

**No one could learn that song****Psalm 100**

Whether the strange chantings of an African tribe, or the singing of a Bach mass, or the passionate outpouring at a rugby match, or the honest sincerity of the General Assembly worship, there is something about singing, the act of singing, that stirs the soul and touches the heart.

Outside churches and football and rugby matches, there are very few opportunities for people to gather together to sing. Maybe with the work of Gareth Malone and his various choirs, maybe with the work of Fischy Music here in Edinburgh encouraging children to sing, and maybe in some of our more enlightened schools where singing has not quite died out, public singing has not quite vanished, but it seems to me certainly to be on the endangered species list.

I know trying to select hymns for school assemblies, weddings and funerals has become more and more difficult over the years of my ministry. We can't assume that people know the things we know. Yet I also know that, by and large, when people are encouraged to sing and given the opportunity, they enjoy it. For singing does indeed move and stir and engage with aspects of people's lives that are not normally touched in everyday living.

Psalm 100 has in its heading the description that it is a psalm for the thank offering, or a psalm of thanksgiving. This is the only time the word 'thanksgiving' appears in a psalm heading. The whole psalm speaks of the unashamedly joyful response to life which seeks to praise God for all that He has done and for all that He is.

In this Psalm, and it should be with all worship, joy and sincerity pulsates throughout. All the earth, all creation, is caught up in the song. And in those times when joyfulness is not possible, then the sincerity and authenticity of our worship, even when hearts are breaking and tears are in our eyes, is the power of singing together felt most keenly.

Psalm 100 takes us close to the heart of true worship, with congregations invited to experience this joyfulness, and this authenticity, whenever they sing. In tradition, or in modernity, singing

with conviction, singing with a willingness to learn, singing because this is one of the personal and communal ways that we affirm our faith, remains at the heart of our worship. “Come into God’s presence with singing”, exclamation mark. We sing our way from earth to heaven, and it gladdens God’s heart.

### **Revelation 14:1-7**

A little while ago I was making a pastoral visit to a man who was approaching the end of his life. He was at peace with himself, and with God, but he had a question for me. “Minister, can you tell me what heaven is going to be like?” We think of clouds, and pearly gates, and golden stairways, and endless sunshine. The Bible has little to say about the dimensions or the interior decoration of heaven. The closest Jesus ever gets to it is the many mansions house that belongs to God. In Revelation there is some attempt by John to describe in a little more detail, but it’s a little hazy.

What we do get is the expressed hope that there will be music. Music in heaven. The redeemed community is a worshipping, celebrating community that learns the new song of the new age.

One of the joys of being Minister here is coming into the Church just before the choir starts its Sunday morning rehearsal. They often start with one of the hymns, before going on to the introit and anthem, and maybe one or two other things. Listening in, I know it’s not always sweet music, as all involved get to grips with the music and the harmony. There may even be times when some may well wonder, that ‘no-one could learn that song’, as John mentions in Revelation.

The point of singing in heaven is that the song is learned by all who make it there. The number given is 144,000, but this is not a literal number. That number stands for the whole church. It stands for those who have, in their living, striven to be faithful to God. John’s vision is of a body that has attempted to be true to God. And if that vision is about all being included in the embrace of heaven, then John’s challenging view is that all who get to heaven will be able to sing that song, that new song.

“No one could learn that song except...” everyone who has been embraced into faith and welcomed into heaven. It is a song of inclusion, not exclusion. It is a new song that re-tunes the harmonies of heaven and moves the people of God forward, and upward, not backward, and downward.

It is a magnificent image: the children of God, **all** of them, singing in heaven. **All** with a voice; **all** with a part to sing; **all** with words to share; **all** with a tune to enjoy. The white people, the black people; the British people, the European people; the old people, the young people; the married people, the single people; the rich people, the poor people; the gay people, the straight people; the Protestant people, the Catholic people; the faithful people, the doubting people.

All the people, all the people dwelling on the earth; all learning the song that none could learn until the blessing of God touched their hearts, their souls, their minds, their lips. And then they sing. They sing to God with all their love and strength.

Tonight we give thanks for the songs that embellish our faith. We sing, because it delights God, and it completes us.

**Amen**