

THE INCARNATION AND MUSIC

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The incarnation of God's Son ushers in a new age. It is an event which evokes music and produces song. It creates a new song which began on the eve of his birth at Bethlehem and has continued ever since. That song celebrates the mystery of God's embodiment for us and our embodiment in God.

By his incarnation Christ has brought the song of heaven down to earth for us so that we earthlings can now join with the angels in their performance of praise in God's presence. Through Jesus heavenly praise has become incarnate on earth. We can now perform the heavenly song bodily with our human voices and our musical instruments in the presence of our embodied God.

And more than that! By his incarnation Christ has taken up and transformed the old song which goes back to the beginning of the world and the start of human history. That old song is the song of the ravaged world, groaning under the burden of decay and waiting for redemption (Rom 8:19-22). It is also the song of broken humanity which sings of lost glory, heartache from ill-will, and the longing for peace on earth. Even though its wistful words and angry sounds are still overheard in the new song, they have been transposed into a different key and rearranged in a new song of petition and thanksgiving and praise. That new song which comes from God's intervention in human history, gives glory to God together with the angelic choir and announces heavenly peace as a gift from God to the citizens of the earth.

This has happened because we human beings were made as singing creatures. We have voices so that we can not only speak but also sing. We have been designed to be sensitive and responsive to ordered sound. Music and song connect us deeply with each other and link us wonderfully with the order of creation. They are an important part of our humanity. The incarnation of God's Son must therefore affect us musically, if it is to touch us at all. Since Christ has taken on a human body to redeem us entirely, he engages us in music and song. Just as he has learnt our language, so that we can hear him and speak to him in our own words, so he has also learnt our human song so that he can teach us to sing his song and make music together with the angels.

In this essay I would like to explore this connection between Christ's incarnation and sacred music. My contention is that the performance of sacred music and song performs two important theological functions for us. They proclaim the presence of the incarnate Son of God and our physical redemption in him; through them the incarnate Son leads us in our songs of praise and involves us in the rejoicing of the Holy Trinity.

Praising the incarnate deity

In his great vision of heavenly worship in Revelation 5:6-10, St John sees twenty-four elders singing a new song. The elders, twelve for the patriarchs of Israel and twelve for the apostles of Christ, represent the people of God in both testaments. As John watches, they rise from their thrones and fall down before Jesus the Lamb, because he has just received the sealed scroll from God. That scroll is his script for the last act in the drama of world history. Each of the elders holds two things in their hands, a lyre for accompanying their songs of praise, and a bowl full of incense for presenting the prayers of the saints to God. As they fall prostrate before Jesus, they sing a new song of praise to him. In this song they acknowledge that by his sacrificial death Jesus has created a new international priesthood for God. Their task is to reign with him on earth. And they reign in a strange way indeed. As those who stand before God and have access to him they reign by their performance of prayer and praise.

This vision shows us how music is connected with the incarnate Christ. He himself has created this priestly choir by his self-sacrifice as the Lamb. This choir now performs its song of praise in his presence here on earth. It acknowledges him as its creator, its director in music and song. It sings its song to him and his heavenly Father together with all the angels and the whole of creation (Rev 5:11-14). By that song it proclaims the hidden kingship of Christ and tells how he acts as the cosmic world-ruler. He does not reign as the Lion of Judah but as the Lamb of God. So we may conclude that the function of sacred music and song is to proclaim the presence of the incarnate Son of God and to disclose his mysterious way of working as the redeemer of the world.

The origin of Christian music lies with King David in the Old Testament. He established the divine service for the temple which his son Solomon built in Jerusalem. God commanded David through the prophets Nathan and Gad to establish the levitical choir for performing praise as part of that service (2 Chron 29:25). The choir was appointed to sing the Lord's song each morning and evening as the lamb for the burnt offering was offered up to the Lord on the altar. This song was announced by the clash of cymbals and was accompanied by lyres and harps. At the end of each verse, sung by the choir as it stood before the altar and faced the assembled congregation, the priests sounded their trumpets to announce the presence of the heavenly king and his readiness to receive the petitions of his people. The song of the Lord consisted of a psalm of praise performed in his presence.

The song of praise performed a very significant theological function in the temple service. It was not spoken to God as a gesture of flattery, or even as an act of adoration, but was addressed to the congregation. As is shown in 1 Chronicles 16:7-36, David proclaimed the goodness and steadfast love of the Lord to the congregation through the choir. He called on the people of Israel and all the nations to join him in seeking God's gracious presence and praising him to the whole world. The song of praise was therefore proclaimed God's name and his saving deeds to all people. It acknowledged his presence and announced his availability to his people. The presence of God in grace inspired the song of praise, even as the song of praise made his gracious presence known to its hearers.

This connection between access to God's presence and the performance of sacred music is shown most vividly by the account of the dedication of the temple by Solomon in 2 Chronicles 5:11-14. This story tells us that after the priests had placed the ark in the inner sanctuary of the temple and had come out of the temple, the full Levitical choir began to sing a song of praise to the accompaniment of lyres and harps. As soon as they began to sing the Lord's song, the glorious presence of the Lord filled the temple. But the glory of the Lord was not seen, because it was hidden in a cloud. The story therefore indicates that the glory of the Lord was revealed to the people audibly to the human ear in the song of praise rather than visibly to the human eye. The performance of praise in music and song disclosed the hidden presence of the Lord and announced his acceptance of his people. It was for this reason that Bach prized this story. It summed up the theological significance of all true church music. He affirmed the importance of this story for him as a church musician by inserting the comment in the margin of his Bible: 'NB. In devotional music God is always present with his grace'.

The presence of God and the gift of his blessing at the temple in Jerusalem prefigured and foreshadowed the incarnation. St John claims that, since the Word became flesh, the glory of God now tabernacles among us in the humanity of Jesus (John 1:14). It is hidden in the flesh of Jesus, rather than in a cloud. His body is now the temple of the living God, the place where God meets with us and we meet with God (John 2:21). Hence the body of Jesus is now the place where God appears and is praised. There God is available to us; there we have access to God.

The incarnation produces a new song of praise which applauds and lauds the presence of the incarnate deity. The gospel of St Luke explores this mystery in the story of the appearance of the angels to the shepherds on Christmas evening (Luke 2:8-20). That story, however, makes sense only in the light of the Old Testament. According to Psalm 29, the angels who stand before God in heaven and behold his glory face to face, react to their vision of God by glorifying him. Heaven was therefore the place where the angels sang doxology to God. But with the birth of Jesus something remarkable has occurred. The place for doxology has shifted from heaven to earth. The radiant presence of God, his glory, is now associated with Jesus. Wherever Jesus is present, human beings can join with the angels in singing: 'Glory the God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours'. Like the shepherds, all God's people glorify and praise God for what they hear from Jesus and see in him. The appearance of God in that human body creates a new choir, in which people combine with the angels in singing the doxology.

The ramifications of this event are unfolded by St Paul in Ephesians 1:3-14. In this passage he contrasts the new choir created by Christ with the old Levitical choir at the temple. The temple choir had been appointed to praise God for the blessings which the Israelites had received from him here on earth. Each of the musicians had been given their allotted place at the temple. Their vocation from God was to praise him whenever they were rostered for duty there at the temple. But now Christ has created a new cosmic choir. That choir is the church. By his incarnation he has united earthlings with angels under his headship. He has redeemed people and made them holy in him. They now have the same status as Jesus. They share in his sonship and have every blessing that belongs to him as God's Son. They join the

angels in a choir which spans heaven and earth. That choir consists of both Jews and Gentiles. Through the incarnation of Jesus human beings have access to the heavenly realm as they continue to live on earth. Both angels and people have the same musical vocation. Even though people are only a little like God, they show what God is like by praising him. They have then been appointed as praise-singers for God the Father here on planet earth. They are to live for the praise of God's glory (Eph 1:6,12,14). They cannot do this apart from God and in his absence. In and through Jesus they praise God the Father as those who stand 'holy and blameless before him' (Eph 1:4), for he has united them bodily with himself and has taken them bodily with himself into the Godhead. As recipients of God's grace they sing the song of God's amazing grace to the world. In fact, God is so utterly good and gracious, so much more generous, philanthropic and loving than the best human being, that they can only communicate something of that grace by wholehearted, full-bodied praise. Sacred music then is full of wonder and amazement at the great mystery of the incarnation, by which the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily in Jesus, so that we humans can come to fullness of life in and through him.

Jesus the praise-singer

A puzzling prophecy is recorded in Zephaniah 3:17. The Israelites usually sang their songs of praise to the Lord in his presence at the temple in Jerusalem. These songs of praise were either addressed to God or, more commonly, sung about God. Yet in a strange reversal of roles, this prophecy announced that in the age to come the Lord himself would be a singer of praise in Zion. He would, in fact, rejoice over his people and exult in them with loud songs of jubilation.

The New Testament shows how Jesus fulfils this prophecy. He came on earth so that his joy would be in his disciples (John 15:11). As the Messiah he is the second David. He outdoes David. Jesus is depicted as the true singer of the psalms. The psalms not only speak of him; he is, most strangely, the speaker in the psalms, their player, the musician who performs them. He enacts the psalms both in himself and in his disciples.

The letter to the Hebrews touches on this enactment of praise by Jesus in its meditation on the incarnation in 2:5-18. God's Son took on human flesh and blood, so that might sanctify us totally and make us his priestly brothers and sisters, holy musicians together with him. As our brother he stands among us when we gather for worship and leads us in our praises. Hebrews 2:11,12 says:

the one who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one Father. For this reason Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters, saying, 'I will proclaim your name to my brothers and sisters, in the midst of the congregation I will praise you.'

As our praise-singer Jesus not only proclaims his Father to us as our Father but also praises him for us and together with us. He became our brother so that he could sing the praises of God to us here on earth and include us in that song of praise. We may therefore join with him in his song. He is our true praise leader.

The full force of Hebrews 2:11,12 is felt only if we note the origin of the quotation. It comes from Psalm 22, the psalm that Jesus prayed as he hung on the cross. This psalm is remarkable because it juxtaposes a terrible lament at utter abandonment by God in verses 1-21 with a resounding act of thanksgiving for divine deliverance coupled with an open call to participation in an eucharistic banquet in celebration of that deliverance in verses 22-31. When the writer of Hebrews quotes the pivotal verse 22, in which the singer of this heart-rending lament begins his song of praise, he implies that we are to understand that verse in the light of the whole psalm.

If that is so, we have here a truly astonishing interpretation of the incarnation through the use of this verse from Psalm 22. The inscription of the psalm identifies it as a psalm of David. He, then, is the apparent singer of this psalm. But it is not just his song. It is the song of Israel in its experience of abandonment by its own God. Indeed it is the song of everyone who has ever felt forsaken by God. Despite that, Hebrews claims that it is predominantly the song of Jesus. God's Son shared our flesh and blood, so that he could taste the worst of death on behalf of all people. As the one who suffered the agony of rejection by his own dear Father physically on the cross, he sings our human song of betrayal and death, so that we can join him in his song of deliverance and thanksgiving. He takes up our angry song in the face of death and makes it part of his song of victory over death and all the powers of darkness. By his incarnation he brings about a wonderful transposition. He transposes our song of rejection and loss into his divine idiom, even as he also transposes his divine song of grace and acceptance into our human idiom. They do not, however, remain two separate songs, two different kinds of music which clash with each other. In Jesus they cohere; they combine to form a single song which speaks of a common experience of abandonment and acceptance, of suffering and celebration, of death and resurrection. The dissonances of earthly life have, as it were, been incorporated in the music of heaven.

Jesus leads the church in its songs of praise. He does not just proclaim his Father's name to those who are his brothers and sisters; he invites them to join with him as their lead-singer. The church then sings its songs of praise together with Jesus. This amazing result of the incarnation is expressed in a number of different ways in the New Testament. Both individuals (Rom 1:8) and the church (Rom 7:25; Col 3:17) give thanks to God the Father *through Jesus*. They give thanks to him *in the name of Jesus* (Eph 5:20). Jesus is also the leader of the church in its performance of doxology. As people who serve with Jesus in the heavenly sanctuary we give glory to God *through Jesus* (Rom 16:27; 1 Pet 4:11; Jude 25) and *in Christ Jesus* (Eph 3:21). So, since we have Jesus as our great high priest who is physically related to us and able to stand in for us physically with his heavenly Father, we are to offer a sacrifice of praise to God *through Jesus* (Heb 13:15).

The church then follows Jesus in singing its songs and in performing its music. It does not, however, sing its own song; it sings the song which it receives from him. Nor does it sing that song by itself with its own instruments. The vision of St John in Revelation 15:2-4 shows how the saints hold 'the harps of God' (or, more correctly, 'the lyres of God') in their hands as they sing 'the song of the Lamb'. The song of the Lamb is the song of Jesus, the song which he sings as he adores his divine Father. Jesus does not copyright that song, but he makes it freely available to us. We can sing it with him because he sings it for us, like a mother teaching her child to sing.

Now all this analysis would be rather theoretical and unreal if we divorced the performance of sacred music and song from its specific location in the church. Jesus the incarnate Son of God sings his praise 'in the midst of the congregation' (Heb 2:12). There he addresses his physical sisters and brothers and invites them to join with him in praising their common Father. As Hebrews intimates by its reference to the act of thanksgiving in Psalm 22, Jesus acts as our praise-singer most obviously in the eucharistic banquet which he has established to share with us. That banquet celebrates his suffering for us and his deliverance from death for us. In the eucharistic prayer which he prays for us, he proclaims what our holy Father has done for us and leads us in our thanksgiving to our God. In the eucharist, heavenly praise is incarnate on earth. There we adore our holy God together with the angels. There Jesus becomes involved with us physically by giving us himself bodily to us. There we rejoice in his real presence with us and our real presence with God the Father through him. There in faith we may approach the Father bodily together with Jesus, since both our hearts and our bodies are cleansed from all impurity (Heb 10:22). There we participate most tangibly in the mystery of the incarnation. How else could we celebrate that transaction than in music and song?

Physical resonance

If a musical instrument is to be played together with other instruments, it needs to be tuned to the same pitch as they are. At the beginning of a concert all the players therefore tune their instruments so that they are in tune with each other. Something like that happens to us as Christians. Yet we do not tune ourselves so that we are in tune with Christ; he tunes us so that we can play his music and sing his song. More correctly, he plays his music and sings his song in and through us. That, however, is not a matter of vocal development but involves the transformation of our whole self, body and soul, mind and spirit. That happens corporately by our incorporation into the church, the choir of Christ.

If certain string instruments are properly tuned, an unplayed instrument may under some conditions resonate sympathetically with another instrument as it is played. Something like this happens spiritually with Christ. But this does not happen musically even if it is associated with the sacred music of song. It comes about by the power of Christ and his holy name. The words of Christ are 'spirit and life' (John 6:63). They are Spirit-filled words. Just as human words are empowered by human breath, so the words of Christ convey his Holy Spirit. The Spirit gives them their power. The Spirit makes them effectual and able to accomplish what they say. They therefore transform their hearers by the inspiration of the joy-producing, music-making Spirit.

Through the combination of Christ's word with music, the Holy Spirit interacts with our spirits and engages us in all the dimensions of our existence. While music is not in itself spiritual, it has great power with us. Music seems to affect us most profoundly when it links our brain waves with the vibration of string instruments, our breathing with the sound of wind instruments, our bodily movements with the rhythms of percussion, and our thinking with the words of a song. So then, if music is combined with Christ's word, his Holy Spirit touches us in all these ways.

We tend to disassociate what is spiritual from what is physical. But as a result of the incarnation God gives us his Holy Spirit by physical means, such as words and water, bread and wine. The incarnate Christ works through these physical things on physical people. He does not seek to save people by disembodiment but by sanctifying them bodily. By his incarnation and his bodily resurrection he incorporates the faithful body with him into the life of the Holy Trinity. He transforms their physical existence with his Holy Spirit.

Christ uses his word and Holy Spirit to attune people to himself and each other. In Romans 15:1-13 Paul argues that the harmony which Christ produces between the people from Jewish and Gentile backgrounds in the church at Rome is both the presupposition and consequence of unanimous praise. He says in 15:5,6:

May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together with one voice you may glorify the Lord and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The key words here are 'in accordance with Christ Jesus.' Jesus not only models harmony but also creates it. As a result of his work the many different members of the church in Rome combine to glorify God together with one voice and one song. That is the goal of the incarnation. It is meant to create a new community of praise. That community is Christ's choir. Through it, according to Romans 15:9, Christ accomplishes what he vowed to do in Psalm 18:49. The work of the incarnate Christ as the praise-singer in the church transforms the church into a praise-singing community.

The performance of sacred music and song in the liturgy of the church incorporates us more completely into Christ and attunes us to him. St Paul explains how this happens in Colossians 3:16:

Let the word of Christ dwell in you (plural) richly, as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with grace/gratitude in your hearts to God.

When Paul uses the word 'dwell' here, he recalls his earlier claim in 2:9 that the whole fullness of Christ 'dwells' bodily in Christ. He teaches that through his word Christ, who became flesh for us, becomes, as it were, embodied in us. He dwells in us and among us bodily through his Word. The Word which became incarnate for us becomes incarnate in us.

The performance of sacred song is closely connected with the word of Christ. This works in two ways. On the one hand, as Christ's word dwells in a Christian community, it produces personal and corporate praise. Through his word Christ not only moves the faithful to sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs; he also gives them the content of these songs. His word shapes the music and inspires the song. Through these songs he speaks his word into the hearts and souls of those who sing them. On the other hand, as the community sings these songs, that word becomes increasingly productive in that community. It enriches those who take it to heart and gives them wisdom from God; it transfigures and transforms them.

This happens in two separate dimensions, the communal and the personal. Communally, as people sing the Lord's song, they teach and instruct each other. They teach God's grace as they sing their song. They do not do this, in a theoretical way, by speaking about faith, judgment, forgiveness, prayer, thanksgiving and so on; they do it, quite practically, by professing their faith, confessing their sins, seeking forgiveness, praying to God, and thanking him. As they sing the word of Christ, they share Christ with each other. And he speaks to them through each other as they sing of God's grace. Christ becomes incarnate in the singing congregation as it focuses on him and his grace. Personally, the singing of a song with a good musical setting plants the word of Christ ever deeper into the heart of every singer and hearer of the song. The sung word of Christ imbeds the 'grace' of God in the human heart where it can then take become most effective and fruitful. That grace produces 'thankfulness', true gratitude which, in turn, issues in thanksgiving to God the Father.

The conjunction of Christ's word with appropriate music accomplishes something powerful in us. As we hear or sing the song of Christ, that song sings God's grace into us. It brings the Holy Spirit into the very centre of our being with the result that the Spirit affects most powerfully and changes us most comprehensively. Once the word of grace has been musically impressed in our hearts, that word moves us individually and corporately, in our bodies with their senses, and in our minds with their affections. It takes over and sings of Christ in us. It fills us with joy and wonder, with awe and gratitude, with thanksgiving and devotion. As it resonates in us, we resonate with it. It makes us thanks-givers, eucharistic people whose hearts are so full of God's goodness that they overflow with thanksgiving and praise. The union of Christ's word with music accomplishes this transformation. Calvin therefore speaks rather vividly of the melody of a hymn as the funnel for God to pour his grace into us. Once that word of grace has sung its way into our hearts, it resides there and produces a never-ending song of thanksgiving to God the Father.

Through the presence of the incarnate Lord Jesus in the church the Holy Spirit creates a new community of praise which resonates with Christ. In Ephesians 5:19b-20 St. Paul describes how the Holy Spirit transforms a congregation through the performance of praise and for its performance. He says:

be filled with the Spirit, as you speak to one another in spiritual psalms and hymns and songs, as you sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, and as you always give thanks to God the father on behalf of everybody, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

This transformation occurs in three dimensions: the communal singing of songs produced by the Holy Spirit, the personal performance of music by the heart in its devotion to Christ, and the inner-trinitarian enactment of continual thanksgiving to God the Father together with Jesus. Through praise the Holy Spirit attunes people to each other, to Christ, and to God the Father.

Through the incarnation a powerful circuit of praise is established. As God the Father fills people with his Holy Spirit, the Spirit produces thanksgiving to God the Father through Jesus Christ. And the more people praise Jesus and his heavenly Father,

the more they are filled with the Holy Spirit and transformed into thanks-givers. And so they rejoice in God just as God rejoices in them.

Conclusion

This year we celebrate the incarnation of our Lord in a special way as we enter the third millennium. We therefore do well to reflect on the implications of this momentous event in human history. We live in a country where most people treat this mystery with contempt. They oscillate between crass materialism and discarnate spirituality, between sordid realism and escapist fantasy. They do not realize that in Christ all things hold together; everything and everybody has its proper place in him. They have forgotten that, as archbishop Temple remarked early in this century, Christianity is the most material of all religions. The Christian faith affirms God's creation of the physical world, God's activity in its history, his incarnation in Jesus, the physical death and resurrection of Jesus, our physical resurrection from the dead, and the final redemption of the whole cosmos. Sacred song and music bear witness to the union of the physical and the material in the Christian faith. They celebrate God's physical involvement with us in Christ as well as our physical involvement with God through Christ. We therefore rejoice in the marriage of heaven and earth as we sing the Lord's song. It proclaims the incarnation of our Lord. It involves us in his incarnation and anticipates our complete physical incorporation into the Godhead at our resurrection. It engages us partially even now in heavenly rejoicing.