

Three weeks ago at Matins we heard something astonishing. It came out of the blue. The choir came in as usual, we attempted a worthy if unmemorable hymn. The choir sang the responses, the organist played over the Venite. And then a group of people, a large group in the north transept, a *task force* of middle-aged men with their wives, threw back their heads, opened their mouths, and unleashed an elemental force of nature. The depth and sonority of their singing were like the swell in the Bay of Biscay at the time of the equinox. But that was nothing compared with the third hymn. As they started on Eternal Father strong to save you could hear the choir and organ crashing through the gears right down to first, as they took on the load. You could see these were people for whom rock and tempest, fire and foe, were trivial annoyances, they guided us through to the end of the service like a convoy being delivered safely into Plymouth Sound.

It'll be a little while before the Royal Navy is brought sufficiently back to a strength that can guarantee the pre-eminence of sung Matins as the glory of the Church of England. And realistically if we're going to try and promote the cause of singing in church – I don't know, but Matins mightn't be the most obvious place to start.

But how *do* we get the world singing again? Where do we go for advice?

I suggest the best person to ask is this chap. (We played a recording of a robin singing.) Why does the robin sing? He sings because he's looking for a mate; he's defending a territory; he sings because he has to, he can do no other, it's part of his very nature. He's saying 'here is a fine example of the species in the prime of health; let's see what we can make of this'. In short, you could say, he's proclaiming his identity. You could say that our party of mariners were doing the same. They were people of faith, people accustomed

to order and obedience, used to standing fast and defending a territory; they had come to church to worship the God who is the source of the beliefs and values that they stand for; and as they sang you knew you wouldn't want to stand in their way. In short, you might say, a fairly typical Matins congregation.

Another time I might pursue the comparison with the robin. We don't, for instance, tend to think of ourselves as being very interested in defending territory; but listen to the singing of southern Baptists in the states or any church in the townships of South Africa and you'll hear that territory is still a potent force to impel people into song. We could look at the Song of Songs to see how love and worship can seem to come close and mingle. And this is my favourite; on a cool spring morning when the sun's not yet up you can hear the little birds, the robins, the wrens and the black birds deep in the bushes quietly shyly trying the first beginnings of the song that they will sing out boldly when the sun is up and the sap has risen.

Sub-cantillation they call it; and forgive me if I suggest that this image, this sound of birds quietly singing under their breath in the privacy of thick foliage, this image is the one we need to hold on to. Few of us come into church nowadays with the intention of singing out with full intensity, of wholly engaging hearts and hands and voices as we raise what one hymn writer called a *sacrifice of words*. We have a world-class choir, for one thing, the person sitting opposite you may have travelled 3,000 miles just to hear them, and you can't be sure that your contribution is going to enhance their experience.

This was a question that troubled Martin Luther in the days of his ministry as an Augustinian, when he still thought he could reform the Roman church from within. In 1523 he wrote, 'I wish we had as many songs as

possible which the people could sing during the Mass, after the Sanctus and the Agnus Dei. These hymns,' he wrote, 'could be sung after the choir has sung the Latin chants, or Latin on one day and vernacular hymns on the next, until the time comes that the whole mass is sung in the vernacular.' He went on to say, we don't yet have the poets who can write these songs. But by 1529 he did.

What he did was to make new anthologies of song. He often used music that congregations already knew, perhaps because they were folk tunes or plainsong that already existed. He had choirs to help lead the singing (more of that in a moment); but most importantly of all he had the people with him, people who were happy to learn to sing music which expressed the spirit of the age. This happened here too, of course, most notably with the Wesleys and the Methodist Church, but also in various revivals that have sporadically disturbed our own Anglican tranquillity.

The Roman Church countered Luther's insistence on congregational singing by moving firmly in the other direction. The music of Vittoria and Byrd was highly organized, and this was the moment when they began to entrench what seemed at the time a strange idea, having someone direct a choir who himself was not singing. (This, believe it or not, was what paved the way for the development of the symphony orchestra.) The Lutherans became used to this too. So it was at this time that the role of the professional conductor took off, and the consolidation of a corps of professional singers singing apart from the congregation.

And here we are today. All this is still very familiar. We can still trace in detail the fault lines of the Reformation, in virtually every aspect of our life in church. And it's not just us. A Catholic Cathedral not 60 miles from here recently saw a revolt by its congregation, who objected to the choir singing

the whole of the Mass. They won a significant victory when the choir agreed to hand over the Amen at the end of the Eucharistic Prayer for the congregation to sing. The great day came for this to happen for the first time, and no one could agree whether they'd actually heard the congregation sing it or not; and after the first time they didn't even try. What the congregation had in fact done was to knock the robin off its perch on the spade; but in the event it turned out that they didn't actually want to take the robin's place.

---

What happens in church when we sing is the same as happens in all other kinds of worship. We come into this place where heaven and earth meet, we stand in the company of innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and as we draw nigh to God he draws nigh to us. The work of getting this to happen is priestly work, and of this priestly work music is an important part. Richard Hooker suggests that music has such pleasing effects upon that very part of man that is most divine, that some have been induced to conclude that the soul is or hath in it harmony, and it would be futile to disagree with that. A fine choir can remind us that we are in the company of angels and saints, as much by the beauty of the sound as by singing works that have been known to generations of Christians for hundreds of years, it can help us be bound together in that great company of witnesses. More than that, Beethoven declared that music is the bridge which allows rational people to connect to their spiritual dimension.

You can see where this is going. I could make this a long lecture on the use of music in worship, and it would give us all a wonderfully warm

feeling; but I want to come back to the point. I want to return to those robins, wrens and blackbirds huddling in the bushes not quite breaking out into song. Because no one has ever yet been saved by a choir. No man may deliver his brother nor make agreement unto God for him. We have to work out our own salvation, and Byrd and Vittoria can't do that for us. I talked of worship as a matter of God and humans drawing closer to each other, and that can certainly happen in song. God sings over us, we hear that in the prophecy of Zephaniah, he sings over us in a loud voice as on a day of great festival; and as we respond to him in singing he and we can be drawn close to each other, I have no doubt of that. And if our heart is pure and our hands clean that may be as much as is required of us. And even sub-cantillation just might be enough. I wish we could all sing like those naval men belting out Eternal Father, strong to save; but if all we manage is to tremble into song, that too may be enough.

But it can go further. If the choir were to start singing the Hallelujah Chorus, or the Heavens are telling, neurologists tell us that our brains would be firing as we listened in much the same way as if we were doing the work ourselves. That's an important way of participating in a choral service: a kind of sub-sub-cantillation, singing along without making a sound.

But - and this is the moment I really do come to the point - there is a problem. Our choir, and the other choirs set up on the same lines in Oxford and beyond; all this musical excellence is the wonderful flower on the upper branches of a bush whose stem and lower branches are withering away. I'm not just talking about the decay of musical provision in schools, I'm talking about the world ceasing to sing. Nowadays the equivalent of the robin singing on his spade is not any of us singing in the bath or whistling on the way to work but the ring tone downloaded to the mobile phone. That's how

people declare their identity to the world, that's how they voice their presence. Music is left to the professionals, music is done by those who are trained.

In a way I'm happy with that, I wouldn't ask anyone to come and listen to me singing except for the kind of speaking on a note that you're kind enough to bear with here week by week. But we can't rest content merely with professionals singing instead of us. Music is part of human identity just as much as eating or laughing; in fact, the human brain is adapted for making music more completely than it seems to be suited for any other activity at all. Even words and speech seems to be secondary to singing. What worries me is that nowadays even professional musicians are beginning to suffer from our reticence about singing. Children who should be getting distinctions in their music exams are scraping merits and passes because they can't sing for their aural tests. Outreach programmes by cathedrals and choir schools founder because the schools they go into don't have staff who are confident about carrying on the work they'd have to do, just standing out in front of children and encouraging them to sing. Where will cathedrals find their choral scholars, where will parish churches find their trebles, in 20 years time?

Singing is a divine activity. God sings over us with a loud voice as on a day of great festival. Virtually the last thing Christ did with his friends during his earthly ministry was to sing with them in the Upper Room. Singing is like eating and laughing, it's human, it's something we're made for. It's part of our identity, it's not going to go away. If we let a dark age of singing descend a later generation will laboriously have to bring the human race back to what it was made for. The work we do in church is futile if we're not passing it on, and singing is right up there at the top of the lists of things we need to be sharing with the future.

Until we can be sure of having regular groups of retired admirals, captains and commanders coming in and leading us in the Venite, we have to make do with who we are. So let me urge you, take a high view of singing. Do it in the bath, along the road, while you're walking, do it most of all when you're with your children and grandchildren. Do it without electricity, do it without someone behind a microphone or a piano putting the tune into your mouth; do it without a percussionist offering to spice it up for you; do it without bothering about anyone who might say they don't like the noise you're making. By doing all this you won't only be making the world a better and more tuneful place for us all to live in, you'll be engaging in an activity which gives joy to God himself.

You're in an awkward position now, I'm about to put you on the spot; you're wondering whether my challenge is impertinent, or whether you're going to be able to rise to it. Perhaps you need more notice so that you can think about how best to achieve what I'm about to ask you to do. Perhaps you feel you'd like a rehearsal. Perhaps you just want to sub-sub-cantillate. Well, all I can advise is, give it your best shot, put your hope in providence, cast restraint to the winds, please stand and sing from the large blue hymn book, Common Praise, hymn no 438.