

## Spirit Song

From football terraces to concert halls, campfires to car-journeys, churches to karaoke bars, there are few things more powerful and uplifting than communal singing. Singing with others releases endorphins which boosts happiness and raises confidence. It actually strengthens our immune system believe it or not. Singing together brings people together; it creates community, bonds and unifies us in celebration, lament and sometimes protest. Singing with others helps us feel part of something bigger. When one voice becomes many, especially in harmony, it can feel like a holy thing.

I sadly didn't make the cut with the school choir. I tried emulating the notes the music teacher played on the piano but evidently those notes were not the right notes, or, to quote the great Eric Morecambe, they were the right notes just not necessarily in the right order!

In this extract from the letter to the Ephesian Church we heard earlier, the apostle Paul encourages the believers to sing together hymns and psalms and spiritual songs. 'Don't get drunk on wine', he advises, which can lead to all sorts of regretful stuff, but be filled instead with the Holy Spirit.

On the day of Pentecost, when the disciples were filled with the Spirit, onlookers mistook it for drunkenness. It seems there might be some comparisons therefore between one kind of spirit and another! Both produce a lack of inhibition and a measure of joy of course. Presumably the Holy Spirit however comes without the regret, the bawdiness and the hangover.

'Be filled with the Spirit'.

What does that mean? How does it happen and what does it look like?

Well, here I think it's useful to make some comparisons actually with the communal singing Paul advocated.

The Holy Spirit, this presence and power of God, is, I believe, at work everywhere and in all things. Just as we all possess the ability to sing (whether the notes are in the right order or not!), the Spirit is already within us all. It therefore becomes a question of tapping into and releasing this Spirit within.

And the first thing to do is to welcome that presence; acknowledge it, and then make room, cultivate an openness to the Spirit, invite her to have her way with us. One of the oldest and most powerful prayers of all is 'Come, Holy Spirit'. This is an ancient invitation to the Spirit to fully inhabit all that we are, and to open us to the deeper dynamics of life.

When we sing with others, we have to tune in, we have to listen. If we impose our own melody, we're end up throwing the whole thing out of tune; it's just noise, dissonance. To be filled with the Spirit however, is to consciously tune in to what's really going on around us and within us. Curiosity is an overlooked spiritual discipline. When we listen curiously, we begin to hear and sense so much; we see connections, we hear harmonies.

Often the Spirit is compared with breath; 'Holy Spirit, Living Breath of God'. When we sing together, we breath together; our rhythms connect. When we allow the Spirit to breathe within, instinctively we begin to tune in to the needs and the lives of others. We begin actually to feel something of what they feel.

To sing together, it helps to have a conductor, a prompter. The Holy Spirit is our conductor; she prompts us. Often that leftfield thought about someone is a prompt to reach out to that someone; send them a text, pick up the phone, pray for them. Just this past week, a telephone call prompted me to swallow some pride and board a plane. And it was the best, most healing thing I could have done. That's the Spirit.

The Holy Spirit works with our instincts. Often those coincidences in life aren't coincidences. She's the great Influencer. The Spirit weaves destinies together. And sometimes the Holy Spirit will give us a little insider information; a whisper, an impression; a word, an image perhaps which give us further insight. Paul called this 'words of knowledge'.

Singing together creates hope. When voices lift together, we make something beautiful and transformative. And that is the work of the Spirit, to create hope and to transform.

In his letter, Paul writes 'for the days are evil'. These days feel particularly evil. We'll all have been heartbroken and shocked by the racist mobs terrorising communities across our land; demonstrating outside mosques, setting fire to hotels housing asylum seekers, clashing violently with police. And it's easy to feel overwhelmed by such evil. But within all of this, the Holy Spirit, the presence and power of God continues her work; in ordinary people turning up the morning after to clear up the damage and rebuild walls torn down. In the thousands who reclaimed those streets in vigil and peaceful resistance. In members of a mosque taking food to anti-Islamic protesters and cups of tea to police officers. In the imam who hugged one of those protesters, crying, 'our hearts are broken too'.

This is the Spirit at work, doing what the Spirit does; building bridges, making peace, creating empathy, showing up in acts of kindness and grace. The anger and fear that has erupted recently cannot simply be addressed by legislation, prison or fines. It can only be met with understanding and compassion. And that's harder, much, much harder. It's beyond our humanity actually. So, we draw deeply from the Spirit within, allowing her to search our own anger and prejudice; asking for the courage to own it and name it. And then to ask ourselves what we can do to speak out and speak up, be peacemakers and kindness-givers wherever we are.

The conductor Jeremy Haneman says 'There's something about communal singing that reaches into the dawn of human history and speaks to us in a way that transcends many boundaries and enables something innately human to manifest itself – the sense of belonging, of sharing, of being part of a team and a bond of camaraderie. We breathe together, we pore over the music together, we harmonise and clash and struggle and work in the service of the song and yet, somehow, it all flows. We are left with a feeling that cannot be measured in any quantitative way but we know in our hearts that something in us has been profoundly shifted.'

So, may we all work at breathing together, at harmonising and clashing and struggling in the service of one another in the power and flow of the Spirit so that something profoundly shifts within us and within our world, and a new Spirit song, a new melody beautiful and life-giving, is born in us and through us. Come Holy Spirit, Come.

## Ephesians 5. 15-20

<sup>15</sup> Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, <sup>16</sup> making the most of the time, because the days are evil. <sup>17</sup> So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. <sup>18</sup> Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit, <sup>19</sup> as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, <sup>20</sup> giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

<sup>53</sup> Jesus said to them, “Very truly I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. <sup>54</sup> Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day. <sup>55</sup> For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. <sup>56</sup> Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in them. <sup>57</sup> Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me. <sup>58</sup> This is the bread that came down from heaven. Your ancestors ate manna and died, but whoever feeds on this bread will live forever.” <sup>59</sup> He said this while teaching in the synagogue in Capernaum.

<sup>15</sup> Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, <sup>16</sup> making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. <sup>17</sup> Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord’s will is. <sup>18</sup> Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit, <sup>19</sup> speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord, <sup>20</sup> always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.