

Church with no hymns is hard to contemplate

CREDO - IAN BRADLEY

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Hymns express feelings that are difficult to articulate by other means. Although churches, mosques, synagogues and temples are opening up for worship again, there is unlikely to be any singing or chanting in them for some time. Present government guidance recommends that these activities be avoided because of fears about the projection of droplets of spittle and microdroplets. Tests are taking place under the auspices of Public Health England, including among the choristers of Salisbury Cathedral, to establish how far singers are ‘transmission vectors’ for viruses such as Covid-19.

Singing has been an important part of worship in the world faiths since their earliest days. The 150 psalms found in the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Old Testament, with their themes of praise, petition and lamentation, were sung by Jesus throughout his life and remain central to both Jewish and Christian worship. There is a strong tradition of unaccompanied devotional singing in Islam, centred particularly around nasheeds, songs that reflect current events as well as points of doctrine and belief.

It is almost unthinkable for Christian worship to take place without hymns and chants. Although Quakers manage to dispense with them, for those of other denominations the prospect of being in church but not being allowed to sing is a grim one. Research that I have

conducted over many years suggests that congregational hymns are the most widely enjoyed element of worship and that many churchgoers remember them when the sermon and prayers have been forgotten. The music reinforces the impact of the words, giving hymns a particular staying power, all the more so when they are sung communally. Many people get their theology from the hymns that they have sung since childhood and which become ingrained in the consciousness through frequent repetition. It can be easier to sing our feelings and fear than to speak them.

Humming has been suggested as a rather safer option while singing is off bounds. Although it seems a rather poor substitute, this more muted form of musical participation may, in fact, bring worshippers closer to the way in which the world was created.

Astronomers have recently recorded the harmonic notes that rang out like a bell in the first fraction of a second after the Big Bang. Cosmologists believe that these ripples of sound became the seed of matter, eventually leading to the formation of stars, galaxies and planets. The phenomenon known as cosmic background radiation suggests that the whole universe started with sound waves compressing and rarefying matter and light. All matter seems to have its origin in vibration and sound.

It does, indeed, seem to be the case that in the beginning was not so much the Word, as the opening of the Book of Genesis suggests, as the hum. Did God bring the world into existence by sounding out that first deep harmonic hum, or om, the vibration that is the source of all matter?

In *The Magician's Nephew* (1955), the sixth of the seven books in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, CS Lewis portrays Aslan, the lion that is often taken as representing God or Jesus Christ, chanting creation into existence. His lone voice, sounding out in the primal darkness with no words and hardly even a tune, brings to birth first the morning stars, which themselves begin singing, and then the sun, mountains, hills, plants and animals. ‘When you listened to his song, you heard the things he was making up, when you looked round, you saw them.’

So even if we can't sing for a while, we can hum in harmony with the music of the spheres and the morning stars. And if we find humming difficult or distracting, then we can always enfold ourselves in that sound which we perhaps don't hear enough in our busy, noisy and wordy worship, the sound of silence. After all, as one of our most popular hymns, *Dear Lord and Father of Mankind*, reminds us, it is in the still small voice of calm that God speaks to us.

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