

# Sixth Sunday of Easter

13th May 2012

*Acts 10: 44-48; Psalm 98, 1 John 5:1-12; John 15: 9-17*

Peter Humphris

In the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen,

If we are to hear the scriptures when they are read we have to be open, and that means we have to let down our defences. In many, if not most churches, and I daresay it is the same in mosques, synagogues and temples, the faithful listen to the holy scriptures with a knowing familiarity – that sense of "I've heard it all before and I know what it's all about"; they listen seeking to have their understanding confirmed rather than challenged. And the church itself is the same in terms of maintaining those defences rather than being open to the possibility of newness each and every time we encounter the Bible.

Today Psalm 98 speaks of a new song;

*O sing to the Lord a new song: for he has done marvellous things;*

In many respects that provides us with an orientation, and a permission to look for newness in the hearing of God's word. As we look at the readings today we might look with an eye to what is new song we are called to sing? At the same time we might be attentive to the defences that will be triggered for as we seek a new song; the institution has a force that will seek to call us back to its orthodox song as defined in "Hymns Ancient and Modern".

An example of this process has been evidenced this week in the news, there are those seeking the new song of "same sex marriage', and the religious right, seeking to defend its orthodox position has named Adam and Eve as the true song of marriage. They hold a firm belief that Adam and Eve were two actual people that God created and placed upon the planet in order that they would procreate and produce a symphony of harmonic little Adam and Eves that now number some six billion songs around the globe.

Galileo sang a new song in the late 1500s, Nicolaus Copernicus did the same a hundred years earlier, and both came up against the institutional orthodoxy of the church; both were asked to go back to the singing of the old song and to recant their new songs. The very same process is seen in the Easter narrative, and in the life of Christ, a Jew, of Jewish faith, but with a new song to sing.

Today's first reading from the Acts of the Apostles has Peter hearing a new song. The reading is primarily focused on baptism, so we should keep our eyes open and listen for songs of new creation, songs that sing about calling, vocation and ministry, even for songs about the church and the opening into the church that baptism provides. By way of contrast the gospel reading speaks of completion, and in between these two we have the psalm

asking us to sing a new song and in the reading from 1 John we have some direction and orchestration for our singing voice.

In the Acts of the Apostles, the author of Luke's gospel gives some insight into the formation of the early church. And even in those early formative moments we can see that there is surprise and shock when a new song is encountered. Peter represents the leadership, the authority and so too the emerging orthodoxy of the church; he's the holder of the commission: "*You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church*." [Matthew 16:18].

In the first reading we hear that *"Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles"*; he was astounded, for he heard a new song being sung! As the authority and orthodoxy of the church Peter was also the gatekeeper, he held the keys. However, rather than opening the door heralded by the new song, and seeking to embrace the new insight it offered, *"he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ."* He brought them into the song of his own orthodoxy; at best he found a new verse to his song, but did he also miss so much more?

The first reading remains for us today an astounding text, for many of us, and most certainly the institutional church, see baptism as the starting point and the action that initiates both Christian faith and salvation. As article 27 of the 39 articles of faith puts it: *"Baptism is not only a sign of profession, and mark of difference, whereby Christian men are discerned from others that be not christened, but is also a sign of Regeneration or new Birth, whereby, as by an instrument, they that receive Baptism rightly are grafted into the Church; the promises of the forgiveness of sin, and of our adoption to be the sons of God by the Holy Ghost, are visibly signed and sealed; Faith is confirmed, and Grace increased by virtue of prayer unto God."*

If we are open to the new song that is being sung in that first reading, what we might hear is that there is no gatekeeper… *the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles.* We will sing a new song and become a new church as we understand that all have received the gift. Each of us, and every other, is an embodiment of the Divine Spirit. Baptism, rather than being a "mark of difference", is an affirmation of oneness with that gift that is the quality we hold in common with each and every other and with Christ.

The 'completion' that I mentioned as being evident in the gospel very much supports and acknowledges our oneness with each other. Verse 11 of today's gospel states: *I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.* And the completion of our happiness, joy, delight and pleasure is found in the gospel's opening line: *As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.* And another chance for us to be astounded by another new song, for the orthodox 'mark of difference' that is promoted as a looming gap between us and Christ, that chasm of sin is not the song of today's gospel.

“Crown him with many crowns” – you can sing that opening hymn as if Christ was something stunningly special, more than a king, more than someone celebrating a Diamond Jubilee, someone with many crowns. In Nepal there’s a delightful iconography called *thangka* painting, where they take representations of the Buddha and they’re put into beautiful, fine icons. And the Hindus are very good at illustrating the holy scriptures: if they illustrated “Crown him with many crowns”, they’d have one head and a crown on it, then another head and another crown, then another head and another crown. The goddess that represents compassion has one thousand arms and a certain number of heads that face in every direction and cover every expression. “Crown him with many crowns” makes no sense at all in relation to the orthodox song of the scriptures; it does make sense if we realize that WE are the many crowns. The image changes - the many crowns of Christ are us.

Christ is not master of the universe, and us his humble sheep-like servants, for the gospel sings us into a oneness with him: *I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father.* The difference between servant and friend, particularly at the time this was written, is profound; and it’s also profound for our understanding of ourselves and of ourselves in relation to and with God. Take for example our contemplative prayer sentence for this month: *"I Myself will tend My flock".* If that is uttered from a master to a servant, the response required is nothing, for the master is taking care of everything. The same words uttered from a friend or a lover to a friend or beloved elicit a response of participation; we want to join, share with our friend in the realization of their endeavor.

Today’s readings are a delightful call to a new awakening, a realization that the song we sing is the song of creation, it is the divine song and is the very voice and verse of creation. It is not the song that is held onto by the institutions that have the power and the authority over our day-to-day lives. It is not the song of governments or oppositions, and nor is it the heave-ho shanty of any AFL club. It is a song of creation, it is a song of your birth. And in the second reading we hear that *“whatever is born of God conquers the world.”* It is a song of Divine victory that is sung at the dawn of every new day. We are called to sing tomorrow into being. Already the Spirit has been gifted and poured out, for by our very being we make real that truth, now it is up to us. It is up to us to sing a new song: *And this is the victory that conquers the world, our faith.* When we look at all the problems of the world, and they appear to be mounting up, conquering those problems is gifted to us, it is our song that brings about change and that brings tomorrow into being.

At HeartSong last Sunday we heard a short story; it has stayed with me, for it resonates with today’s reading and underlines both an openness to looking and the importance of seeking rather than finding. It reflects a constant search for the new song that we are all asked to sing. It’s called “Searching for God” and it’s by Rabindranath Tagore:

*‘I have been seeking and searching God for as long as I can remember, for many many lives, from the very beginning of existence. Once in a while, I have seen him by the side of a*

*faraway star, and I have rejoiced and danced that the distance, although great, is not impossible to reach. And I have travelled and reached to the star; but by the time I reached the star, God has moved to another star. And it has been going on for centuries.*

*The challenge is so great that I go on hoping against hope... I have to find him, I am so absorbed in the search. The very search is so intriguing, so mysterious, so enchanting, that God has become almost an excuse - the search has become itself the goal.*

*And to my surprise, one day I reached a house in a faraway star with a small sign in front of it, saying, "This is the house of God." My joy knew no bounds so finally I have arrived! I rushed up the steps, many steps, that led to the door of the house. But as I was coming closer and closer to the door, a fear suddenly appeared in my heart. As I was going to knock, I became paralyzed with a fear that I had never known, never thought of, never dreamt of. The fear was: If this house is certainly the house of God, then what will I do after I have found him?"*

*Now searching for God has become my very life; to have found him will be equivalent to committing suicide. And what am I going to do with him? I had never thought of all these things before. I should have thought before I started the search: what am I going to do with God?*

*I took my shoes in my hands, and silently and very slowly stepped back, afraid that God may hear the noise and may open the door and say, "Where are you going? I am here, come in!" And as I reached the steps, I ran away as I have never run before, and since then I have been again searching for God, looking for him in every direction and avoiding the house where he really lives. Now I know that house has to be avoided. And I continue the search, enjoy the very journey, enjoy the pilgrimage'.*

*Pray without ceasing, in everything Give thanks for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus our Lord*[1 Thess 5:17].

Amen
Peter Humphris