Sing, O barren one who did not bear; / burst into song and shout, / you who have not been in labour!

In nomine…

When Ben our organist this morning struck up for the hymn we have just sung, did any of you, I wonder, think to yourselves that’s the wrong tune. It wasn’t of course. There is a long and distinguished tradition, in the Church of England and the Methodist Church alike, of setting ‘O for a thousand tongues to sing’ to the tune we had this morning, Richmond. It is a strong and dignified tune with a wonderful climax at the end of the third line that fits well with the cadence of Charles Wesley’s verse. The emphasis falls perfectly on the final syllable:

The glories of my God and King

His blood can make the foulest clean

The mournful, broken hearts rejoice

But, for all that, I suspect some among us were feeling the loss of another tune, very closely associated with this hymn in more Evangelical circles. This is the tune Lyngham: a tune with lively rhythms, with unexpected leaps and with the repetition of two lines of each verse. It is especially loved in free churches, where, played with stately grandeur, it is one of the great set piece statements of faith. Unlike this morning’s tune, Lyngham puts the emphasis on the second and fourth lines and draws out a slightly different sense from the words:

Jesus! the name…

That bids our sorrows cease, That bids our sorrows cease

‘tis life and health and peace, ‘tis life - and health - and peace
One of the many things they don’t teach you at theological college is that, for most people, hymns have only one tune. I learned this the hard way in the first weddings I conducted. Discussing them with couples, I would blithely jot down the first line without taking care to establish which tune we were talking about. ‘Love divine, all loves excelling’, for instance. Only when the organist started playing did I realise my mistake in choosing the eponymous tune in the hymnbook when the bride all too clearly had her heart set on Blaenwern. Some of us feel the same about ‘O Jesus, I have promised’, which to my mind has one proper tune, Wolvercote. It is a tune that sets this marvellous hymn of recommitment on just the right footing: determined, flowing, but never underplaying the challenges to be met along the way:

O let me see thy foot-marks / And in them plant my own; / My hope to follow duly / Is in thy strength alone.

But then there’s another popular tune, Hatherop Castle, whose upbeat bounciness I find really hard to take: it seems to assume that, once embarked upon, the path of discipleship will be a smooth one: plain-sailing all the way.

I’m sure that many of you are familiar with that national institution, the Radio 4 panel game, I’m sorry I haven’t a clue. It often involves a round called ‘One song to the tune of another’. Sometimes the round falls a bit flat, but frequently there are sublime juxtapositions: ‘How much is that doggy in the window?’ to the tune of ‘Blowin’ in the Wind’, for instance; or ‘When I’m cleaning windows’ to the tune of ‘Away in a manger’; or Pulp’s ‘Common People’ to the tune ‘If you’re happy and you know it’. ‘One song to the tune of another’ is a delightfully childish source of comedy, but the experience it distils for comic effect is one that most of us are familiar with in more poignant circumstances. I’m thinking not of the discomfort of hymns set against our expectations, but the more serious challenges and trials that some people face a good deal and all of us at times: those experiences of having to sing to the tune of a prevailing way of doing things that doesn’t fit.

Gender dysphoria is an instance of this that we’re becoming better attuned to at the moment. The Anglican priest and poet, Rachel Mann, writes of her experience of the transition from one gender to another in terms of learning to sing a new song:

How do we learn to sing a new song when we’ve played only one tune all our lives? And when we dare to take up another song how do we cope when we discover that instead of the song of joy we thought it was, it feels like a song of lament, of pain
and of loss? That instead of being a song of light and illumination it becomes a song of the night? (Dazzling Darkness, p.42)

Rachel’s memoir, Dazzling Darkness, is a beautifully subtle set of reflections on her journey from man to woman and through atheism to faith. Neither journey is straightforward, each involves the repeated experience of a disjuncture between expectations – her own and others’ – and her lived experience: the recurrent sense of singing a song to the wrong tune. And gender dysphoria is just the most prominent instance of the misfit that people encounter in so many spheres. Marriage is another good example: divorce can sometimes be the only way, but it’s rarely experienced as a straightforward liberation; and re-marriage doesn’t simply announce the happy ending to the tale. Learning the right tune to the song is a slow and often painful process.

‘How shall I sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?’, asks the psalmist in the exile of Babylon. But the question has rightly been taken in mystical literature to address not just the Babylonian captivity of the people of Israel, but the captivity to sin of the whole people of God. As human beings we are endowed with the gift of song, but it is masked, trapped, knocked off key, by our enslavement to things that are less than God.

Yet God’s grace reaches out to us to, inviting us to audition for a choir in which we can learn to sing the right song to the right tune. In the words of Isaiah from our first reading:

**Sing, O barren one who did not bear; / burst into song and shout…**

Now it’s famously easy to mishear sermons. What I’m not saying is that it’s sinful to sing a hymn to the wrong tune – ‘O Jesus I have promised’ to Hatherop Castle, for instance! What I am saying is that the experience of singing tunes that don’t seem to fit is not a bad analogy for sin – both in general and in particular.

Singing one song to the tune of another sort of works: we do it an awful lot in life and we get by; but it goes against the grain, pulls us out of tune.

But by God’s grace we can learn – slowly and with many false notes and errors of timing – learn to sing the right song to the right tune:

**O For a thousand tongues to sing**

**My dear Redeemer’s praise!**

**The glories of my God and King,**

**The triumphs of His grace!**

*The triumphs of His grace!*

In nomine…