

Sing and make Music (Ephesians 5:15-20)

Music is important.

Throughout history, music has been part of human life, from the most basic instruments – drums and sticks, to more and more complex string and woodwind and brass instruments, to harpsichords and pianos to magnificent pipe organs, to electric guitars and synthesizers. Music has a place in every major occasion in our lives – birthdays, weddings, funerals, coronations, ANZAC day, Olympics, Christmas, Easter, and of course Sunday worship services.

The most common musical instrument is the human voice. An instrument that has an immense range, that sounds great as a solo, a small group, and a massed choir. An instrument that just about all of us have, and one which can be a joy to use, whether in a choir or alone – who among us hasn't sung in the shower?

Music – and in particular singing – is present throughout our lives. Whether it's in the shopping centres, in lifts, in cars, in advertising, in corroborees, in singalongs in preschools or nursing homes.

Music sticks with us – songs stick with us. Sometimes we set out to learn them. I remember learning the national anthem and the school song. I remember learning the alphabet song. But some songs just sink in: "There's a bear in there, and a chair as well, and people with games, and stories to tell. Open wide, come inside, it's play school time" I never set out to learn that, but I certainly know it – as do most of us.

And the advertisers certainly have embraced it too – can you sing along to Mojo's "You oughta be congratulated" or "C'mon Aussie, C'mon"?

It works for us as followers of Jesus, too. We learn and remember things through hymns. Is Jesus God the Son? "Word of the Father, now in flesh appearing", why did Jesus go to the cross? "Died he for me, who caused his pain", the trinity? "God in three persons, blessed trinity". Many of the hymns that we know were written to support and emphasise not only particular ideas, but particular sermons. (And that is particularly common for the great hymns of Charles Wesley).

Music sticks with us. Hymns speak to us – our souls and our hearts and our minds.

As we went through the years of Covid lockdowns and restrictions in our church, singing together was something that we missed the most. We could watch services on Youtube. We could catch up with friends by phone. But we couldn't sing together.

As restrictions eased, and we came back to church – the most common question was "Richie, when do you think we'll be able to sing together?"

In today's reading from Paul's letter to the Ephesians, he talks about singing and making music, and he does it in the context of both being the church together, and how we should act.

He begins by saying “Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity,” (5:15-16a) sensible advice – be wise, rather than unwise, and make the most of it.

But then Paul adds “because the days are evil.” We tend to think that our own time is pretty bad. There are bad things going on in the world. Pressures to do the wrong thing. Hatred. Anger. Resentment. Social media. And all the rest of it. But really, things have always been bad – there have always been pressures on the followers of Jesus to do the wrong thing. Paul knew it two thousand odd years ago... and we know it today.

Therefore, do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord’s will is. Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. (5:17-18a). Again, it’s sensible advice. But sometimes we do need to be reminded not to be foolish. And if we get drunk on wine, we will be more likely to do the wrong thing – so don’t get drunk on wine. He doesn’t say “don’t drink wine” (which I’m sure is a relief to many of us), but “don’t get drunk on wine”. Don’t lose control.

As an antidote to all these things, Paul tells us what we should be doing “Instead, be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord,” (5:18b-19)

Instead of the bad things, fill yourself with the good. When Saul, the first King of Israel, was tormented by an evil spirit, David played the harp for him. All through scripture, and all through the ages, when people faced uncertain times or had reached the limits of their endurance in difficult situations, they’ve turned to music – #whether it was the songs slaves sang together in the fields, the song about the swagman by the billabong reminding soldiers of home while they were fighting in foreign lands, or the assurance of laying down in green pastures and dwelling in the house of the Lord forever at the loss of a loved one.

But it’s not just on those difficult occasions: Paul is saying that we always – need to be speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit.

Especially as we meet together as the followers of Jesus, we sing together – and our singing together is part of what strengthens us as the people of God. It reminds us of the hope that we share, and it encourages us to share that hope. How often do we leave church humming or singing one of the hymns?

As someone who used to visit and lead services at lots of different churches, I can tell you that the best way to be accepted, the best way to be listened to, is to choose good hymns. Memorable hymns. Hymns that encourage.

Music is one of the reasons we come together as the church. We need these songs. The tunes that bring the words into our minds. Once we start humming the tune it leads us to remembering the words. And the words will bring us comfort, and hope, and strength.

But it's not just about what singing can do to build us up. Paul concludes this reading by telling us "Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ."

As we sing, as we praise, as we listen, we must give thanks to God. God who loves us so much, that he gave up his only son for us – Jesus, who died on the cross, and rose from the dead to open the way for us to everlasting life. Our response to that love, that grace, is to give thanks and praise to God who has brought us to him.

And it is thanks and praise that will echo into eternity. To quote one of the most famous hymns of all time:

When we've been there ten thousand years, bright shining as the sun, We've no less days to sing God's praise than when we first begun.

Amen.