

Singing multiplies the hope and meaning of Christmas. Sadly, outside of church and football, communal singing no longer has much of a place in our culture

STEPHEN COTTRELL, ARCHBISHOP OF YORK, 18 December 2021

When church buildings were able to reopen earlier this year and we came back to worship in person, to begin with, singing was not allowed. I don't think I was the only one who was left a bit nonplussed by some of the Government's guidelines at the time. In the summer, as England made their way to the final of the Euros, thousands sang lustily in the stands at Wembley Stadium, but small, socially distanced congregations on Sunday were instructed to remain silent.

St Augustine is supposed to have said that he who sings prays twice. Scholars can find no record of this, but it's a fascinating thought. Now that we are allowed to sing again, I've been thinking about the power of singing, how I've missed it, and how it intensifies speech and prayer. I'm thinking primarily of singing in worship, but I can't help also thinking of Strauss's Four Last Songs or Leonard Cohen's final album.

When we sing, we pray twice because, first of all, we pay greater attention to the words. We shape and taste each syllable within the ebb and flow of melody and metre. When there is harmony too, each word is broadened out. You hear and experience layers and even subterranean strata of meaning. I'm thinking of the resonant, deep bass in Rachmaninov's All-Night Vigil. We hear it in our gut as well as through our ears. In unison with other voices, we pray 100 times and become one voice.

One of the highlights of my Christmas used to be my mother singing in the Scratch Messiah at the Royal Albert Hall each year. Covid has got in the way of that. But it was a fabulous experience: hundreds gathered for the single purpose of singing Handel's wonderful music. Music changes us. It amplifies and expands our praise. It brings joy to our praying. Moreover, singing is good for you! Earlier this year, Opera North published 10 reasons why. Here are a few of them. Singing releases serotonin and dopamine, the "happy chemicals" that boost your mood. It increases lung capacity. And good deep breathing is one of the better and cheaper ways of beating stress. Oliver Rundell, the chorus master at Opera North, says: "Tune out the rest of the world. Enjoy the physical sensation of breathing in and creating a note with your body." Perhaps that is why we pray twice when we sing. Our whole body is involved.

On Christmas night, the Angels sang. Just like the crowd at Wembley, song is the only language that will do the job. Sadly, outside of church and football, communal singing no longer has much of a place in our culture. But we still long for it. Isn't this one of the reasons that Christmas carol services continue to grow in popularity? They are the one repertoire of songs that many of us still know; and this makes it easier to join in.

But it's not just this. It is the particular song that we sing at Christmas, the song of the angels: peace on Earth, goodwill to everyone. This song speaks to the human heart, and lifts our hearts and voices to pray as well, draws us back to Bethlehem and the mystery of God among us, retuning our hearts to heaven's no-longer-elusive wavelength. And what do we long for this Christmas, if not peace on Earth? We pray for peace with the earth as we navigate our way through our climate crisis. We pray for peace with one another in our families and communities, but also for the fragile cargoes of human life that cross the Channel. This song is a song of hope out of hopelessness and, pointing to Christ, shows us how we need to change and where help is available. It beckons us to join in. It is a promise for the whole of life, for the whole earth, and for our whole being.

If I had been in the Royal Albert Hall this year listening to Messiah, I would be waiting for my favourite bit, that sudden gear change in the Hallelujah chorus where the choir in magnificent voice declares: "The kingdom of this world is become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ." The text from the Book of Revelation is expanded. It is celebrated. It is the hope and meaning of Christmas multiplied by song.