

## You shall have a song

Isaiah 30:29

May 13, 2007

*Ye shall have a song, as in the night when a holy solemnity is kept; and gladness of heart, as when one goeth with a pipe to come into the mountain of the Lord.*

I first heard these words in the spring of 1969. I was sixteen years old, a sophomore in high school, and when I heard these words my body trembled and I was moved to tears. This is what I heard ...

(Play LP recording of Massachusetts All-State Chorus, Plymouth, Massachusetts, 1969, singing *Have Ye Not Known* and *Ye Shall Have a Song* from Randall Thompson's *Peaceable Kingdom*)

It still moves me, every time I hear it! The recording is a selection from *The Peaceable Kingdom* by Randall Thompson, sung by the 1969 Massachusetts All-State Chorus, a choir made up of 240 high school students. I have another CD of this piece, but I like this recording best, because it is full of passion! The guest conductor for the All-State Chorus that year was Vito Mason, a music director at American University and at the Lutheran Church of the Reformation in Washington D.C. He was a powerful motivator, molding 240 voices into a single voice, getting them to sing with great energy and passion, precision and lively expression.

I am moved by the music, by its beauty and wonder and grace. You know what it's like, when the music surrounds you, engulfs you. You enter into it. You become a part of it. The music creates another world which you enter for a time, and you never want the music to end!

It does end. You come back to reality, but reality is not the same. Music is a product of imagination, but what it creates is not imaginary. Music changes our ways of perceiving and experiencing what is real. It is not just a diversion or distraction, not just entertainment, but something that educates and nurtures and remakes us.

But it is not only the music that moves me, but the marriage of music and text. Even though I have been an instrumental musician much of my life and played in the All-State Band when this recording was made, it is choral music I love best. I believe sung music is music's most powerful expression, because sung music joins words and music and provides a vehicle for offering our praise to God. This I believe is music's highest purpose: to bring honor and glory to God!

It was the text and music of this anthem, Isaiah's words set to Randall Thompson's music, that moved me.

*Ye shall have a song, as in the night when a holy solemnity is kept ...*

Reverent, solemn, beautiful, peace-ful ...

*and gladness of heart ...*

Gladness of heart! Joy building, building, building in intensity and exuberance!

*as when one goeth with a pipe ...*

The joy bursts into dance, and we are swept up into the dance and into the joy!

*to come into the mountain of the Lord ...*

There it is! There it is ... the experience that is beyond words, that only words in music can begin to convey. What it means to come into the mountain of the Lord. What it means to come into the presence of the Lord. What it means to sense the awe, the wonder, the holiness, the grandeur, the goodness we find in the Lord's presence!

This is what music can do. It can bring us to a place where we can begin to see what is beyond seeing, and to hear what is beyond hearing, and to feel what is beyond the limits of our normal capacity for feeling. This is worship! This is faith! To begin to understand what it means to be in the presence of God. To drop every pretense, every claim, every idea, every argument ... and just be, just be there, just come into the mountain of the Lord!

Can you feel it? Can you feel the awe, the majesty, the wonder, the glory? Do you want me to play it for you again?

It is no accident that music can enable our worship in a way nothing else can, that worship can communicate ineffable realities in a way nothing else can. Music is God's gift to us. You shall have a song! You shall have a song ... and gladness of heart!

These are God's promises to us: a song and gladness of heart. Thanks be to God! Music is God's gift to us ... and music is our gift to God!