

HOMILY FOR 29TH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

FR SHAUN'S PREACHING SERIES - THE SUNDAY EXPERIENCE - WEEK ONE

Do you sing in the shower? It's not something I often do, but it seems to be a fairly common practice. I wondered why this might be, so I consulted that fountain of all knowledge - Google - & asked, "*Why do people sing in the shower?*" Apparently, regardless of the quality of their voices, few people can resist the urge to belt out a song behind the glass doors of their shower. Several factors seem to make shower enclosures so appealing for amateur vocalists. Under a rush of warm water & isolated from distractions, your brain releases the feel-good neurotransmitter dopamine, putting you in an upbeat mood. The shower cubicle also serves as a primitive but effective recording booth. Shower tiles don't absorb sound well, meaning your voice tends to bounce off the walls, making it sound much richer than if you were singing in the living room or your car. Rewarded by a good acoustic, you'll likely be compelled to keep going. So, singing in the shower is no random occurrence. Biochemical, psychological, & acoustic circumstances create the perfect atmosphere.

Today, I'm beginning a new three-Sunday preaching series, *The Sunday Experience*. Sunday (I'm including the Sat. Vigil Mass) is the one time each week when most of our community gathers together. It stands to reason that, as we think about parish renewal, we should be investing time & energy into working on the quality of the Sunday experience of Mass. How *accessible* is it? How *engaging* is it? How *joyful* is it?

Over these three Sundays, I'll be exploring what Fr James Mallon, in his Book *Divine Renovation*, calls the **Three H's**: *Hymns, Hospitality, & Homilies*. These three things have a massive impact on the accessibility, levels of engagement, & joyfulness of our Sunday experience of Mass.

I'm beginning today with the first H - **Hymns**. Our Responsorial Psalm today exhorts us: *O sing a new song to the Lord, sing to the Lord all the earth*. Singing is a powerful way to express our joy & gratitude to the Lord. Our joy in Christ is a beacon of hope in a world filled with uncertainty & trials. When we gather in church to sing, our voices join in harmony to lift our praises to God, reminding us of the joy we find in him. Singing in church is a form of worship, an offering of our hearts to God. In the Gospel, Jesus says: *Give back to God. what belongs to God!* - and what holds first place in what we need to give back to God is our praise and worship. We acknowledge God's

goodness, faithfulness, & the blessings he bestows upon us. We express our gratitude for his grace, mercy, & love through song.

Compared to other Christian denominations, Catholics don't really have a reputation for enthusiastic hymn singing. There are historical reasons why that may be the case, but it saddens me so often at Mass to see many parishioners who don't sing at all & many of whom don't even pick up the hymn book.

I began by talking about the popularity of singing in the shower. Singing itself doesn't seem to be the problem – it's *singing in church* that seems to be the issue. I bet if you were at a football match at Wembley or a Rugby Match at Twickenham, you'd join in with the singing more readily than in church. If you were at a music festival at Glastonbury or Reading, I bet you'd join in with your favourite songs. And if, at the end of the Mass, I were to say: "*It's Mable's 100th birthday today,*" – I bet that virtually everyone would join a rousing rendition of '*Happy Birthday.*' Why will we sing in the shower, or on the football or rugby terraces, or at a festival – but many people won't sing or even open the hymn book to worship God in song in church? I don't think there's a straightforward answer, but it's a real issue & as we step out along the path of renewal, it's something we have to address.

Music & singing will play an essential part in our parish's renewal. Renewal doesn't happen without change – without change, renewal is just optimistic words thrown out into the ether. Renewal requires change, which means looking afresh at the place of music in our Masses.

At this point in his homily, Fr. Shaun speaks about the music at each of the three Sunday Masses.

6pm Mass - At this 6pm Mass, we don't usually sing hymns? Why? Is it because this is the "*get over with as quickly & with as little fuss as possible Mass?*" If it is, it shouldn't be. Every Sunday Mass (& this is a Sunday Mass) should be celebrated with solemnity, dignity & music. So, from today, we'll be singing at this Mass. Raising our voices in song to the Lord is a good thing & if there's anyone here this evening who plays an instrument - organ, piano, guitar – anyone who'd like to be part of a little music group to lead music at this Mass, please speak to me; it'd be great to have some accompaniment for our singing.

9 am Mass - There's a place for traditional music in our worship and that's something that we do very well here at the 9.00 am Mass. The Church has a rich tradition of liturgical music from Gregorian Chant to modern Mass settings, like the *Mass of Wisdom* we're currently learning. We're blessed with a very talented Choir, and it would be amazing if we could boost the membership of the Choir - both women's and men's voices - with new singers. It would also be great to have more musicians, so if you play the piano & maybe would like to learn the organ, or if you play the trumpet or another wind instrument, please speak to me, drop me an email, or chat with Fiona or Anne, our Choir Leaders, after Mass. But you know, it's not just the Choir who are meant to be singing. When it comes to the hymns & the Mass setting, we're *all* meant to participate. At the moment, the Choir is down in the body of the Church, helping us to get familiar with the *Mass of Wisdom* & I've noticed that the congregation is singing more boldly & confidently, so you can do it! And I really want to encourage you to be bold in your singing.

11 am Mass - Some people may not sing because they don't connect to the hymns - the lyrics or the melodies don't speak to them or make them **want** to sing. If that's you - I want you to know that at this 11 am Mass, we're going to be introducing a new style of music - it's called *Praise and Worship* - contemporary music with modern instruments - with "banging tunes" as the youngsters might say - & why shouldn't God have some banging tunes, with powerful lyrics that lift our voices, our hearts, and yes, our souls to God! From the beginning of Advent, our wonderful 11 am musicians will be singing & playing from the front. We'll introduce some Praise and Worship music - starting with the new Mass setting - *the Mass of Communion* - which we began to learn last Sunday, and then in the New Year, we'll start to introduce some of the best-known Praise and Worship songs. Those of you with children in Catholic schools - your kids are probably singing Praise and worship songs in school. If you'd like to try out some Praise & Worship songs, you can always come along to the Living Word Fellowship meetings held here on a Friday evening at 7pm. Peter Stuart will be able to give you the details.

If we want you to be renewed & attract new generations to explore & come to faith, we must be open to new expressions of church music. I'm appealing now to any of you who love singing or who play an instrument & would love to see upbeat contemporary *Praise and Worship* music at this Mass; then please, please, speak to me. I believe we can have an amazing, vibrant, transformative music ministry in our parish.

The homily continues addressed to all three Mass congregations.

One of the things I really want to do as an important step in our journey of renewal in the next year or so is to introduce LED screens on either side of the church, where we can display the words of the hymns, use hymns not in the hymn book & display the prayers of the Mass. Screens in churches, when professionally installed, have been proven to massively increase congregational participation. It also opens up a new ministry for our teenagers. Let's be honest: who's better with technology than teenagers & with the introduction of screens we'll have a great opportunity to get our teenagers actively involved in serving the parish community at Sunday Mass. I can't tell you yet *when* we might get the screens; - to do this properly involves careful planning & we'll need a fundraising campaign for this specific purpose before we can introduce them. The introduction of screens can positively impact all three of the *H's* I'm talking about in this preaching series - *Hymns, Hospitality, & Homilies* - so I'll have more to say about screens over the next couple of weeks.

Singing in church isn't just an act of individual worship; it's a communal experience. When we sing together, our voices unite in a chorus of faith, strengthening our bonds as brothers and sisters in Christ. As we share in this act of worship, we inspire one another to persevere in the faith. Singing in church is a beautiful offering to God. Just as the psalmist in Responsorial Psalm encourages us to "*Sing to the Lord*," our songs become a pleasing aroma to him. God delights in the praises of his people & is glorified when we come together to lift our voices in unity. Singing God's praise in church allows us to praise God's holy name, to joyfully proclaim our gratitude, declare God's truths, & build each other up in Christ to give back to God what belongs to God.

So, if singing in the shower is your thing, or sing on the terraces is your thing, or if singing at a music festival is your thing, why not think about making singing God's praises in Church *your thing* too! It doesn't matter if we're not a Pavarotti or a Susan Boyle or a Beyoncé; we don't have to have the world's most amazing voice: God delights in the sung praises of all his people. He longs for us to lift our voices in praise of him in song & when we do, I think we'll go forth from church with a smile on our faces & a bit more joy in our hearts!