

Come into

His Presence

with Singing

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And I saw as it were a sea of glass mingled with fire: and them that had gotten the victory over the beast, and over his image, and over his mark, and over the number of his name, stand on the sea of glass, having harps of God. And they sing the song of Moses the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb, saying, Great and marvelous are thy works, Lord God Almighty; just and true are thy ways, thou King of saints. Who shall not fear thee, O Lord, and glorify thy name? for thou only art holy: for all nations shall come and worship before thee; for thy judgments are made manifest (Rev. 15:2-4).

Brothers and Sisters, I have been asked to talk on music as a form of worship, or on the significance of music in worship.* I found in reading some scriptures trying to prepare for this talk that I needed to narrow things down, so my real topic would be something like the religious or spiritual significance of song, and if I were to give a title for it, I would paraphrase Psalm 100, verse 2: "Serve the Lord with gladness: come into his presence with singing."

Consider for a moment the following: The Apostle Paul tells us, "Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard" the actuality of the Kingdom of God, "neither [hath it] entered into the heart of man" (I Cor. 2:9). Thus most of our descriptions of the Kingdom of God have the nature of metaphors, which is not to say that they are false, but rather that they are verbal images of a reality which is beyond our natural power to perceive right now, and equally beyond the power of literal language to report. Even when a natural man has had his spiritual sight opened on the things of God, as Isaiah, Ezekiel, or Daniel, he will report his vision in words hard to take quite literally: angels, we Mormons say, have no wings, yet Isaiah portrays six-winged seraphim around the throne of God. Metaphorical or non-literal language, though, can convey some hints of what literal language may lack words and syntax to describe.

It is a curious fact of our history that these days, in our concern for correlating and administering the many programs of the Church, we draw many of our current metaphors for the Kingdom of God from the realms of corporate organization and leadership. But the scriptures draw their imagery and their metaphors of the Kingdom of God from quite different sources, and one of these is music, particularly song. It is another curious fact that we Mormons tell one another that the image of heaven as a place where redeemed souls play harps and sing around the throne of God is false, just an old sectarian notion, and we're all going to be busy carrying out programs, preaching the gospel, drawing blueprints for new worlds, filling out requisitions for space and matter unorganized, and holding celestial family home evenings. But right from the Book of Mormon we read this: "And he hath brought to pass the redemption of the world, whereby he that is found guiltless before him at the judgment day hath it given unto him to dwell in the presence of God in his kingdom, to sing ceaseless praises with the choirs above, unto the Father, and unto the Son, and unto the Holy Ghost, which are one God, in a state of happiness which hath no end" (Mormon 7:7).^{*}

There it is. Of course we might expect a translation of ancient scripture to use those ancient metaphors. But then we might notice the references to "songs of everlasting joy" at the final gathering of Zion, in the Doctrine and Covenants (45:71; 66:11; 101:18). I won't read those, but I would like to point out that one of

*Given in *Sacrament Service*, 8 July 1973, Ithaca, New York.

the images of the Kingdom of Heaven in revealed scripture, both ancient and modern, is the condition of singing.

Of course it is not the only image, nor are the various patterns of images for the Kingdom mutually exclusive but rather cumulative and incremental, so that each image can teach us something important about the Kingdom that the others do not. I would like to explore with you what the image of song might mean in terms of our worship and its purpose. Let me give one more instance of song in the scriptures. Various prophets have seen the Kingdom of Heaven and have come back bearing metaphors—verbal images of what they saw, very often figurative, sometimes literal, though it's often difficult to tell how much is literal and how much is metaphorical. Here is one of Isaiah's reports: "In the year that King Uzziah died I saw also the Lord, sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple. Above it stood the seraphims: each one had six wings; with twain he covered his face, and with twain he covered his feet, and with twain he did fly. And one cried unto another and said, "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of Hosts! The whole earth is full of His glory."—or that may be translated, "His glory is the fullness of the whole earth." These angels crying to one another, "Holy, holy, holy!" have been the inspiration for any number of marvelous musical settings. When their song is done in Latin, it's called a "Sanctus," and one of the finest I know is by Berlioz—the final chorus of his *Requiem*. Isaiah's report terrifically inspired Berlioz, and Berlioz' music, in its turn an image of what Isaiah saw, may terrifically inspire a receptive listener, who now and then may hear, as in the tenor solo of Berlioz' "Sanctus," something that makes him say, "Maybe that's what angels sound like."

Let me point out some other instances, too. The passage I began with, which comes from the Revelation of John, describes what one of the prophets called "the winding-up scene" at the latter end of time; but we encounter a reference to song at the beginning of things, too, in the Book of Job where the Lord, answering Job out of the whirlwind, asks, "Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth? declare, if thou hast understanding. Who hath laid the measures thereof, if thou knowest? or who hath stretched the line upon it? Whereupon are the foundations thereof fastened? or who laid the corner stone thereof; When the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy?" (38:4-7) Whether that was a composed and rehearsed song, I'll leave aside, but the idea of song, the image of song, as marking key occasions in the divine plot of history runs throughout the scriptures. (The Handbook for Church Music points out several other instances, and a brief article by Robert Matthews in the June 1973 *Ensign* cites a great many more.)

My two instances, at the beginning and end of this world's history, suggest one observation about song in the scriptures that seems worth making: that song is usually a group affair, a matter of community, of people becoming united with one another in song. There are grand exceptions to this, such as the Song of Moses, the Song of Deborah, many of the Psalms in the first person singular, and Nephi's psalm in the Book of Mormon. But "the morning stars sang together," and the Apocalyptic song that John heard was sung by "the hundred and forty and four thousand, which were redeemed from the earth." And so at least those first and last great instances of song in the scriptures represent joinings-together, the uniting of multitudes, as does the middle great instance, when "suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the host, praising God. . . ."

This sense of song as communion seems to me very important to our worship. I

take a cue from the Church Music Handbook, which stresses that music directors and all those concerned with music in our wards should use a terminology that implies participation rather than spectatorship; to use the term “congregation” rather than “audience,” for instance, is meant to reduce the sense that you out there are listening to a program up here, that this is something akin to entertainment. It isn’t; when the choir sings, it’s not supposed to feel like entertainment. The handbook suggests that the term “service” or “services” be used rather than “program,” again to dispel the sense that there is a program being presented up here to which you out there are passive auditors or spectators. The feeling of communal participation is clearly important.

I want now to suggest some other insights into the reasons why song matters. Perhaps the most frequently quoted scripture of the Church having to do with song, found in the Preface to our hymnal, comes from *Doctrine and Covenants*, wherein Emma Smith was directed to make a selection of sacred hymns. The Lord said, “For my soul delighteth in the song of the heart; yea, the song of the righteous is a prayer unto me, and it shall be answered with a blessing upon their heads” (25:12).

Let’s explicate this for a minute; let’s unfold it. Remember when the Lord was walking with two disciples to Emmaus, and, as the scripture says, “he unfolded the scriptures unto them.” I’m going to do a little unfolding here, a little explication. Whenever Mormons use the word “soul,” they mean something different from what other religious groups mean. For us, that word means the total being, the total person: it doesn’t mean only spirit or the unembodied. It means the embodied, the unity of intelligence, spirit, and physical body. So, “My soul delighteth,” says the Lord, “in the song of the heart.” I think that’s an important clue for us. Can we say that of ourselves? What happens to us when we really sing?

Well, in a matter-of-fact way, a rather obvious way, all those aspects of our souls are participating as we sing. Quite literally, flesh and bone are involved: there are bones in our head that are resonating, and if we’re really singing loudly we can feel it all the way down to our knees; flesh is involved—our diaphragm, vocal cords, mouth, lips; and it takes a certain intelligent discipline of flesh and bone to sing. The breath of life is the breath of song. The voice, by which each human being is known to other human beings, is involved. There is a kind of wholeness about the act of singing that makes song an appropriate symbol for the kind of wholeness each individual child of God is to experience in His Kingdom. Song delights the Lord’s soul, and it is a fitting metaphor of the joy our souls may share in His presence.

Take the next part of the verse: “The song of the righteous is a prayer unto me.” We usually emphasize “the righteous” here, which is very important, but the fact remains that He says their song is a prayer. How are songs prayers? What does song have to do with prayer? Some songs are obviously supplication, of course, but I need to return to the Church Music Handbook for another cue. The authors of the Handbook note that in our services, “Prayer, hymn singing, and partaking of the sacrament allow the worshipper to express himself to God.” I find it interesting to consider these three things together—song, prayer, and the sacrament, which is an ordinance. I would suggest that song is something between prayer and ordinance. Prayer, of course, is something we do in a pattern which is suggested but not laid down in absolutely strict lines by the Lord. Ordinance is that which is more strictly patterned, ordered, by the Lord: we submit ourselves to his pattern in the ordinance

of baptism, the ordinance of the sacrament, the ordinances of the priesthood, the ordinances of the temple; we grow into a pattern that has been established. Prayer is a somewhat freer, more individualistic form of address to the Lord. All three of these are forms of address and exchange, mediatory forms between us and the Lord.

I think that song gives us an experience not identical with but rather analogous to the experience of an ordinance. It is a pattern, arranged by man rather than by the Lord, that we join ourselves to, that we participate in willingly and with concentration, with the engagement of flesh and bone, breath, spirit, and intelligence. In song we unite these elements in ourselves, and we unite ourselves with our brothers and sisters. Think of how four-part harmony, for instance, combines different sounds into a unity more whole and lovely than any one part alone. It seems to me that these are the two functions of song—unity within us individually and unity among us as a congregation, unities that augment our potential for uniting ourselves with God. This makes song an appropriate symbol of the Kingdom of God.

I return again to Revelation, the beginning of Chapter 14: "And I looked, and, lo, a Lamb stood on the mount Sion, and with him an hundred forty and four thousand, having his Father's name written in their foreheads. And I heard a voice from heaven, as the voice of many waters, and as the voice of a great thunder: and I heard the voice of harpers harping with their harps: And they sung as it were a new song before the throne, and before the four beasts, and the elders: and no man could learn that song but the hundred and forty and four thousand, which were redeemed from the earth. . . . These are they which follow the Lamb whithersoever he goeth. These were redeemed from among men, being the firstfruits unto God and to the Lamb."

It is my prayer, brothers and sisters, that we may come to some kind of emotional and imaginative understanding of song, that we might learn to use song, as all human faculties and human possibilities, so in the service of our Lord and in uniting ourselves one to another and to Him that we may be able to learn that song and be ready to sing it when the occasion comes: that we, too, may one day come into his presence with singing.

In the name of Jesus Christ: Amen.