

Today is often called "Low Sunday" because people are tired and worn out from Christmas festivities and today it seems that is all over.

Attendance is often down and enthusiasm often wains.....

I hope you are still enjoying Christmas... we still have more than a week to celebrate and to sing Christmas Carols.

You may have noticed in the last few weeks as we have led up to Christmas, Luke's gospel has a series of hymns embedded within it.

There is the Magnificat - the Song of Mary...that is often described as the gospel in condensed form...we had that last Sunday...My soul glorifies the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my saviour..

There is Zechariah - the father of John the Baptist who proclaims the song known as the Benedictus...Blessed be the Lord the God of Israel...

There are the Angels who at the birth of Jesus sing the Gloria "Glory to God in the Highest..."

And today the Song of Simeon - also known as the Nunc Dimittis.

These Hymns each form part of the churches prayers and liturgies - morning prayer Benedictus, Evening Prayer Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis - at Compline (night prayer)

The bible - particularly the psalms, often refers to making music and joyful noise.

The psalms are actually a book of spiritual songs.

Songs, psalms, prayers, poetry all go together as ways of expressing the human condition, emotions, yearnings and desires.

Singing is a wonderful thing.

And it seems to me that Christmas time is perhaps the one time of year when people sing together.

In the UK people sing and chant at football matches - often in the local pub,

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...the Asian Karaoke trend caught on with a few people in Australia..

... and I don't know enough about Canadian culture to say whether there are times when people sing together -..

...but I'm guessing it would be safe to say that Christmas appears to be a time when many people sing along to carols.

Before Christmas, perhaps some of us were fortunate enough to attend Christmas concerts at local schools attended by our children or grandchildren, friends and neighbours.

I was lucky enough to attend 2 such performances.

There people hummed along or joined in singing when invited to - with great gusto.

The kids appeared very happy and on a natural "high"

There are many benefits from singing: physically, emotionally and socially.

Physically

1. Singing exercises our lungs. It tones up our intercostal muscles and our diaphragm.
2. It can improve our sleep
3. We benefit our hearts and circulation by improving our aerobic capacity and we decrease muscle tension.
4. Our facial muscles get toned.
5. Our posture improves.
6. We can become more mentally alert.
7. Sinuses and respiratory tubes are opened up more
8. With careful training recent evidence suggests that it can help decrease the problem of snoring.
9. There is a release of pain relieving endorphins.
10. Our immune system is given a boost enabling us to fight disease.
11. It can help reduce anger and depression and anxiety
12. Use of music can help people to regain balance if affected by illness such as Parkinson's disease

Emotionally

1. Increase in self esteem and confidence

2. It increases feelings of wellbeing
3. It enhances mood
4. Useful as a stress reducer
5. It is uplifting spiritually
6. It can increase positive feelings
7. Encourages creativity
8. It can be energizing
9. It evokes emotions
10. Promotes bonding
11. Increases understanding and empathy between cultures.
12. It is healing

Socially

1. It enables you to meet more people
2. Is a forum for sharing
3. Brings people together and encourages a sense of community
4. Offers opportunity for giving and receiving positive feedback
5. A forum for fun & laughter
6. Support
7. Provides a safe environment to try new skills

So singing Christmas carols is good for us and for our community.

Music and song are such a gift.

Traditionally communities would gather in a circle and sing together, and later, perhaps around a piano.

You would have seen African kids with such incredible rhythm and confidence - formed by a childhood of exposure to music, song and dance.

We have seen a resurgence in recent years of community choirs and Capella groups as people rediscover the many benefits and joys of song.

This is good news!

There are so many advantages to our health in singing - and that is just another of the wonderful things about being part of a Christian community - we sing together - we sing much more than just at Christmas time - we sing all year!

And if your new year's resolution is to improve your health and wellbeing

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...without it costing you an arm and a leg, or recurring you stick to certain foods or do 100 push ups a day - try singing more...

...join a choir...join our choir here!

I'm sure they would welcome you with open arms and more people would mean they can learn more and try new things!

Have you seen the movie Sr Act with Whoopi Goldberg? I just love how the choir is the thing that transforms the entire church and community.

Singing is such a gift.

We all have a voice - whether we are old, young, believe we are tone deaf... there is no excuse. When we sing together we blend into something amazing.

Unfortunately, our western culture now sees professional singers as the only ones able to sing...but in other cultures, every one grows up with music and song.

In many cultures singing is as common and as comfortable as speaking.

Everyone can sing...If we can talk, we can sing!

Spiritual singing has even more advantages.

When we sing the beautiful, and often profound words of hymns, we are immersed in a way of being - the words live within us and become part of us.

They teach us and remind us of who we are throughout the day.

Our life becomes an effortless life of prayer..and we are in touch with our feelings and emotions.

Nothing awakens our emotions like music and song.

We become more connected with ourselves and with others and we become whole.

Negro Spirituals were sung by the slaves to communicate with one another without the masters knowing what was going on.

The slaves were stripped of everything but their music could not be taken away.

It gave them comfort and courage, inspirations and connection.

When I was at the school concerts I realized that all the people there were singing songs about the birth of Jesus, about God's love, about Mary and Joseph.

The songs themselves were a vehicle for the gospel to be spread to the students and audience who heard and sung them.

It occurred to me that the music teacher was actually an evangelist - teaching the students the ancient stories and truth through song - which is a much more powerful mode than scripture in classrooms.

The mere repetitive nature of listening to and learning a song would mean that the students would have the music etched and ingrained in their minds and hearts.

This gave me a real hope for the future and an insight into God working beyond our limitations to reach all people.

I realized how important it was to encourage and support musical endeavours in the schools and wider community.

Music is the language of God.

So perhaps if you are looking for a proven, concrete way of improving your life this year - that really doesn't take a lot of resources - consider the simplicity of singing.

Sing at home, song in the car, join a choir, join with friends, make music, take a lesson...It is a shortcut to the divine realm...

Christmas gives us many gifts - to be most treasured are the gifts of Christ and the gift of song.

I mentioned before about the movie Sr Act...This film is set in a convent community called St Catherine's that is at risk of closing.

By enthusiastically transforming the songs - the music allowed the nuns to reach the community.

When they stepped outside the convent and engaged with the wider community they began to thrive.

How can we, here at St Christopher's, use our gifts, our gift of music and song, to reach our community and share the joy?