

*O sing unto the Lord a new song:
sing unto the Lord, all the whole earth.
(Psalm 96:1)*

Isaiah 60: 9 – end

Hebrews 6:17 – 7:10

Do you like new songs or just the old ones? Do you look back to the songs of your youth and think that nothing written today could ever match the songs that you remember from that stage in your life? Or what about the songs we use in church? Do you like the new songs or the old hymns?

In a Cathedral of course congregations will experience Christian song from every possible period as that which is brand new. From plainsong to contemporary – it's what Cathedrals do and do well.

But I suspect that usually we are more comfortable with what we know or with what we've heard before than with what is new. Last Sunday I was in a church where to me the music at communion sounded so strange that for a moment I found myself wondering if the organist had the music the right way up – and of course she did. But it was new music, it was a challenge both to my ears and to my thinking, which is what it should be. It took me away for a moment from the comfortable place in which I like to be and I received communion to the sounds of a new song which was right for that moment – communion should disturb us as well as be a comfort.

Tonight's psalm begins: 'sing unto the Lord a new song' but 'new songs' can fill some Christians with even more fear than the thought of judgement itself. But I'd like us tonight to think about the notion of singing a new song in it's widest context. I want us to think about the idea of coming unto the Lord with this new song which is the sum of what you, I or we would want to say to God at this moment.

Every week, new songs are released. The world of music and song never stands still. There is a sense of moving on, a sense of development as one genre slides into the next. But there is also a sense that when the ink has dried on the last page of the manuscript the song is already out of date. And so perhaps the newest song is the improvisation that Dr Price plays

on the organ – where that which is happening in the organist's head and heart is offered to God within the fraction of a second that it takes for the message to travel from his heart and mind to his fingers and feet.

Psalm 96 says: 'sing a new song to the Lord' and this isn't just about the hymn books – it is about our relationship with God. Psalm 100 says that we should come 'into God's presence with a song' and on the basis of St Augustine's advice that 'to sing is to pray twice' then I think that we should be mindful of the great power that a new song can have.

King David, whether or not he actually wrote the psalms, is, in my book, the Elvis of the Old Testament and the Psalter is a song book that gives us permission to speak to God however we like. The psalms give us permission to praise God, to offer our moans and sadness to God, they even give us permission to be angry with God. The psalms of David, like the music of Elvis, have not only the power to shock but also to surprise us about the power of love. Thomas Merton said that the psalms were written by men 'who knew who God was'. But the Psalter is not the definitive song book. New songs are needed every day, every moment, simply because our world, like our lives, our relationship with God and our relationship with God's Church, is always changing.

Students on ordination courses are sometimes asked to write their own psalm. They are asked to write the song that describes their relationship or perhaps their struggle with God and sometimes I know that they wonder if it's ok even to think these things let alone write them down. It is so much easier and safer to rely on what's been written before. But God, I think, prefers our openness and our honesty. God, I think, would want us to express who we are now. So... 'sing a new song to the Lord'.

Tonight's reading from Isaiah also happens to be a song. It appears in Common Worship these days as the 'Song of a New Jerusalem' and is one of the daily canticles for Epiphany. It's a song about Jerusalem, a city that one way or another will always exist. It's an important city geographically, politically and theologically – it's a city with eternal dimensions. The Song of Isaiah is that the New Jerusalem would be better than the old one. His song was for a city that might have the kind of Kingdom values that represent an eternal dwelling place. It's a song from the prophet who yearned for change. It's what the prophet yearned for – it was his song.

And in the reading from the Book of Hebrews tonight we heard the song of someone who wanted to say something about the nature of Christ and in doing so the writer looks back to a mythical figure of the past, Melchizedek.

In my days at theological college Melchizedek was a character I saw every day because he appeared in the stained glass window above the altar in the college chapel. He reminded me of two things – firstly, the notion of the ‘priest for ever’ but secondly, for the fact that in the window Melchizedek was wearing a very daring pair of red and white stripy socks. There was something about him that challenged the Anglican norm – he was the character who was bold enough to shock. So if King David was the Elvis of the Old Testament then in my book Melchizedek stood tall as the Jonny Rotten or the David Bowie of the New. Of course, the glass maker probably only had enough materials to give him stripy socks – but he remains for me a character in the Bible who sings a song for the church to be a learning community as it discovers and understands more about Jesus Christ. According to this song Jesus is different from contemporary ideas about priesthood and the new church needed to get used to the idea that Jesus was different. He was more like this mystical priest king who had once blessed Abraham the father of the fathers, a king who was the king of saving justice, the king of peace and a priest who was the Rolls Royce of priests – well Jesus is a new one of those. It wasn’t a song as such but it was a new way for the church at that moment that needed to develop its understanding of who Jesus was.

So what’s your song? What would you be wanting to say or even sing to God? Or perhaps you’re thinking, what about him up there, what’s his song?

Well I’m not going to sing but I’ll tell you about the song I want God and God’s Church to hear. My song at the moment is about the need for our Church to embrace the world more lovingly and to be more ready to bless. My song is for us, the church and for the leaders of our church to speak up and be heard because sometimes, and too often, I can’t hear them.

Let me tell you about two different and separate situations from the same day last week. In the morning I was with a Dad and his baby boy not yet two months old. The Dad has had no role models on which to base his

fatherhood, and he and the child's mother, who also has had no good models on which to base her motherhood, had just split up. I did for them what I could but it was so difficult to feel anything but sadness for what might lie ahead for each of them.

And then in the afternoon, a teacher came to ask me for my views about a child coming into school who had just been adopted by two male parents; two male parents who will give that child love, security, stability and support. My song looks for a church that not only helps those who struggle but for a church that will, without reservation, bless those who make good families and rejoice with them - no matter what they look like or how they conflict with how we once thought a family should be. So to the teacher I said 'this is great, this is wonderful'. My song for the church is that it might do more of that. To be a church which has leaders who are brave enough to sing not only the old songs but who are courageous in singing something new.

My song would be for a church which is less rigid in its understanding of what's normal – it's a song for a church which is a bit less dull, a church that sees Jesus as one after the order of Melchizedek with his red stripy socks; a church that supports and nurtures, a church that can surprise and improvise but above all, a church that brings blessings to a world which has got so used to us saying 'no' or even worse, saying nothing at all, that it is beginning not to ask.

So in the presence of God, let us always have the courage to 'Sing unto the Lord a new song.'

Peter Sutton