

Glorifying God with one Voice: Music and Worship

13th February 2019

A reflection on [Romans 15.1-7](#) by the Dean of Melbourne, the Very Revd Dr Andreas Loewe, at the Royal School of Church Music Choral Evensong at St Paul's Cathedral on 13 February 2019:

What does it mean to be glorifying God with one voice? And what does it mean to share in such harmony as to enable that glorification? Does the apostle Paul foresee that we should give up singing polyphonic music – anthems in many voices - and instead sing plainchant or simple chorales – music for one voice supported by harmony, as it were? There were periods in the church's life, where the lesson that stands at the heart of tonight's service was interpreted more or less literally: music that is pleasing to God, is music that is sung with one voice, the argument went. During the reformation, for instance, it was this understanding that gave shape to many of the more "Protestant" compositions of Thomas Tallis: works written in a style somewhat more sober, and less polyphonic, than the motets he wrote for use under Catholic Queen Mary Tudor, or for use in the households of recusant Catholic landowners.

But that is not what Paul means when he talks to the Romans about the harmony that is pleasing to God. This is not about setting one form of music against another, preferring a simpler, sober style over and above a more ornate or harmonically intricate one – Schütz rather than Bach, say, or Stanford rather than Howells. This is not about favouritism in types of music, but about the intention that underlies any of our musical efforts in service of God. Paul speaks here about our inner disposition when we come to the organ console, the choir stalls or the conductor's stand, the spiritual qualities we may bring when we sit at the drums or keyboard, when we take out our guitars or warm up to sing our songs of praise.

Harmony, Paul tells the Romans, isn't about style. It's not about what we sing, what music choices we make – Ancient or Modern, Revised, the Gellineau Psalter or Coverdale. It's about how we sing. And again the apostle does not speak about the beauty of our choral tradition, or the musicianship of our worship leaders. Paul speaks about something much more fundamental than that. Before we open our lips to sing God's praise, Paul reminds the Romans, we should seek to please God and neighbour, and not please ourselves. In fact, Paul tells us explicitly to put up with the failings of the weak – whether that be the cyphered organ pipe, or the flat second tenors. Joining in harmony for God's glory is about the intention, not the polished result.

That that may well be a source of frustration is clear to the apostle. But the merit of striving for harmony, whether in choir and sanctuary, or the wider church, is that it is when we enable all to share in singing God's praises, when we look and listen out for our neighbours, then ultimately, all will sing better praises and in more beautiful harmony than if we foster only the excellence of a few. "Each of us must please our neighbour for the purposes of building up our neighbour", Paul reminds us. If we are serious about singing the praises of him who died, who died upon the cross, Paul tells, then we may never please self first: our own tastes, our own striving for excellence is set against the example of the One who forsook the excellence of the divine life to take on the weakness of our human nature, who took on our life in order to give it up. "Christ did not please himself", Paul tells.

While building up our neighbour may mean forgoing our own tastes – I might think that all services should feature at least one anthem and one voluntary by Bach, while you might prefer the works of Karg-Ehler, Palestrina or William Harris – while building up all in harmony, then, may mean letting our own preferences come second to the overall aim of building up God's song of praise; that letting go of our own predilection does not mean we just offer God second best. Enabling others to share with us in the music making that creates divine harmony – the kind of harmony that unites our church as one body – is, in fact, much harder work, I would argue than the solitary striving for perfecting excellence or a particular tradition. Because we will need to listen to the kind of voices that may not be those of our

friends and supporters, but rather those of our critics. Because we will need to listen to the comments of the tone deaf, and those who dislike music: they, too, have a place in the harmony of God. For Christ did not please himself.

Well, that sounds like a very steep demand. And Paul realises that this is so. Which is why he gives the Romans a number of resources to enable them to persevere in the difficult task that is set before them: singing a song that brings harmony, uniting voices wherever possible; singing together in spite of fundamental difference, because we have listened to one another's concerns first. Today's church is just as divided as the church in Rome in the first decades after the resurrection. Many of the concerns remain the same as those encountered by Paul in the Roman church: what is the right way to celebrate our festivals? Who is part of the community of the faithful and who is not? What do we need to do to belong, and what do we need to shun? And Paul tells the people in Rome that, in those matters of faith he describes as *adiaphora* – and the types of hymnals we use or the kind of music we perform certainly are matters that are not essential to our beliefs – that in those matters we should strive for what unites rather than what divides: “let us pursue what makes for peace and our mutual upbuilding” he writes only a few verses before tonight's lesson.

The resources that Paul puts at our disposal to help us work towards the unity that is God's will, and which is expressed in the harmony of our glorifying God with one united voice, is the story of our faith: the Scriptures are given us as encouragement, as example. And in particular the Word made Flesh, Jesus Christ. Christ's story, Christ's sacrifice, is given us as the chief encouragement in our striving for harmony and unity. Paul knows that this endeavour requires hope: the hope we find in the example of the self-giving Christ, who divested himself of all that would serve self in service of us all. And that hope that we too might embody Christ's example in our actions, Paul knows, is made visible through the steadfast practise and encouragement of those among whom we are called to serve. It is the practise of unity that will lead to unity, Paul tells us: the more we embody the qualities of the One who calls us to be one, as he and the Father are one, the more we will experience encouragement in our service, and be people who enthuse and encourage others to share in our serving God alongside us.

At the end Paul foresees a community sustained by a shared hope: that of joining together in glorifying God, for God is glorified in the lives of women and men who mirror through their actions and their love for another the life of Christ. God will accomplish great things through us, Paul tells, when we share our gifts and resources, our talents and imagination with one another. God will accomplish great things for us, Paul knows, when we work together, listen out for dissenting and shrill voices as much as for harmonising and soothing voices, in order to bring about the vision of a church united in praise and prayer, service and sacrifice God has given us as hope and encouragement for our journey. And so, as we give thanks for the gift of music to help us reflect here on earth something of the eternal harmony for which we hope and strive, let us rejoice in the rich gifts God gifts us and use them in his service for the building up of his kingdom in this place.

The Lord be with you.