Sermon Archive 612

Sunday 22 November, 2026
Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch
Reflections for St Cecilia's Day
Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack

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An Introduction: Encouraged to sing

1973, I'm part of a group of children sitting on the mat down the back of a crowded fibrolite prefab classroom. It's a dangerous place to be, since the pot belly stove in the corner (fuelled by dirty coal) tends to shoot forth great tongues of flame when the wind comes the wrong way down the chimney. With Jim Allnat (the teacher who hit me) playing the guitar quite badly, we're singing "Bridge over troubled waters". What annoys me is that near the end of the song, there's a really high note, which I cannot get, but David Churchouse can. His voice overtakes mine! From early on, I fell into the trap of considering it a competition (was that a trap?)

1981 (I think), with a different voice (was I also a different person), I was part of a school choir that delivered a pretty rough rendition of part of Faure's Requiem at the funeral of my history teacher's mother. We weren't very polished, but I felt like our gift of song had been received with both hands and a deep gratitude. This wasn't a competition; it was something kind of about support and love - offering what we had in the right kind of spirit.

1994, I'm being auditioned by a well-respected singing teacher. She's deciding if I'm worth her teaching time. That's very much the dynamic. I'm not deciding if I'll give her my money. She's deciding if she'll give me her time. She gets me to sing a few scales and arpeggios. She gets me to lie on the floor and do breathing. She tells me that she's surprised I haven't already died, given how badly I breathe. Then she teaches me (I think) for ten years. I lacked the drive and natural talent to do really well, but she took what I had and brought it to a point where I could offer it in some wonderfully rich and rewarding musical occasions. She crafted me.

2026. I don't sing much now - except in church. Somewhere along the way, I became too busy to sing. One day, I'll have more time, and probably a croaky old voice. Maybe I'll learn to whistle.

We sing along the way.

Hymn: Come to us, creative Spirit

Lesson: Psalm 96: 1-6, 11-12

A Reflection: Cecilia sings

The place is Rome, and the year is somewhere in the Third Century. Cecelia's well resourced parents were occupied with the matter of finding someone suitable for their daughter to marry - because, as it is written "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife." Cecelia's parents found someone for their daughter, called Valerian, and made arrangements for the wedding. In their haste, they omitted that quite important matter of asking their daughter about ***her*** wishes. Her wishes didn't include marriage, since she had developed the idea of consecrating her virginity to God. Most people don't develop that idea - and we don't have the capacity to quiz her on her thinking around that. Suffice to say, that Cecelia didn't want to get married, and saw that desire as something she could dedicate to God.

At her wedding, it is said that she sat apart from the rest of the congregation, quietly singing to God in her heart. Song was either her protest, or her retreat from that which frightened her. It was certainly her way of saying "no, I don't belong to Valerian; I belong to God".

It didn't work, of course. By the end of the ceremony, she was declared, despite her wishes, to be married to Valerian. It's a sadly common story of people not listening to a woman - and forcing her down a road she has not chosen.

Some saints are said to have levitated to the rafters. Some are said to have picked up their decapitated heads and walked through Paris. Cecelia is celebrated for stepping away from what others imposed upon her, and singing quietly to God.

Because her great deed of courage (or solace, longed-for-escape) was singing, she's remembered by parts of the church, and the culture those parts of the church influenced, as the patron saint of Music. In paintings, she's presented as a figure playing an organ, or viola, or other musical instruments.

Music as some kind of expression of principle, or longing, or protest, or hope.

We sing along the way.

Lesson: Psalm 137: 1-6

A Reflection: How can songs be sung?

These days, when your country's been invaded, it tends to have been done by drones and missiles, and you're just left on the ground to live amid the rubble. If you've watched the news recently, you'll have lots of images to bring that kind of

thing to mind. Sometimes, when you're just not able to live amid the rubble, you'll do the refugee response, which is to try to get out of there - maybe sinking on the unseaworthy vessels of the people smugglers, losing some of your children on the beach (awful images). In the olden days of the psalm, there's this third experience - exile - forcibly being removed from your home, and taken to someone else's country, where you're forced into labour to serve the people who've conquered you. (It's a bit like being removed from Ghana, sailed for de-programming in the Caribbean, then to the United States for slavery.

Old pirates, yes they rob I, so I to the merchant ships, / Minutes after they took I from the bottomless pit. / But my hand was made strong by the hand of the Almighty, / we forward this generation triumphantly. / Won't you help us sing these songs of freedom? / Redemption songs . . . [Bob Marley]

It's from within that experience of exile that this psalm was written. The exiles are mocked by their conquerors - invited, as it were, to put on black face and dance before their masters.

The first response to this mockery is for the people to hang up their instruments on the willows, by the river, and just be silent. How can our songs be sung in times of humiliation? In times of being removed?

Well, in the cotton fields right across the Southern states of the United States, people sang their songs of freedom. On a picket line outside a tobacco factory in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1945, people sang "We shall overcome". It was sung again around the reflecting pool in Washington in 1963, when a Baptist preacher delivered quite an important speech.

When you are in a strange land, or feeling like you're losing, or maybe thrilled that you might be turning a corner (from weeping by the rivers of Babylon), singing opens a way. It finds and fills a voice

We sing along the way.

A Reflection: Human creativity

I think I already mentioned that once I boycotted facebook's Trump posts, I was flooded by reels of Pope Leo XIV. On 23 September, 2026, Pope Leo's people posted a video of him speaking about human achievement and creativity. Leo says;

Revolutionary advances in science and technology in the past century have led some to assume that belief in God is now obsolete and that true human autonomy can be affirmed only by emancipation from God. The Council Fathers [of Vatican II] emphasised, to the contrary, that the achievements of the human

race are a sign of God's greatness and the fulfilment of His mysterious design. Indeed, far from inhibiting believers from being engaged in human activity, the gospel message compels us to contribute to authentic human flourishing through our involvement in society. Let us carry out our daily activities with true charity, offering our work to the Lord both as a means for personal sanctification and as an expression of our desire ever more fully to bring about God's Kingdom - especially through pursuing the common good, caring for the needy, and defending human dignity.

Generally, music and all the creative arts, are interpreted as human achievement. I think it's proper that the world expresses honour and gratitude for how hard humans work to add beauty to the world. Pope Leo suggests that the offering of the artists may be even more valuable. Cecelia, and her friends, are sharing signs of God's greatness and mysterious design being fulfilled.

Strangely finding ourselves caught up into the mysterious creativity of God, we sing along the way.

Lesson: Colossians 3: 12-17

A Reflection: Singing to one another

Arthur Hannah was a retired school teacher in Takapuna, North Shore, Tāmaki Makaurau. During the Second World War he'd been a singer in a concert party. It had been his job to travel around various theatres of war, bringing song to those frightened and far from home.

Arthur had a whole lot of songs stored away in his head, and often one would pop out. We'd be in the middle of a conversation about "this or that", and a connection would be made in his head, and into the conversation would come a song - in a way that made perfect sense. It was a bit like living inside a musical. Script, script, song. Script, script, song. Song was part of how Arthur spoke in community. It was quirky, lyrical and lovely.

Paul describes a kind of life for the people of Colossae. It's the kind of life that people live when the love of Christ has made a home among them. It's a life of gratitude, compassion and kindness - a life of perfect harmony. Everything is fitting together exactly as it should. Looking for a way of describing it, Paul says it's like people whose hearts are fed by singing in the heart - singing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Let your life be a song. O, you companion of Jesus, let a song be in your heart!

And let it bring you to a moment of quiet.

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