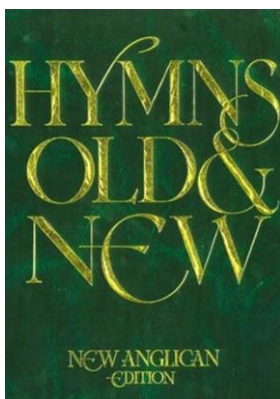


Choir Notes – May 2024

What are you singing about?



It is my belief that one of the reasons for the decline in attendance at church in the UK over the last 100 years is the lack of understanding with which hymns are sung.

It is one of our most natural instincts to express ourselves through song, and it provides a real emotional release for many people. Except that it no longer does.

It's a bit of a chicken and egg situation; did people give up on the words of hymns because they were so dull, and they just didn't feel inspired to sing them any longer, or did people start to sing in such an inhibited way that the meaning of the words became irrelevant in the dirge?

I remember going to a concert in which a baritone and a mezzo soprano sang one of my least favourite duets, *La ci darem la mano*, from Mozart's *Don Giovanni*. In this performance, however, the baritone put a comma in the first line, which I have never heard before or since, and suddenly, my attention was caught, and I listened attentively.

Mostly, British congregations ignore even the most obvious punctuation and it's very possible to listen to people sing a whole hymn without ever understanding what

the hymn is about. It's not very inspiring.

From another point of view, we have a very British way of not wanting to be seen to show off. In other countries, people will sing away happily at the top of their voices, whether they have a voice like an angel or one that sounds like ten pigs.

I'm certainly not getting at the congregation of Bledlow/Saunderton/Horsenden, and I'm not blowing the trumpet of the choir, because even in our choir there are people who sing the hymns as if English were a foreign language (harsh but fair).

Look around you at a service now that we are past Lent, when we have a hymn full of words of praise and majesty. How many people look joyful? I know, people will say it's on the inside but, really, honestly, if it's on the inside, we will not be able to help showing it on the outside.

We might cringe if someone throws up their hands or dances down the aisle. I know I would. The times when I have felt like doing that and/or have done it, have not been in church. If we are honest with ourselves, though, it's possible that our cringing at the thought of it might just be a manifestation of our jealousy at not bursting with joy to the extent that those people do. It is our birthright to experience joy. Jesus says so.

Look at the old Welsh congregations, or Baptist congregations where they make up the harmonies that feel good and, eventually, those harmonies become traditional. Wouldn't we love to sing like that?

To be clear, this is not getting at anyone. I just think that our connection to God, nature, the universe, source, or whatever way you like to think of a higher power, ought to leave us feeling so joyful that we sing with our hearts and souls.

Singing ought to be an experience of the soul and of connection with God, in whatever form. In texts from the Bible and from other religions where someone meets God, they invariably come out shining from the light of that meeting. I heard a podcast this week where Jack Canfield, author of *Chicken Soup For The Soul*, saw Jesus, in a dream. Jesus got off a golden cross and came towards Canfield, eventually entering the author at the point of the mythical third eye. When he woke up, nobody knew what had happened to him, but all present said that he was shining as if he were Jesus himself.

So next time you sing a hymn, see if you can use the punctuation to make it mean something to you. See whether there is potential to take a breath which enables your entire body to vibrate with the feeling of that text and of the tune somebody wrote to inspire it, and just imagine that your face is shining with love and joy as you do it. And then go a bit further. And when we all do that, the congregation will grow, because we will then leave church with that something special to which others will be drawn.

Jeff Stewart