

8-30-26 homily
Colossians 3.12-17

I wonder when the first song was sung by a human? I wonder if it was an attempt to mimic birdsong, perhaps. A simple melody that that person heard and tried to reproduce? Not with words, but the sounds. Words would come later. And we would begin to carry our stories, our hopes, our sadness – our culture – in song. Centuries before Benedictine monk, Guido of Arezzo would create the beginnings of the modern musical staff in the eleventh century in order to teach monastic chants to singers, humans were already transmitting memories and meaning through music. Some indigenous peoples have been singing the same songs for centuries often to a simple drumbeat. Long before electricity allowed us to control the comfort of our homes year-round, bards and musicians sang epic poems around the fire, to hold off the deep cold of winter, or at least make it bearable.

My parents were pub entertainers. Mum played piano, dad sang. They played in the pubs in the ‘Golden Triangle’ area of Norwich, and people looked forward to a few hours of singing together of a Saturday night. I doubt you can find a single pub in the whole of Norwich that does that today. Music does something to us. It can transport us in an instant to another time and another place. It can keep us going through the hardest of times. It’s something that unites people – sometimes people who are divided in so many other ways.

Since 1902, the fans of my hometown football team, Norwich City – the mighty Canaries – have been singing the same song before every game, and during the game to lift the team’s spirits when they’re losing. “On the Ball City” is the oldest football chant still sung regularly. Probably the most famous club song is “You’ll Never Walk Alone,” the anthem of Liverpool FC. If you’re an Arsenal fan, “North London Forever” is the latest song to ring out around their ground, 50,000 people singing their hearts out about the club and community they love. For some unknown reason, “Sweet Caroline” has begun a favorite of the England national team!

On match day, it doesn’t matter who you voted for, how much money you make, what your gender identity is, who you love, if you’re wearing yellow, and sing, “On the ball City...” then you belong to the 20,000 or so other Norwich fans at Carrow Road. If you wear red and sing, “You’ll Never Walk Alone,” you belong to Liverpool FC. Even if you’re singing it while watching the game by satellite in Rwanda. It’s why we have National Anthems. Songs that we sing – together - that tell us who we are. Where we’ve come from. Who we belong to. It’s why we have school “fight songs”. And it’s why the church sings “psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude to God in our hearts,” as Paul exhorted the church in Colossae to do.

Initially, the church adopted the Psalter – the hymnbook of our Jewish siblings – but then began to add our own songs, about Jesus the Christ. They became a way to teach doctrine – beliefs – to people who could not read. Charles Wesley is famous for borrowing tunes sung in the pubs of England, and penning hymns that taught his brother John’s theology to the

working classes. In time, other traditions in other countries would take simple tunes, folk tunes and do the same. And those songs get *into* us. They shape us.

They become important to us.

So much so, that even if we no longer believe the theology contained in some of those camp songs we sang every summer, if someone starts singing, “I’ll Fly Away”, I’m ready to raise a glass and bellow out, “When I die, hallelujah, by and by, I’ll fly away!” Because those songs connect us. And not just us to God. They connect us to each other. They connect us to a past that we may long for – simpler times, with fewer concerns. They connect us to people long gone – people who loved that particular song. Some of whom – when they no longer recognized us – could still join in *with* us as soon as we started singing that song. Connecting us still.

Music is so important.

How many revolutions have been carried by the songs the people sang? The anthems of protest. The songs of resistance. The hymns of the church, which remind us who we are – and *whose* we are.

So – it’s good to sing! It’s good to sing together. Sometimes it’s even good to sing old songs with dodgy theology. Because even in those, we’re reminded of who we are. And whose we are. Because they connect us to those who’ve loved us in the past. And they remind us to love those around us now. “Hymn sings” may be old-fashioned, but I suspect they will never grow old.

So, “Sing, and make music in your heart.” I suspect it’s one of the ways we are being saved, every day. Amen.