

Living Praise

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It was the evening of Christmas day. I was staying at a place where many of the houses back onto a series of waterways and canals. My friends had a boat and we took to the canals to tour the local displays of Christmas lights. It was one of those perfect, clear summer nights (here in the Southern hemisphere). The light displays were bright and colourful and fun, but my eyes kept drifting back to the clear night sky.

Our mortal existence is so intrinsically bound to linear time that I think it's fair to say, for most of us, the concepts of Eternity and The Infinite are near impossible to actually fathom.

“No eye has seen, no mind has imagined...” (1 Cor 2:9)

We are bound to the linear, cyclic nature of time—sunrise, sunset; live, age, die; summer, autumn, winter, spring—and to try and imagine life outside of this system, to imagine immortality and eternity, is a difficult thing.

In a strange way, for me, attempting to comprehend the incomprehensibility of our vast solar system, then the enormity of the galaxy in which our solar system is just a minute speck, and then the expanding, infinite universe beyond—in a strange way, the fact that I can't comprehend what that is actually like—helps me anchor the concept of an infinite God. God, a divine being existing outside of time and space. So when I look at the stars, and think about the vastness of space, I feel like I get a tiny glimpse at who God is.

This struck me powerfully that night. I wished I didn't have to go back to my home in the city where there's too much light pollution to see the night sky so clearly. I wished I could see God in this way and feel this connection all the time. But then I was struck with a second thought, that just because I couldn't see the stars anymore, it didn't mean that they weren't there. They're always there whether we see them or not, and so is God.

We arrived back at the house and docked the boat. I leapt ashore, rudely ignoring my friend trying to talk to me. “Just wait, just wait—I have a song, I have to write it down!” because the first

verse of this song had arrived in my head, and I just had to quickly capture it before it was gone again. Here's that song.

Lord I Know You're Here

*Lord, I love the night,
I see You in the stars as I gaze into that window to infinity
And even when the city lights shine neon bright, enough to fill my eyes
Even when I cannot see You,
Lord I know You're there.*

*Lord, I love the dawn,
I see you in the sun's rays as they climb across that distant blue horizon
And even when the highway noise drowns out the sound of birdsong on the air,
Even when I cannot hear you,
Lord I know You're there.*

*Lord, I love the light,

I feel You in the midday sun and taste You on that summer sea breeze
And even when I close the doors and windows and hide behind these walls,
Even when I'm in the dark,
I still know You're there.*

*Lord I love the sound
Of a heartbeat in the silence as I listen for Your still, small voice,
And even when the life I lead barely leaves enough space to breathe,
I know that if I find the stillness,
Lord, You're there –
You have always been there,
You will always be there,
Father you will never leave me,
Lord, I know You're here.*

(Words & music: Aletheia Burney)

When I had finished writing this song a week or so later, I was so excited and couldn't wait to share it with someone. I played it to a friend of mine, and I spent ages rambling on, trying to

explain the background and the story and the concept and the metaphor, much as I've just done here. After a while, I gave up and just sang the song, and her response was something along the lines of, "You really didn't need to explain all that, you could have just played the song. It says everything."

Now, I'll be the first to admit that I'm not the world's most concise story teller, and I do take particular delight in tangents and sidebars and mundane details. And maybe the fact that I'm not the best at translating the tangle in my head into organised sentences is one of the very reasons I write songs! But I think she hit on an interesting thought here. Music has the ability to speak in a way that words alone can't. It almost goes without saying because it's something that I'm fairly confident we've all experienced. The way that particular song gets your foot tapping and gets you on your feet dancing. The way a song puts words around or conveys that exact feeling. The way music sparks the imagination, tells stories and paints pictures. The way we are moved to tears, or filled with joy, or soothed, calmed, motivated, energised, lifted up by music. The way music is able to connect us emotionally, spiritually, physically and intellectually. Or, put another way: heart, soul, strength and mind. (Luke 10:27)

I think this is one of the main reasons why it feels so natural for praise and worship to flow through music. When we need to express the inexpressible, to elevate with beauty, and to release what can no longer be contained, we often turn to music. And when we have a God who crafted us into existence, chose us, nurtures us, knows every hair on our heads, loves us despite our many, many failings, and has done "...immeasurably more than all we could ask or imagine" (Eph 3:20), how can we respond to that knowledge, except with thanks and praise.

Of course, this concept is articulated time and time again in the Psalms:

I will give thanks to the LORD because of his righteousness; I will sing the praises of the name of the LORD Most High. (Ps 7:17)

I will sing the LORD's praise, for he has been good to me. (Ps 13:6)

Praise be to the LORD, for he has heard my cry for mercy. (Ps 28:6)

You removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, that my heart may sing your praises and not be silent. (Ps 30:11-12)

And that's just a few! Again and again there's this feeling of being so full of gratitude and joy that it just has to spill over in singing and praise.

Music is so powerful, and it's also a powerful way we can connect with each other. When we sing together as groups or congregations, we share an experience, we experience harmony and unity in a very literal way. In Ephesians 5 Paul writes,

Be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. (Eph 5:18-20)

So, we can also sing and speak to each other: “Brother, sister, let me serve you,” “Brethren let us walk together in the bonds of love and peace,” “Seek ye first the kingdom of God.” These are a few lines from hymns that might be familiar to you.

Music can also be a tool for learning,

Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. (Col 3:16)

Teach and admonish. Two very powerful words! It's certainly an interesting exercise to consider the application of music as a tool for teaching and cautioning in our community.

Hymns re-imagined

Hymns as we know them have been part of Western churches for a long, long time, and Christadelphians are no exception to that tradition. We have our own curated selection of hymns in our hymn book.

The art form of Western hymn writing is a very structured one. Four-part harmony is the norm and there are harmonic rules to follow. Things you can and cannot do. They each have a meter, meaning that the lines in each stanza have a specific number of syllables—much like in the world of poetry. This lends a certain predictability and accessibility to hymns, which in turn, allows them to really work well in the context of congregational singing. In my opinion, it's in this context that traditional hymns are most powerful, and I think there is a beauty in that.

That being said, for many people, the musical style of hymns doesn't always align with our personal tastes in music. And is pretty far from our contemporary cultural musical language, making it sometimes difficult to connect with.

A few years ago I started re-writing the tunes of some hymns. It began with an impulse to simplify and modernise the chords and harmonies, to make them more accessible to my personal tastes in music. It was a quick, fun composition exercise, but I soon became curious as I began to see what effect re-contextualising some of these well known, well-loved hymns could have.

What I found was that when we remove the words from their structured framework and take them to a place that is a more meditational, more emotionally cohesive, intuitive setting, it can allow us to hear the words differently, and see them in a completely new light, even if—or perhaps, especially if!—it's a hymn we've sung a hundred times before.

Other hymn tunes I have re-written because I stumbled across them and thought, “What excellent, grand poetry – how come I don't know this one, how come I've never sung this one before?!” And I think, occasionally, the inherent rigidity of hymns can sometimes dampen the power of the words. This is what I was thinking when I came across this hymn and decided to re-write the tune, “God moves in a mysterious way”.

God moves in a mysterious way

*God moves in a mysterious way
His wonders to perform;
He plants His footsteps in the sea,
And rides upon the storm.*

*Deep in unfathomable mines
Of never-failing skill,
He treasures up His bright designs,
And works His sovereign will.*

*Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take,
The clouds you so much dread
Are big with mercy and will break
In blessings on your head.*

(Words: William Cowper, Music: Aletheia Burney)

I've called these re-writes 'hymns re-imagined'. My brother and I are working on recording a collection of these hymns re-imagined, under the title "From Age to Age". It's a nod to acknowledging roots and heritage and tradition and constants, in conjunction with honouring change and reflection and fluidity and growth.

I wonder if there are other aspects of our traditions and personal lives that could benefit from a similar treatment of re-contextualising...

Contemporary composers

A hugely valuable resource in praise and worship are our contemporary composers—people writing music right now. These voices are so important in expressing aspects of spiritual life and praise in a way that is current and relevant to our communities. I believe it is important to make space for these expressions of praise. When we are able to separate unity from uniformity, and individuality (being yourself) from individualism (every man for himself!), we can truly benefit from and celebrate the diversity of the Body.

I was very blessed to have encouraging mentors when I was just starting out writing songs. If it weren't for these wonderful people, I'm not sure any of my music would have seen the light of day! Writing music, and particularly praise music, is often a process of baring the soul. It's a reaction, an emotional response—and sharing that with the world at large can be a very vulnerable thing to do. We can all find ways to support the artists and musicians in our midst by building and fostering trusting environments that provide opportunity, and build up rather than tear down. Of course, this benefits all of us in every area of our spiritual service, because when we build a church culture where we trust each other, where we are no longer looking over our shoulders for fear of judgement and reprimand, then we pave the way for authenticity in our worship and spiritual walk.

It's a very, very human thing to do: judging. And it's something we all struggle with to some degree. But it's also something that's taken care of already—God is taking care of that, the Righteous Judge (Ps 7:11), whose grace is sufficient, whose power is made perfect in weakness. (2 Cor 12:9) He knows us better than we know ourselves, and certainly better than we know each other! When thought of this way, it seems almost laughable that we are so inclined to undertake a task we are so very ill-qualified for.

We are loved by God and Christ, loved so fiercely that nothing can separate us from it. As it says in Romans 8,

*Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? ... neither height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of Christ Jesus our Lord.
(Rom 8:35-39)*

Tasked with the directive to “follow his steps” (1 Pet 2:21), to follow the example of Christ, this is the kind of love that we should aspire to have for each other.

Making space for authentic worship is part of this process. When we can support each other and trust each other spiritually, we can begin the process of letting go of the facade of who we think we should be, in order to own up to who we really are, and then start moving towards who we are created to be in Christ—God’s workmanship, created to do good works, prepared for us by God. (Eph 2:10)

That person, the person underneath the facade and expectations (put on us by both ourselves and others), that is the person that God knows and wants to work with and work through.

“You have searched me, Lord, and you know me” in Psalm 139 paints a vivid picture of this intimate knowing that God has with each one of us. One of the first songs I ever wrote is based around some of the ideas and phrases in this psalm. It’s called Wings of Dawn. May you too be held safe in His hand.

Wings of Dawn

Oh LORD You’ve searched and known me.

Oh LORD You know my thoughts.

You know my actions and my words.

You know each day I live.

If I fly away on the wings of dawn,

To the sky or the depths of the sea,

You will be right there, You will show the way,

Your hand will hold me safe.

I will praise You LORD for You are great.

You turn the darkness to light.

*Oh search my heart and lead me to
The everlasting way.*

*If I fly away on the wings of dawn,
To the sky or the depths of the sea,
You will be right there, You will show the way,
Your hand will hold me safe.*

*If I fly away on the wings of dawn,
To the sky or the depths of the sea,
You will be right there, You will show the way,
Your hand will hold me safe.
Your hand will hold me safe.*

(Words: Aletheia Burney (based on Psalm 139), Music: Aletheia Burney)