



Singing for Christ, the cornerstone

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27th Sunday in Ordinary Time

8 October 2017

Isaiah 5:1-7

Philippians 3:4b-14

Matthew 21:33-46

"I shall sing for my beloved my love-song about his vineyard" – the opening words of today's reading from Isaiah.

I've recently joined a choir after a break of a couple of years. It's a small choir of women's voices, singing a variety of music, particularly French music, with everyone there sharing a love of singing, as well as some degree of familiarity with the French language. It's a long time since I graduated BA in French and Geography, but there is still enough there for the words I sing to be largely comprehensible!

My love of singing began at about age 11, when I failed an audition to get in to the intermediate school choir! So instead I turned to the Girls' Choir at All Saints Church, Palmerston North. Since then, over many years and in many choirs, I've sung (in Isaiah's words) "love-songs for God" – songs about God's love, God's world and God's people. I'm now singing in a different setting, yet still finding the joy I discovered all those years ago.

The reason for sharing this with you today is not to sell tickets to our concert in November (I'll do that in a few weeks!) But it's to link today's readings to a story from my life - a story that brings together two of today's themes: music, and Christ as our cornerstone.

It's 1990. I am very, very pregnant with Thomas, our oldest son. Roger and I had sung in the Cathedral Choir since 1981, having joined the choir not long before

Peter Godfrey was appointed Director of Music. Many of you will be familiar with the Cathedral building, and the strong tradition of beautiful choral music over many years. The Cathedral was our place of worship, our parish family. My ministry of singing, the music I had learned and loved from age 11, grounded me in that place. On the day I went into labour, 15 July 1990, Roger and I were meant to be with the Cathedral Choir on the Kapiti Coast, singing at the last service in the church in Paraparaumu which was to be moved into Wellington to become the Lady Chapel at the Cathedral. I'm not sure how we got the message through to the choir that we wouldn't get there – it was before the days of cell phones everywhere - but somehow news got to them that we were otherwise occupied!

After Thomas was born, I took a break from the choir and returned after a few months. Thanks to Thomas' godmother babysitting on choir practice nights, Roger and I were both able to continue singing, both attending choir practice, and then singing one service each on the Sunday. On one level it worked beautifully – we both got to keep singing, and stay connected with our friends in the choir. But for me there was another journey going on deep within me. On the days when I was sitting in the pew, trying to look after a wriggly baby, then an energetic toddler, how could I possibly worship God? I felt bereft, empty, and distant from God. My whole world of ministry and worship that focused on singing, was turned upside down. I agonised over whether the Cathedral was the right place for me to worship with a baby. Noises during services were frowned upon. Where was God? How could I find God as I sat with a squirming baby beside me? How could I be uplifted to God's presence when I was not singing the words and music that had been the expression of my faith for so long?

An answer came painfully and unexpectedly from a surprising place. After Thomas was born I had joined a Mother Support Group where we lived in Tawa, and there I met a woman with a baby the same age, who attended St Christopher's Church. We clicked, found we had lots in common, and enjoyed getting to know one another. We looked after the other's baby once a week so we could have a free morning to ourselves. I remember I signed up for a stitching class while my new friend looked after Thomas.

As our friendship grew over the following months, I shared my frustration about not being able to sing in the choir as I'd used to, and how I felt my connection

with God was not there any more. She invited me to a weekday women's Bible study group she attended. The children were looked after in the church hall by a team of helpers, while we went off to someone's home for a couple of hours of respite and fellowship.

Well. What a shock. An informal, close-knit Bible study group was completely foreign to me. They talked about their faith! They prayed out loud! They sang without music! One Friday morning it just got too much to bear, and I remember bolting from the room... I stood outside crying. My friend came to join me - she knew enough of where I was at to know what was wrong. Part of me wanted to give up there and then. But when she said gently to me: "There is so much more...." I realised that something would draw me back the next week, and the next....

A few weeks later at the group, the leader explained that she wanted to do something a bit different. Instead of the Bible study booklet we'd been working our way through, she suggested we have an extended time of prayer. She invited us to sit in a time of quiet and wait upon God, then share any insights, words of scripture or images that came to us. My mind was blank. I felt extremely uncomfortable. The silence seemed interminable. After a few moments a couple of women shared words or verses of scripture. Then another woman said she would like to share a vision she'd just seen. She added that it didn't make much sense to her, but she felt compelled to share it. She described the back door of a house, leading into a kitchen. It had glass panels of frosted glass – you know the sort of back kitchen door in houses of the 1960s or 1970s, with a stainless steel door handle. She went on to describe a bushy doormat, one of those wiry brown doormats, on the concrete porch up a few steps from the path. Standing on the doormat, knocking on the door, she saw Jesus. And Jesus was saying "Let me in".

With each element of the scene she described, my heart quickened. A wave of heat swept over my body. I felt shaky. I couldn't speak. I felt paralysed on the outside, yet my heart was racing and thumping on the inside. I was sure everyone else must be able to hear it. Because that was my kitchen door, my bushy doormat. A woman I hardly knew saw Jesus knocking on my door saying to me: "Let me in". In that moment I knew I hadn't let Jesus in to my life, not really.

The leader drew our prayer time to a close. She asked if anyone wanted to share anything. I couldn't find the words to describe what I'd experienced. Yet I needed help to work out what had just happened. Was it real? Could it be real? Just as the woman had felt compelled to share her vision, I felt compelled to share what I'd experienced. After the session when everyone else had left, I asked the leader if I could talk with her. She sensed that something had happened, for someone, in that prayer time. She suggested she come over to my place after we'd picked up our children. An hour later, we sat down together. My heart was still racing, everything felt a bit unreal, and I shared what had happened. To my surprise, she wasn't at all surprised! She suggested that I'd been touched in a powerful way by God's Holy Spirit, and wondered if God might be inviting me into a closer relationship with Jesus Christ. She prayed for me. She gently asked me if I felt I wanted to make a fresh commitment to Jesus Christ – I knew the answer even before she'd finished the question. My Bible we wrote in that day, 4 November 1992, is precious to me.

I'm telling you this story because on that day the cornerstone of my faith shifted. Before that day, my cornerstone was a particular way of worshipping God, a particular style of music, a particular form of liturgy. All beautiful, all honourable - stunning music and words and liturgy composed through the ages to the glory of God. For me they equated to faith. They were my connection with God. And without them, I had no cornerstone. Without them I was lost. My new friend had realised that, and she'd said "Come and see". With that simple invitation I entered one of the most uncomfortable, but one of the most fruitful, times of my life and faith. In that experience on 4 November 1992 I discovered that Jesus Christ was my true cornerstone. I became thirsty for more and more of God.

Over the following months, as I reflected on my experience, I realised I'd been so caught up in the outward "doing" stuff of faith, that I hadn't allowed myself to enter a relationship with Jesus Christ, or even contemplated doing so. And the interesting thing was, I didn't lose my love for church choral music or the liturgy I'd grown up with – if anything it was enhanced. What did change is that my view became wider, broader, more encompassing, and more inclusive of the breadth of worship and ways of connecting with God. I came to see the things I particularly loved not as "things" in themselves, but as an outward expression of

my inner connection with God; they flowed from the cornerstone, rather than being the cornerstone themselves.

In this time of transition, the building and many of the much-loved symbols of worship and belonging for the St Alban's faith community are missing. Perhaps for some of you those are "cornerstones" that you can't live without. The pain of not worshipping amidst them might be too hard to bear. Those who feel that loss most keenly may not be here, or may not come along to be with us as often as they used to. I acknowledge that pain and that grief. But what is that saying? That the physical cornerstones are more important than the connections and relationships formed by worshipping together? Is God only present in the places I feel most comfortable, or in the places I choose to love?

I want to celebrate and give thanks that we are here. That we are seeing Jesus Christ here in our midst. That we are discerning blessings in what might seem an uncomfortable, unsettled time and space. Patience is one of the fruits of the Spirit – and patience is something we are all called to right now.

I believe that God's timing is bigger than our timing; that God's timing is better than our timing. We're not sure how and when our building discernment process will continue to unfold. And I wonder if part of God's timing is to give each and every person time to discover Jesus Christ as their cornerstone in a fresh way. I challenge each of you – here today or reading this sermon later – to look long and hard within yourselves and ask: What is the cornerstone of my faith? Is it a place? Is it a particular way of worship? Is it the "right" songs, the "right" liturgy, the "right" people? Or is it Jesus, the risen Christ himself, who comes to us wherever, whenever, surprising us, greeting us, welcoming us, widening our perspective, and rejoicing as we give our very selves to him.

I wonder if God is challenging us to see this waiting time as a gift, not as a problem. A gift to enable God to work within us to help us re-shape our concept of "cornerstone", to learn to hold "physical" cornerstones with a new lightness, before we can move with God into the next season in this place.

I'm not suggesting that everyone needs or will have the sort of experience I had that re-shaped my cornerstone. Recognising Jesus Christ as your true cornerstone might creep up on you gradually, as you realise one day that you feel an unfamiliar sense of freedom or generosity, or that you feel a fresh

connection with the people you worship alongside or see in the street. Or maybe your heart will become strangely warmed towards someone you've struggled with; maybe your eyes will be opened to notice an unexpected blessing you hadn't seen before.

When my friend said "Come and see", and when Jesus said "Let me in", it was as if a gate within me to the kingdom of God swung open. Maybe that gate within me – the gate that is within all of us – was already open, I just didn't know the pathway that led to it. As my friend assured me, "there was so much more". In the years since 1992, the gates of the kingdom within me have opened wider than I could ever have imagined.

There will be an opportunity during Communion this morning if you would like prayer or anointing, or the chance to pray for someone else who is on your heart at this time.

For now, let us sing once more to our beloved:

*The kingdom of God is justice and peace,
and joy in the Holy Spirit.
Come, Lord, and open in us the gates of your kingdom.*

Amen.

