

## **Why We Sing: radical hope at the end of the world**

*Chine McDonald*

Tomorrow sees the release of *The Choral* in UK (starring Ralph Fiennes) cinemas — a film set in a Yorkshire village during the First World War where a local choral society, stripped of its men by conscription, decides that singing together is their answer to the chaos around them.

With war raging outside the doors, the film draws on the act of raising voices as a declaration: community won't collapse, hope won't be silenced, and music will be their answer to uncertainty.

In that moment – against the backdrop of war - song isn't just comfort, it's resistance, it is reclamation of dignity, it is a claim that even amid upheaval, the human spirit can lift itself and others.

On Sunday we will remember those who died in that terrible war, 81 years ago. In so many ways, life has changed since then. There has been so much progress, so much global solidarity, so much hope for the future.

But right now it doesn't feel like that.

Because the world feels like it is creaking, groaning, unravelling.

We hear endless news of conflict, political turbulence, climate catastrophe. We experience the relentless pressures of modern life in our hustle-and-bustle, endlessly productive culture.

There is a pervasive sense many of us just can't shift that the future feels uncertain, violent, hopeless.

Globally, every morning brings a new story of struggle: communities displaced by floods, violent acts perpetrated against others, families torn apart by war, economies teetering under invisible pressures, and the ever-present hum of anxiety that no one seems able to silence.

In this landscape, when the world feels like it might be hurtling towards its end, hope is not simply scarce - it often feels impossible.

I don't know about you, but I'm exhausted. There is a fatigue born not just of overwork, but of bearing witness to a world that feels on fire.

The promises of progress and prosperity that once shaped our collective imagination now feel fragile, almost hollow.

Social media amplifies despair, turning personal anxieties into collective crises, making every misstep, every tragedy, feel immediate and inescapable.

And yet.

Yet, even in this pervasive gloom, we see glimmers of light in the cracks. It is punctuated by small flickers - acts of courage, solidarity, and resilience that remind us of what humanity is capable of, even when the odds seem stacked against us.

And in the darkness and the gloom, we see – and perhaps sometimes hear – examples of prophetic imagination. Examples of an imagination that pierces the darkness with poetic visions of alternative realities, of how the world could and should be.

Some call this a vision of the kingdom of God – the now and the not yet; and sometimes it is best illustrated in song.

### **The song that births the world**

Like Mary's song. In Luke's Gospel, we read of a young woman who finds herself chosen for something that should have been impossible.

Mary of Nazareth. Poor. Unmarried. Unimportant.

And yet - through her body, God begins again. God chooses to have a mother. In Mary is birthed both a song and a hope for the world.

When Mary lifts her voice in the Magnificat, she does not whisper polite gratitude, in the way that we have all been conned into thinking Mary might. Coily, quietly, meekly.

No Mary sings a song of revolution.

*My soul magnifies the Lord,  
and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour...  
He has brought down the mighty from their thrones  
and lifted up the humble.  
He has filled the hungry with good things,  
and the rich he has sent away empty.*

Mary's *Magnificat* is radical, not just devotional - it's a song that rises from the rubble of oppression, and if you listen closely, its vibrato echoes right into our situation today.

Picture her: a young, poor girl from Nazareth, under Roman occupation, where taxes crush the people, violence is part of daily life, rulers exploit the vulnerable, and justice is a distant dream.

And still, she sings: the lowly will be lifted, the hungry filled, the proud cast down.

This song is a song of prophetic imagination, prophetic resistance, a refusal to accept a world where power protects itself, where greed is rewarded, while the poor and the marginalized suffer.

Mary's joy is political, her gratitude revolutionary, because it names both oppression and God's promise of reversal. Today, when inequality, structural racism, and corruption threaten to make us feel small and voiceless, Mary's voice reminds us that even the most vulnerable can proclaim truth, insist on justice, and imagine a world turned right-side-up.

When I imagine Mary singing this song of hope, I imagine her looking upwards – away from her circumstances and up at what God has called her towards.

I imagine her almost as being in a vision-like state, singing this prophetic song in which she visualises and speaks of a new world order.

Once a year – either at Christmas or my birthday – my husband gets me a voucher for an hour's singing lesson in one of those fancy studios in Fitzrovia. And here I spend an hour with a professional singing teacher, in a soundproof room, singing at the top of my lungs.

The last time I had one of these sessions earlier this year – I felt a profound sense of freedom, of being unshackled. No phone. No laptop. No responsibilities but to use my lungs, my breath, my voice... to just sing. For a moment during this session, I felt euphoric. By the way, I was singing *Never Enough* from the *Greatest Showman*!

Edith Piaf once said: “Singing is a way of escaping. It’s another world. I’m no longer on earth.”

Sometimes we sing to escape our present circumstances. This has been true throughout history – for those whose earthly existence was one of oppression, suffering and marginalisation.

There are many examples.

Examples of people facing immense suffering who have turned to singing as a way to cope, resist, and find solidarity.

During the Holocaust, prisoners in concentration camps and ghettos would sometimes sing together despite the unimaginable conditions and climates surrounding them.

In 1936, the Yiddish song **“S’brent” (It Burns)** was written to speak prophetically of what was happening in a ghetto in Warsaw, and urge resistance and communal courage.

*It burns! Brothers, it burns!  
Help can only come if you return  
Love which shtetl once inspired,  
Take up arms, put out the fire.*

During the holocaust, communal singing became a subtle act of resilience - a way to assert humanity in the face of systematic dehumanization. Even in moments of despair, voices raised together could create fleeting spaces of emotional relief, shared identity, and spiritual sustenance. They could help people escape from the pitiable circumstances around them.

Similarly, prisoners of war during the Vietnam War, enduring extreme deprivation and isolation, turned to singing as a lifeline. Small groups would gather to sing patriotic songs and hymns, providing psychological support and helping maintain group cohesion.

Singing in captivity offered a means to preserve personal and collective identity, assert dignity, and resist the dehumanizing effects of imprisonment. In these constrained circumstances, music became a subtle but powerful form of resilience, allowing individuals to endure conditions designed to strip them of hope.

And so too for enslaved black people in the United States who famously relied on song to survive oppression, particularly in “hush harbours” where they gathered covertly to worship, away from the prying eyes of their white ‘owners’. Spirituals like *Go Down, Moses*, *Wade in the Water*, and *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot* carried dual meanings: outwardly expressions of religious faith, yet often coded messages of resistance and the yearning for freedom.

*Wade in the water  
God is gonna trouble these waters*

Singing in these hidden spaces allowed enslaved communities to maintain emotional connection, express grief, and keep a hope that seemed impossible alive as they lived under the constant threat of violence and subjugation.

When the world feels like it's falling apart, our instinct as humans is not only to speak or to shout, but to sing. Even in our grief, we hum under our breath; even in despair, we turn to melody.

Perhaps this singing is part of what it means to be a human made in the image of God – a God who sings over us, too.

Perhaps singing has always been humanity's oldest form of hope.

Before we could read scripture, before we could write theology, we sang our faith.

And in those songs, we remembered who we were.

And perhaps, who God still is.

Now as I've been thinking about what I was going to say today I have been thinking about this idea of song and hope. I had wondered whether it might feel a bit random, a bit out of place, since I knew none of what else was on the programme... apart from Rowan Williams!

So imagine how I felt as I was sitting in the side room I'd been put in just now preparing myself to speak, when I heard beautiful voices coming from down the corridor. I walked around and eavesdropped on the most amazing sound of some of you singing – in a seminar called *My Hope Is My Song*.

*Lead me, O Lord  
In all the sorrows of this world  
Father, Father, Father  
Father I thank you  
For you still protect me.*

I wonder if there's any space for those who were in that seminar to lead us in song at the end??

### **The power of singing together**

Across history, song has always been the heartbeat of liberation. But one thing about these songs of liberation is that part of their power comes in the fact they are sung together with others. It is the solidarity in the singing that matters.

We hear the solidarity in the songs of civil rights marchers in the American South singing *We Shall Overcome*.

We hear the solidarity in South Africans standing under apartheid singing *Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika*.

Historian Beth Allison-Barr ends her book *The Making of Biblical Womanhood* reflecting on the power of the patriotic hymn *Jerusalem* within the early 20<sup>th</sup> century fight for women's equality. In 1917, a year before the first women in England were allowed to vote, the women of the Royal Albert Hall choir performed at a service held to

mark the female contribution to the Great War effort, with some having driven ambulances, been nurses or part of the land army.

At the service, attended by Queen Mary, the choir sang the hymn – which comprised William Blake’s hymn *And Did Those Feet In Ancient Times*. Barr writes that the following year it was sung at a suffrage demonstration, and that the song ‘would become emblematic of women’s perseverance in their fight for the vote’. Standing at the Royal Albert Hall, she said: ‘I could imagine the words echoing throughout the curved building, filtering beyond its walls and into the streets of London.’<sup>i</sup>

*I will not cease from Mental Fight,*

*Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand:*

*Till we have built Jerusalem,*

*In Englands green & pleasant Land.*

In my earliest months of motherhood, where I thought I had lost myself, I found solidarity and freedom in song, alongside a group of mothers in south-east London. The first time I walked into the community centre where the Hummy Mummies – a community choral group – met, it felt like heaven. There were babies crawling around on the floor, rolling around on playmats, being breastfed by their mums. There were babies crying. There were babies having their nappies changed. Then there were the mothers. They were free. As I walked into the chaos, I exhaled; because here I did not have to shush my baby, or feel shame at not having it all together. Most wonderfully of all, here I got to sing with others. Pop and rock classics that made us feel good: from Cindy Lauper’s *True Colours* to Bon Jovi’s *Living On a Prayer*.

In her book *Why We Sing*, Julia Hollander details Swedish singer and neuroscientist Bjorn Vickhoff’s experiment exploring the effects of social singing on the rhythms of the singers’ hearts. It found that ‘even allowing for the variability in each individual’s cardiac oscillations, they were sharing common patterns... In other words, singing together makes our hearts beat as one’.<sup>ii</sup>

Hollander describes this communal singing as like a murmuration – a collective of birds that flock together, swooping, swirling and shape-shifting as one. ‘It felt as though we were in our own version of a murmuration,’ she writes. ‘With our hearts as the hub, from the soles of our feet to the crowns of our heads, our blood is all pumping in the same rhythm. Even if we didn’t know it, our bodies must have felt that common beat through our skin: in our veins and our arteries. In the pulsing of our singing hearts there must be some ancient survival instinct, not so different from the birds.’ When we sing together, it can make a difference.

When human beings have needed courage, they have found it through song.

When they’ve needed unity, they’ve discovered it in harmony.

When we sing together, our hearts begin to beat in rhythm with one another.

Physically. Literally. Symbolically. Powerfully.

Our hearts sync.

Our breathing aligns.

Our bodies remember that we are not alone.

It's as though God has written harmony into our very DNA.

We are made for chorus, not for solo.

We are made for communion.

Sometimes the power in the songs we sing comes from the fact we are singing words that our forebears – those who have gone before – have sung the same songs. We sing in solidarity with those who are around us today but we can also sing in solidarity with those who have come before.

Mary's song is an echo of another's. The Magnificat joins with the prophetic singing of women in scripture who had gone before. Theologians have noted the similarities between Mary's Magnificat and Hannah's song in 1 Samuel. Some have suggested that Hannah's is a harbinger of Mary's, with both using their gratitude at their divinely ordained motherhood to sing praise to God and declare a coming kingdom that bears little resemblance to the unjust one in which they live. The Magnificat is also a song addressed to another woman – Elizabeth – who like Hannah and like Mary has become pregnant. For Hannah and Elizabeth, their pregnancies follow years of infertility. The Magnificat is a declaration for all humanity, but it is also the song of women. As a group of feminist theologians declared in 1994:

This song, the Magnificat, announces a complete change in the present, patriarchal order. This means moral, social, political, economic and cultural reversals. The woman who sings this song is a liberated woman, standing in the line of the strong women of Israel... There is great encouragement for women in the support and solidarity that women give to one another.<sup>iii</sup>

There is something very particular about women's voices singing. Writing about women's role in radical theology in the English revolution in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Dr Sarah Apetrei, notes that women engaged in prophetic singing. She writes: "Spiritual singing was considered a manifestation of the new birth, like the Magnificat: the proclamation of the living Christ incarnate in the saints, and heaven's condescension to earth. With Mary, female prophets played a particular role as singing heralds of the kingdom of Christ, breaking forth within all humanity."<sup>iv</sup>

A singing prophetess was 'the herald of revolutionary change, not only in the world around her, but in herself: the site of the living temple, where the songs of Sion could be sung anew'.<sup>v</sup>

Speaking of Mary's song, womanist Hebrew scholar Professor Wil Gafney notes: 'She professes faith in a God whose mercy transcends time and is not limited to her and those who see the world exactly as she sees it. She

proclaims a God who is partial to the plight of the poor and is a terror to the tyrant. The Magnificat recalls an ancestral promise and she bears witness, in her very body, to a God of promise.<sup>vi</sup>

### **Radical hope at the end of the world**

It's easy to lose hope when you look around.

Wars rage. Ice caps melt. Inequality widens. Greed wins.

So many of us fear that we are living in a world that is on the verge of destroying itself. I sometimes have bleak visions of apocalyptic scenes, the end of the world.

My friend Elizabeth Oldfield often says that – if the world is ending – our task is to work towards being the kinds of people we all need at the end of the world.

And if I think about it, if the world is ending I want to be a person of radical hope, and a person who sings. Songs of hope and songs of a God of love, who gives us a hope and a future.

Jonathan Lear's *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation* explores how a community can endure and find meaning after the collapse of its way of life, the end of its world. Focusing on the story of Plenty Coups, the last great chief of the Crow Nation, Lear examines how the Crow people faced the loss of their traditional culture under colonial pressure.

He argues that "radical hope" - a hope for a good that we cannot yet fully understand - is essential in confronting such profound moral and cultural disruption. The book is a profound reflection on what it means to live ethically and imaginatively amid historical and existential crisis.

Mary's Song to me is an example of the radical hope that Lear talks about. Her song is prophetic in that it looks beyond present circumstances and realities towards a future that seems unimaginable.

Toni Morrison once said that humanity has lost the ability to think beyond its own immediate future - that we can imagine our children, maybe our grandchildren, but not the generations to come.

We have lost our long view.

But hope demands a long view. Advent is a journey through time. It takes time to reach the thing for which we hope. The coming of Christ, the ushering in of the kingdom of God where, a time where the world will be turned right way up.

Song can reach back through centuries and project forward into futures that we cannot conceive of now. Could some of the greatest hymn writers who penned some of the songs we sing have imagined such a thing – that their words and music would still resonate hundreds of years later? This is the power of song.

Radical hope, like radical song, stretches the imagination beyond our lifetime.

As the Church, we are a people of song. Each day, each week in our churches, we join with Mary to announce the kingdom with melody, not just with words.

When the Church sings only of comfort, it forgets its calling.

But when it sings the Magnificat, it remembers who it is:

a people of upside-down hope, proclaiming that another world is possible.

In the past, Mary's song had been banned in some parts of the world for being too dangerous. Because the powerful have always known that songs can start revolutions.

So, if our songs do not unsettle the powerful, perhaps we are singing the wrong ones.

If our songs do not comfort the poor, perhaps we have forgotten Mary's melody.

What our broken world needs is songs of hope – literally and metaphorically – that unseat the unjust and the powerful, cast down the mighty, pierce through the darkness. As we approach Advent, we will sing these songs of hope into a world that feels like it's ending.

### **Why we sing**

So why do we sing?

We sing because God sang creation into being.

*Let there be light*: the first lyric of existence.

We sing because even when the world is ending, love is still composing new verses.

We sing because our voices, joined together, remind us that we belong to one another.

We sing because silence would mean surrender.

We sing because we hope.

One day, we may stand at the edge of all things, when the climate has changed beyond repair, when institutions have crumbled, when everything we have built seems lost.

And even there, at the end of the world, I hope we will still be singing.

Singing the kind of prophetic hope-filled song that Mary does in the Magnificat.

We, the Church, must keep singing it.

Until the mighty are cast down.

Until the hungry are filled.

Mary's song is a manifesto of justice, a proclamation that the God is good and that the world will be one day turned right way up.

This is what true songs of faith do: they name what is – not turning away from pain or despair or darkness - but they also imagine what could be.

They are sung in the tension between what is broken and what is promised.

Between despair and radical hope.

Mary's voice is not the voice of one who has all the answers.

She sings because she has to – her prophetic song flows out of her.

Because song is what faith sounds like when the world is on fire.

We sing because the world is not yet as it should be.

And because God is not finished yet.

We sing because the Spirit still hovers over the chaos,  
still calling light from darkness,  
still whispering to the weary: *Sing*.

Because every time we sing, we join Mary's ancient melody of radical hope.

Every time we sing, we rehearse resurrection.  
Every time we sing, the end of the world becomes the beginning of the new one.

This is why we sing.

I want to end with words from the poem "Praise Song for the Day" by Elizabeth Alexander, which was recited at President Obama's inauguration in 2009:

Some live by *love thy neighbor as thyself*,  
others by *first do no harm or take no more*  
*than you need*. What if the mightiest word is love?

Love beyond marital, filial, national,  
love that casts a widening pool of light,  
love with no need to pre-empt grievance.

In today's sharp sparkle, this winter air,  
any thing can be made, any sentence begun.  
On the brink, on the brim, on the cusp,

praise song for walking forward in that light.

---

<sup>i</sup> Beth Allison Barr, *The Making of Biblical Womanhood*, p.215-216

<sup>ii</sup> Julia Hollander, *Why We Sing*, (Atlantic Books, 2023), p.142

<sup>iii</sup> Singapore Conference, Summary Statement on Feminist Mariology, in *Feminist Theology from the Third World: A Reader*, (SPCK/Orbis Press), 1994, p.272-273

<sup>iv</sup> Sarah Apetrei, *The Reformation of the Heart: Gender and Radical Theology in the English Revolution*, (OUP, Oxford), 2023, p.137

<sup>v</sup> Sarah Apetrei, *Reformation of the Heart*, p.137

<sup>vi</sup> Wil Gafney, *Live Your Theology Out Loud in Public*, Womanists Wading in the Word (online), December 2017 [Live Your Theology Out Loud in Public – The Rev. Wil Gafney, Ph.D. | Womanists Wading in the Word™](#)