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## SINGING in Worship

1 I'm reproducing for this posting almost verbatim a sermon I preached recently in my home church, Christ Lutheran in Waterloo, Ontario. What I've done here is called *mystagogy* – opening the mysteries of Christian worship. Helping worshippers to worship. And it's a very old and very legitimate way to preach. You can read the full manuscript – and watch a video of my preaching it! – at our parish's website <[christwaterloo.ca](http://christwaterloo.ca)>.

2 You've noticed that here at Christ Church, we sing seven, even eight hymns every Sunday. And our service itself is full of singing. You sing your part; Andre sings his. I've even been in Lutheran services where the pastor sings all the prayers. And the Readers don't read the Bible Readings; they *sing* them. (Ready for that next Sunday, Reiner?) Wow! That's a lot of singing. Now: Why all this singing? What's wrong with just speaking?

3 Here's what's wrong with just speaking. As one of my mentors says, People sing when they have something to sing about. And we Christians, dear friends, surely have something to sing about! So sing out! Even if you can't carry a tune in a bucket! Even if you have to sing monotone. Christian worship doesn't need to sound like the Metropolitan Opera.

4 Let me tell you a terrific story about our Gathering Hymn, 524, *What is this place*. Turn to it in your hymnal. I had a study leave in Europe in 1968 – before any of you were born. Hah! – and I attended a Roman Catholic mass in Amsterdam, Holland, led by this fellow who wrote the words here, Huub Oosterhuis. (My Dutch pronunciation needs some work.) See his name there? Lower left. I knew he had a reputation as a reformer, following the principles of the Second Vatican Council in Roman Catholicism, so I arranged to interview him after Mass for an hour.

5 The interview was wonderful. But it was the Mass itself that blew me away. Very participatory. Lots of congregational singing, even a splendid version of a sung psalm, in Dutch – like you did in English with Andre a minute ago. Martin Luther would have loved it!

6 But what really put a crown on the whole experience – when I saw this hymn for the first time in *ELWorship* – was remembering where we lived then, our street address. We were living for a week with friends in Amsterdam – on *Valerius Street*! Do you see that name? Lower left also. He’s the composer of the music here, from the 17th Century! Not a German chorale, but a Dutch chorale! An ancient hymn tune with a terrific modern text. Even more wonderful: A Dutch Reformed hymn tune! Our hymn book is thoroughly ecumenical. Not just narrowly Lutheran.

7 And get this: We’re singing a hymn today from the 2nd Century, dear friends! Turn to 478: *Father, We Thank You*. This hymn text – in poetry here – was originally Greek, and it dates from the time when the *Gospel of John* was being written! Wow! There’re not many things in this world with that history! *Didache* means *Teaching* in Greek – think of the English word didactic – and it’s presumably the teaching of the Apostles about early Christian worship. There are at least 3 other hymns in our book that use these images, these metaphors from the *Didache*, about the many seeds gathered into one loaf. That’s a terrific picture of all our human diversity gathered into one church.

8 OK. Look in the lower right corner. That’s the hymn tune name, *Rendez a Dieu*. (My French pronunciation needs some work too.) Every hymn in our book has a hymn tune name. A name for the melody. That’s terrific too. Easy to identify!

9 And those strange numbers below the tune name? Guess. That’s right: the syllable number. You’ll sometimes see CM for Common Metre, and Common Metre means eight syllables and then six syllables. We’re even singing today a hymn in Shakespeare’s metre: *iambic pentametre*: That’s ten syllables in each line: 463 *Lord, who the night you were betrayed did pray*.

10 Now: Why put the number of syllables in a hymn book? So you can swap hymn tunes if you want to! In other words, the text of this poetry can be sung to *another* tune with the same metre! And we often do that too at Christ Church. At the very back of our book, there’s a First Line index, a Tune Name index, and even a Metrical index. Very helpful for worship planners.

11 Now turn to our Sending Hymn, our last hymn, 840 *Now Thank We All Our God*. That’s a German Chorale, one of the all-time great hymns ever written, surely among the Top Ten. But we’ve got Scandinavian hymns and English hymns and spirituals, both black and white. Our Offertory Hymn today, 725, is a Spanish hymn. There are even a couple Chinese hymns in our book. And lots of wonderful African hymns. You can sing them with drums. And we often do! Remember: The word “catholic” means “embracing everything; lacking nothing”. And it’s a good word, not a bad word.

12 Now I want you to remember all this, because there’s going to be a test next Sunday. No, seriously, there will not be a test. I’m just kidding. You don’t need to know or to remember *any* of this. But *pastors* ought to know these things. Because it’s part of their tool chest. I’d want my pastors to know and to love the tools in their tool box, the same way the car mechanics in my garage know and love the tools they use, day after day.

13 So singing in worship is not just the fussy preoccupation of an elite. In fact, there are at least five good reasons for singing. Every Sunday.

14 First, you get a lesson in theology. These hymns and songs – they teach you something about the Good News of God’s favour to all in Jesus. That’s the principle witness in Christian faith. You walk in the door here on Sunday, and within minutes, you’re singing the Gospel. You sing – you hear others sing! – the Gospel, every Sunday. Even when the sermon’s a dud! Hah!

15 Second. You get a lesson in Christian ethics. How to live out your life. Not all hymns, not all the songs we sing, are as ethically rich and challenging as our Hymn of the Day, 704 *When pain of the world surrounds us*. This hymn reminds you that Christian faith is not just you and Jesus. It’s also active in love toward your neighbour. Hey, toward your enemy, as Jesus reminds us! Your adversary. Christian faith is a social thing. A corporate thing.

16 So for instance I used to tell my classes at Seminary that you come to worship, not just for the health of your own soul, but also for the health of *my* soul. For your *neighbour’s* soul. The fact is, I need to see you – need to hear you! --singing these songs, praying these prayers. Your neighbour needs it.

17 We have fragile faith lives, all of us. You need to see *me* here, engaged in what’s going on, singing those hymns, praying those prayers. It strengthens your faith to hear me singing here. It strengthens my faith to hear *you* singing. We simply need each other. We are food for each other: “...each other’s bread and wine”, says our wonderful Gathering Hymn.

18 Third. You even get a lesson in Church History. Have you ever heard of the *Didache* before? Well, now you have. That’s early Christian history. Among the very earliest Christian history! Something you can drop in conversation tomorrow around the water cooler. “I understand that the *Didache* says...” Hah!

19 Here’s fourth. I think it’s just fun. Christian worship should not be a drag every Sunday. It should lift up your spirit, inspire you. Singing exhilarates you!

20 Here’s the last reason all this is important. The most important reason. Singing itself. Singing together in an assembly these days is a distinctly counter-cultural activity. That is, it goes against the radical individualism that the surrounding society is trying to sell you.

21 Christian faith – and therefore, Christian worship – has a set of values our surrounding world does not have. We call that, in shorthand, the Kingdom of God, the Rule and Reign of Christ.

22 So, in Holy Communion, with our bread and cup, we honour, at our best, the world of nature – the molecules! – as well as the world of human beings. We honour little kids, as well as grown-ups. Girls and women, as well as men. The poor and oppressed, as well as the rich and privileged. Blacks and browns and yellows, as well as whites. Gays, as well as straights. Old folks and the disabled, as well as young folks and those of us temporarily able-bodied. (And

it *is* only temporary, folks. Gravity gets us *all*, sooner or later!) People who cannot read or write, as well as people who can. People with right wing opinions, and people with left wing opinions. You won't find those values out there in the world. Not yet.

23 No, Christian worship will be nothing like a TV Talk Show, or a Rock Concert, or a Virtual Reality Video Game. It will be something you have to learn. In Christian life, there's always something more you can learn. That's why I call what we do here every Sunday "worship for grown-ups." Martin Luther has a great quote: "The Christian life is not being. It's becoming." Christian life is a journey. And none of us is there yet.

26 And here's a reminder: In Lutheran worship – catholic worship – the *assembly* is the choir. *You* are the choir. Those people who sit up front are not there to present a concert every Sunday. They're only there to help you do your job.

27 Finally, here's a terrific quote from Latin: *Bis orat, qui contat*. "Those who sing pray twice."

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