source of all creativity and source of all our song.

When we sing, we pray twice.

I'm guessing that at St. John's we're actually praying at least thrice. Or four times.

Our hearts are in it. And our hearts will be saddened by the retirement of SWMBOBNN - but the foundation she has built here will serve us well. And other church musicians will join us with instrument and song - and we will praise our Maker's name as long as we have breath.

Thank you, You Who Know Who You Are and Must Be Obeyed But Not Named, thank you, each and every church musician, for leading us, for inspiring us, and for gracing us with your presence.

We are truly blessed.