

## Why we sing at Mass

By Cecily McNeill

*Let us build a house where love can dwell,  
And all can safely live;  
A place where saints and children tell,  
How hearts learn to forgive.  
Built of hopes and dreams and visions,  
Rock of faith and vault of grace,  
Here the love of Christ shall end divisions  
All are welcome ... in this place.*

This first verse of Marty Haugen's widely sung hymn "All are welcome" speaks of community building which Jesus exhorts us to do constantly – "For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them" Mt 18:20. The gospels are full of stories of Jesus bringing people together – at Zacchaeus' house (Lk 19), at the home of Martha and Mary and their brother Lazarus (John 11), in the upper room before his crucifixion, and afterwards in Acts as the disciples built their church communities. This hymn proclaims the reason we sing at Mass, primarily to bring the community together and to help us prepare to listen to the word of God. It also reminds us that we need to ponder the problems people face in a world beset by division and hatred – "*Here the outcast and the stranger / bears the image of God's face ... All are welcome*".

Singing is a vital part of liturgical celebration – the psalms exhort us to sing – "*Cry out with joy to the Lord, all the earth... come before him singing for joy*" (Psalm 100). Strong and vigorous singing and participation are a most powerful spiritual action. When we sing, we pray using our whole body – voice and lungs, all our musculature and our senses. The endorphins that singing stimulate open us to the Spirit within us. We sing so that we will be changed – transformed by the Body of Christ to become the Body of Christ – the music compels us to go forth from the liturgy with a mission to serve, to be heralds for the reign of God. For a Christian community, the whole purpose and end point of its ministry is the common song of faith.

Hymns are a vehicle for spiritual nourishment, and a way of imparting knowledge of God and of how worshippers can be open to the love and wisdom of God. Vatican II instructed bishops to ensure the full participation of the laity in the liturgy. Singing is a way for everyone to join in.

In every church, music ministers choose hymns that will illuminate the theme of the readings and bring people together. The scripture readings speak of realising the kingdom of God in our community. They teach such values as love and compassion, respect for the other, justice for the poor. In focusing on the lyrics, we sing our theology, our understanding of God. Hymns such as "All are welcome", give the congregation a cohesive unit of theological reflection on these Christian values. This is why it is important to think carefully before shortening a hymn. Leaving out some

verses may distort the hymn's theological meaning. Quality hymns are complete and full prayer structures.

A good hymn will stay with the singer long after the Mass has ended. As David Haas writes: "the music does not end with the final procession at Mass. The song needs to keep going on and on in our hearts and in our lives." It "leads us through church doors to the whole world, with its joys and hopes, griefs and anxieties".

So next time you find your mind wandering during a hymn, or wishing it were over, think about the words and what they say about the Kingdom of God in our parish and the wider community – Let us build a house ... where all are welcome.

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About the Author:

Cecily McNeill comes from a long line of church musicians starting with her great grandfather who played the organ and conducted the choir for the opening of St Anne's church and school, Newtown, in August 1902. Her grandparents met in St Anne's choir. Her mother conducted church choirs in Palmerston North, Hamilton, and Whangarei. Cecily has played the organ and piano in St Anne's, Newtown for 20 years. In 2005 she graduated with an MA in Theology from Australian Catholic University. She spent the following nine years editing *Wel-Com*.