

MUSIC and FAITH

Christ and the Cantus Firmus of our Faith

By Benjamin Ho

In the biblical account of Genesis, the fall of Adam and Eve in Garden of Eden was depicted as not being only a personal sin, but one that has collective consequences for the entire human race. Indeed, the bible also speaks of Adam and Eve being separated from each other (Adam blaming Eve for feeding him with the forbidden fruit) as well as being separated from the rest of God's creation (hence work becomes a toil). Moreover, as a result of sin, man is now alienated from the source of life – God himself.

Today, separation and alienation have become the twin malaises that characterize our way of life. Despite having an abundance of technological tools to communicate *with*, our quality of friendships and relationships have not been improved; on the contrary, we have witnessed an increase of broken marriages and a decrease in relational commitment, whether in our workplaces or within the family. The much sought-after freedom to be who we are have led to a fragmentation of our personal selves, and ironically in the process of doing so, led to a loss of self as we live our lives devoid of true friendships and authentic affections.

In his letter to the Colossian church, the Apostle Paul speaks of the reconciliatory work of Christ in which the Son of God has “reconciled to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross” (Col 1:20, NIV). This act of reconciliation, by which believers of all different times and diverse tongues are brought together into a glorious community of never-ending praise, can be understood as a musical “polyphony” of sorts, whereby separate musical voices are simultaneously sounded within a broader musical kaleidoscope.

Seen from this perspective, our lives – despite their temporality and fragmentary character – remain nonetheless very much part of God's bigger story, provided we are able to recognize the handwriting of our Creator in his handiwork of history. The German theologian and Lutheran pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer, whose resistance against the Adolf Hitler during World War II resulted in his execution at the hands of the Nazi regime, explains that this seemingly fragmentariness of life “may, in fact, point towards a fulfillment beyond the limits of human achievement”. He wrote:

“Even if the pressure of outward events may split our lives into fragments, like bombs falling on houses, we must do our best to keep in view how the whole was planned and thought out.”¹

The idea of a “polyphony of life” – as Bonhoeffer saw it – provided an eschatological perspective with which to make sense of the multidimensional and fragmented nature of human life. According to

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, p. 215

Bonhoeffer, the *cantus firmus*² of our love for God as his beloved creatures provides the foundation upon which all our other earthly events – which act as counterpoints - are related to.

“Where the *cantus firmus* is clear and plain, the counterpoint can be developed to its limits...that is the only way to a full and perfect sound, when the counterpoint has a firm support and can't come adrift or get out of tune, while remaining a distinct whole in its own right. Only a polyphony of this kind can give life a wholeness and at the same time assure us that nothing calamitous can happen as long as *the cantus firmus* is kept going”³

Living amidst a complicated, even confusing world, our lives need to be guided by a trustworthy reference point, without which we would be vulnerable to the vicissitudes of life. As anyone who uses a compass would know, the greater the alignment of the magnetized needle with the lines of the Earth's magnetic field, the more accurate the direction it shows. Likewise, as Christians, we need to constantly align our lives in accordance with the purposes of Christ, the Rock of Ages and our Strong Deliverer. As one hymn writer puts it, our hope ought to be built on nothing less than the blood of Jesus and his righteousness.⁴ Christ himself emphatically states that “I am the Way, the Truth and the Life” (John 14:6, NIV) while the Apostle Peter reaffirms that whoever trusts in [Christ, the cornerstone] will “never be put to shame” (1 Peter 2:6, NIV).

The fact that Christ has reconciled this world to himself means that those within the Christian community are no longer alienated from each other, but instead are members of the same family – in spite of socio-cultural differences. The Christian community, as Harold Best writes, is not just a “community of new hearts and minds in the abstract, but a working outreach of new creativity. The communion of saints is not just a mystical and spiritual oneness; it is also an active, aggressive, faithful, sojourning, and relational communion.”⁵ As the choral anthem *Many Colors Paint the Rainbow* beautifully puts it:

All may offer gifts to others and from them receive in turn.
In the gathering of nations, help us, God, to teach and learn.
Many faces round the table wait for Christ, the Risen Lord,
for he comes with love to meet us in the Loaf, the Cup, the Word.
All are welcomed, none rejected, bound by Christ in unity,
naming others, sisters, brothers, in a worldwide family.
Many voices sing God's praises in a language all their own.

² Literally “firm chant,” the principal or central theme, or pre-existing melody, in a piece of medieval polyphony, providing coherence and enabling the other contrapuntal parts to flourish.

³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, p. 303

⁴ Edward Mote, *The Solid Rock*, C. 1834

⁵ Harold Best, *Music Through the Eyes of Faith*, p. 216

Tongues confused at Babel's Tower now are joined around God's throne.

Free our hearts of hate and discord till our lives in concert blend.

"Alleluia! Alleluia!" be our anthem without end.