

372 “Let the saints be joyful in glory”

(A brief correction and apology at the start: Israel Folau has signed for the French club Catalan Dragons, not for Wigan rugby league team as we stated last week. The message conveyed by that example is still valid).

Music, singing and dancing have always had a special place in human life. They express our deep emotions and reveal what really matters to us, and as such they can be forces for great good, or for great bad!

In Exodus 15.1-21 we read of Moses and the children of Israel, with “Miriam the prophetess ... and all the women with timbrels and dances” singing “unto the Lord, for he hath triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider hath he thrown into the sea” (vv.1b & 20, KJV).

So many of the Psalms are similar songs of worship and praise, such as, “Praise ye the Lord ... I will sing praises unto my God while I have any being ... for [it is] good to sing praises unto our God; for [it is] pleasant; [and] praise is comely ... Praise ye the Lord from the heavens: praise him in the heights ... Sing unto the Lord a new song ... Let them praise his name in the dance ... with the timbrel and harp ... Let the saints be joyful in glory: let them sing aloud on their beds ... let everything that hath breath praise the Lord” (a few examples from Psalms 146 – 150).

We read of the Lord and his disciples singing a hymn after their Passover meal before setting off for Gethsemane (Matthew 26.30 & Mark 14.26), and of Paul and Silas in prison in Philippi praying and singing at midnight, with the little aside, “and the prisoners heard them” – for they didn’t have much choice! (Acts 16.25).

We read of Paul praying and singing “with the spirit and with understanding” (I Corinthians 14.15), and of the Holy Spirit telling us through Paul in Ephesians 5.19 and Colossians 3.16 – “Speaking to yourselves ... teaching and admonishing one another ... in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord ... singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord”.

In Revelation we hear of “a new song” being sung around and before the throne (5.8-9 and 14.3), and then the singing of “the song of Moses the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb” (15.3). So God’s covenant people are to be praising, singing joyful people, for by the mercies of

Almighty God, the Father, the Son and the Holy spirit, we have ample reason to be so!

We must be aware too though of the other side of music, singing and dancing. The Lord in His Word has given us that grim scene in Exodus 32, when the people got fed up with waiting for Moses, and, with the participation of Aaron, made and then worshipped a golden calf: “These [be] thy gods, O Israel” (vv.1-5). After offering burnt and peace offerings before this calf, “the people sat down to eat and to drink, and rose up to play” (v.6), making what Joshua, returning with Moses, took to be “a noise of war in the camp” (32.17), but Moses realised was wild singing (v.18), mixed in with wild, idolatrous dancing (v.19a).

How quickly and easily God’s people had turned aside from the Lord their God to a ridiculous, wicked, home-made idol, in flat contradiction of the recently given “Ten Commandments” (Exodus 20), and with the connivance of weak, muddled Aaron (32.1-5 & 22-24). Punishment quickly followed (vv.20-21, 25-29,33-35), and Moses pleaded on behalf of the people that God would forgive their sin (vv.30-32).

Since the birth of the 1950s “pop scene” in the West, we have seen a massive spread of a singing-dancing-music culture that has far more to do with that golden calf near Mount Sinai than with those beasts and elders worshipping around God’s throne as described in Revelation, or with God’s redeemed people joyfully singing their psalms, hymns and spiritual songs in our daily lives.

Thanks be to God that, in the midst of all the sinful, God-defying dross, there is still much of glory and worth, as within sacred music and God-blessed hymns and songs both old and new, but how we need to be on our guard, for ourselves and for one another. Satan still plants his many “tares among the wheat”, so we do well to ask, “Is this occasion and its music in accord with the Almighty God and His Word, and giving Him the glory that is His due?”.

“Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves: be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves” (Matthew 10.16). These words from the Lord apply to us today as much as ever, with music, singing and dancing so often being a true expression of what is really going on.