

Singing to the Lord in Exile: Biblical Reflections with Music

Introduction

As Catholics, one of the most disconcerting parts of the current policy of social-distancing and self-isolation has been our inability to attend Mass, and to bring our prayers and concerns before God together in the liturgy. Whilst many of us have been able to participate in Mass or other prayer services through live-streaming (for those in the Diocese of Leeds- see www.dioceseofleeds.org.uk/cathedral) and making acts of Spiritual Communion, there is clearly something lacking in these online forms of communal prayer. As material creatures, we naturally take comfort in the presence of others. One important purpose of the Eucharist is the gathering of God's people into a single body, united in love of God and neighbour, sharing His own life: as St Paul puts it,

“The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread”.

But whilst we can be spiritually united to others through shared prayer, at present we cannot express or deepen this unity at a physical level whilst preserving our own safety and that of the wider community. Of course, many of the live-streamed services have been beautiful and poignant occasions for spiritual unity, the highlight of which was perhaps (paradoxically) the sight of Pope Francis blessing Rome and the World across a deserted St. Peter's Square. In our own Diocese, I have been especially moved to see people in the “chat” of the Cathedral's Mass live-stream giving one another virtual handshakes during the sign of peace. Yet ultimately, our physical gathering to receive material sacraments is not something that can be adequately replaced.

As we approach Holy Week and Easter, this inability to gather as God's People is likely to feel increasingly disconcerting. In the liturgies and ceremonies of the *Triduum*, all kinds of tangible, shared experiences tie us together as Christ's Body. Some of us have our feet washed; we come forward together to venerate the same cross; we light candles from one another as we fill the Church with Christ's light at the Vigil. The repetition of actions across the years gives us spiritual anchorage, assuring us that God remains faithful to His promises, and in turn allows us to renew our commitment to Him. Our time is drawn into God's time and story. But this year, we will not share these experiences in the same place or be able to see and feel one another's responses to the dramatic presentation of the central story of our faith.

One of the many aspects of the Liturgy which we might miss in addition to access to the Sacraments is the ability to listen to or participate in the music which accompanies Lenten and Holy Week services. As a child, one of the first things about the Holy Week liturgies which struck me was the beautiful way in which the repentant reverence of those venerating the cross matched the emotional attitude expressed by the *Reproaches* which are sung during the veneration. Liturgical music has many functions, but perhaps a couple are worth mentioning here in particular.

Firstly, despite the protests of some philosophers, it's clear that music can express emotion. According to some influential recent philosophical accounts which have support in experimental psychology, this is because music can mirror the ways in which humans express emotions. For example, “sad” music is often slow, with dissonant (“clashing”) harmonics which resembles the noises which we might make when in pain.¹ In making music as part of the liturgy, then, we can express appropriate emotions- for example, sorrow at sin or joy at creation and salvation- to God and to one another. Moreover, perhaps when we listen to music we not only notice the ways in which music expresses emotion, but even come to feel relevant emotions by way of sympathy, affording us a new, emotionally-charged picture of the world

¹ This explanation of music's ability to express emotion was first advanced by Peter Kivy in *The Corded Shell: Reflections on Musical Expression* (Princeton UP, 1981), and has received a substantial recent defence in James Young's, *Critique of Pure Music* (OUP, 2014).

through which we see the world in a new light: perhaps as God means us to see it.² This can be particularly spiritually helpful when we struggle to experience the relevant emotions ourselves, or to imagine what the world might look like if we approach it, say, with a sense of gratitude or wonder.

Secondly, music can serve to bind people together. As the philosopher Terence Cuneo has suggested, when we sing together we are engaged in “full divided attention”, paying close attention to both our own singing, in a process of immediate feedback and adjust which he terms “real-time responsiveness”. “Full-divided attention” and “real-time responsiveness” make singing together one of the most immediately and intimately co-operative tasks that humans can easily perform. It is perhaps not surprising then that, as Cuneo mentions, choral singing has been shown to stimulate the release of group-bonding hormones. From a Christian perspective, we can therefore see why it is particularly appropriate that we sing together in the Liturgy, because the Liturgy is also the place in which we ask God to gather and unite us as His people.³

Whilst we can't share the experience of listening to liturgical music together this Holy Week, modern technology does enable us to read God's Word together with some of the music which we would ordinarily listen to. In this series of short, “blog-style” articles, I want to share some of my own reflections on passages of Scripture which have been set to music. I don't have in mind any special way of reading the articles below, apart from the fact that it might help to prayerfully read the Biblical texts whilst listening to the suggested music, where appropriate.⁴

I hope that the passages I have chosen will provide the space for prayerful reflection using music and texts which we will not hear together, providing another avenue for us to draw closer to God and to one another in this time of isolation.

² See e.g. Mark Wynn, “Musical Affects and the Life of Faith: Some Reflections on the Religious Potency of Music”, *Faith and Philosophy* 21 (2004).

³ For Cuneo's commentary, see Terence Cuneo, *Ritualized Faith: Essays on the Philosophy of Liturgy* (OUP, 2016), Ch.7.

⁴ I will generally use the NRSV translation of the Bible; translations of Biblical texts set to music will be my own.