

Advent III
15/12/13
St Paul's

Readings

Magnificat

Matthew 11:2-11

+FSHS

Last weekend I participated in a performance of Handel's Messiah. Canticum Chamber Choir sang to the accompaniment of members of QSO in a recreation of how Handel would probably have originally performed it: with a group of not more than 40 singers, and a chamber orchestra. It was a fine performance, featuring world-renowned soloists like Sara McLiver and Tobias Cole, complete with flourishes and an interpretation sensitive to early music performance practice conventions. But through the whole thing I felt utterly flat. Neither the music nor the words really touched me. Until we reached the end of the second part, which culminates in the very famous Hallelujah chorus. The whole audience rose to their feet, and I could see the expectation, the joy, the exhilaration in their faces. That surge of energy was enough to lift our performance, and I have to say, even as a seasoned and jaded singer of the work, it was one of the most thrilling singing experiences I've ever had. And the reason for it was the incredible sense of unity and oneness and joy which seemed to fill the QPAC concert hall. Interestingly, the vast majority of those who come to that Messiah performance are not churchgoers in any meaningful sense. It was a clear case of music - in its performance and its reception - uttering and embodying truths which go beyond words. You could tell, leaving QPAC, that those folk went away changed, perhaps given a new perspective, prompted to change the way they live. Well, I hope so.

Today, the third Sunday of Advent, was once called Gaudete Sunday. It was called this because the introit, the opening fragment of chant sung at the beginning of the mass began "Rejoice in the Lord always." We've lost that somewhat because we don't read Philippians 4 anymore on this day in our calendar. Originally this day was a lighter day in the midst of a penitential season, analogous to the fourth Sunday of Lent when the fast would be lessened. Nowadays Advent is a time of solemn but joyful preparation for remembering the first coming of Christ, as well as looking forward awake and

alert to greet his second coming. But the impetus remains, not least because on this day we are called to sing with Mary: "My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour."

Why does she sing this song? She's a teenager, she's pregnant, unmarried, fled her home to go stay with her cousin Elizabeth, away from prying eyes in Nazareth. She's been told the baby she's carrying is no ordinary baby, but is destined to save the people, to be the Messiah, the promised one. I wouldn't be singing if I were her. I'd be spending a lot of time wondering what on earth to make of my life, and how I was going to be able to keep going. I'd probably be spending a lot of time talking to God about the whole situation too - and certainly not in the sense of "rejoicing in the Lord always". And yet, in answer to her cousin's greeting in which she is hailed as the mother of the Lord, her heart fills and she bursts into song because she simply can't contain herself.

What does she sing about? She sings, in the end, not about herself, but about what it means for God to draw close to God's people: God lifts up the lowly, pulls down the mighty from their exalted seats, humbles the proud and exalts the humble, feeds the hungry while sending the rich away empty. When God comes, she sings, things get stood on their heads. The status quo is inverted. It is good news! And she can't do anything other than rejoice - and in her rejoicing, draw others into the song.

Her son sings something similar years later. His cousin, the same one who recognised him, leaping in Elizabeth's womb, is sitting in jail. He's held onto faith, and held that faith out to others for years: Repent! - we heard the cry again last week. Repent and be baptised for the forgiveness of sins. He's been compelled to live the life of a prophet, ever on the margins, slightly crazed (in the opinions of others, and sometimes that recognition slips through in his own moments of lucidity - normally he's driven by the inexplicable energy of the call of God's holy Spirit on his life). He's followed the call, fought the good fight, and to all intents and purposes is flagging as he's coming to the finish of the race. He's sitting in jail, wondering whether it was all in vain, wondering if his cousin really is who he thought he was - because Jesus hasn't stepped into the shoes of the Messiah. The Messiah was supposed to be a conquering king who would reclaim the Jewish kingdom and restore the fortunes of God's people Israel... wasn't he? He sends some of his concerned disciples to Jesus to pop the question: are you who I think you are, or are you someone else? Is there someone else to come? Have I wasted my life after all singing your praises?

In reply Jesus takes up his mother's song: the lame walk, the blind see, the sick are healed, the dead are alive again, lepers are cleansed and the poor are hearing good news at last. In other words: YES. God has come to God's people, and the normal order of things is inverted. Rejoice and be glad, for the message was not preached in vain. The good news of God's realm goes on. Hallelujah!

Christians have been singing that song ever since. Or trying to. And more often than not, failing. The person who can wake up and be almost continuously and unendingly joyful until they go to sleep is rare indeed. Most of us live in varying levels of busy-ness, our time consumed with things that pass away - organisation of this gathering, the orchestrating of that, the argument that's raging with someone at church or a neighbour or family member, the heartache, trials and hardships of losing a job or a loved one, or dealing with a severe and debilitating illness. Or gossip, the need to know the salacious details of other people's woes. Stress, anxiety, the persistent drive to acquire things. Or... you name it, we get distracted by it. I would hazard a guess that very few sitting here today would class themselves as joyful people - and if they did, I wonder how many of those around us would say the same thing? What song is our life singing? - our life as individuals, our lives together as a parish, as a group of Anglican Christians in Ipswich? As a church? As a state? As a nation?

This week the songs we heard were of woe: the closure of the Holden plant in SA and the prospective roll on effects in other industries; the approval of dredging of the Barrier Reef in order that more coal might be shipped to China, faster; hit and runs, violent crimes, shootings. In contrast there were other songs we heard too: literally, we heard the sounds of the South African people singing, mourning and celebrating Nelson Mandela's life. In the midst of their sorrow, you could only describe their singing as joyful: Mandela's life was a paean of hope for them, a legacy which will continue.

So I wonder what songs your life, our life together, is singing? As we observe from our news bulletins, lament runs alongside, interweaves in counterpoint to, joyful song; while this mortal life continues it will be ever so. But the point is, the tendency we have is to focus on the lament and complaining. Lament and complaining has its place. However, we are invited beyond that, beyond unenviable circumstances, to see a broader vision, to hear choirs singing "Hallelujah" and join in the song of rejoicing... yes, even in the midst of hardship and pain. Because I am convinced that it is in song, as in prayer, that the future is woven in hope. It is in song that what is hoped for is embodied and made real.

Because it's not sufficient simply to sit or stand around and sing. The songs we sing have direct consequence in action as well as being a result of those actions. Mary's song, Jesus' song, is about justice being done, about healing being offered and effected, about forgiveness and reconciliation, about true peace. Those are concrete actions. Our actions will come out of what we sing. If we sing "Onward Christian Soldiers marching as to war" then the position we take will be adversarially over and against the world. If we sing "She sits as a bird brooding on the waters" the tender creativity of the Spirit is present in and amongst us, in turn to offer that to others. If we sing "Tell out my soul the greatness of the Lord" our hearts too are caught up and inspired to do justice and love kindness.

One of the songs I am encouraged that we are beginning to sing is the desire to work together as Anglicans across the three parishes of Ipswich to meet the ministry needs of our city. That is not just a song, but a piece with multiple movements. If we can find our own part within it, if we can learn to sing God's song, can you imagine what that would be like? What if our lives moment by moment were to be characterised by joy and rejoicing in God's presence? I wonder what difference that might make, what it would look like, in how we live our faith, and the messages we send to others?

At the very thought, my own heart overflows and rejoices with Mary: "My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my saviour." Let us sing with our hearts full of joy at this knowledge that God is with us. Let us sing when things are dark and painful and the way unclear. Let us sing, knowing that the song of rejoicing has the power of the incarnate one to effect real change. Let us sing, because we are destined to join the choirs of angels, rejoicing in the heavenly places. Let us sing, until God's kingdom comes, God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven, and finally, finally - finally the reign of God comes forever and ever. Amen. Hallelujah.

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.