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DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.18820/23099089/actat.v40i2.06>

ISSN: 1015-8758 (Print)

ISSN: 2309-9089 (Online)

Acta Theologica 2020
40(2):96-115

Date received:
14 September 2020

Date accepted:
20 October 2020

Date published:
18 December 2020



Published by the UFS
<http://journals.ufs.ac.za/index.php/at>

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FRAGMENTS OF THE SACRED: SACRAMENTALLY SUSTAINED IN TIMES OF UNCERTAINTY

ABSTRACT

The year 2020 will be remembered for the Covid-19 pandemic, where people were locked into their homes and worship in churches fell silent. Church leaders, ministers, and lay people worldwide turned to social platforms such as Facebook and YouTube for online services and to deliver messages to people. In this article, the gaze is directed outwards and possibilities for encountering the sacred that are broader than what is offered by digital means are investigated. The hymn, Now, thank we all our God (Nun danket alle Gott) is offered as an example of a sacred song that is alive in the public sphere, even if often inconspicuously. The text of the hymn is discussed and its relevancy in uncertain times is shown. The reception history of the hymn is also given to show how it functioned in diverse contexts. Narratives from the public sphere in various countries are then analysed to determine how unobtrusive and seemingly insignificant fragments of the sacred such as bells that ring, carillons that are played, and sacred songs that are sung can communally function in the public sphere and could sustain people sacramentally in times of fear, uncertainty, and loss.

1. INTRODUCTION

The virus causes great suspicion towards the innocent praise of life. One cannot ignore suspicion – and one also cannot surrender to it. The old task of trust (Zuversicht) is not only to overlook the

danger, but also to contest its ultimate right. ... Corona demands what all idols demand, namely that we should fear them. Those who are afraid see only the danger. They do not see the lilacs that are in bloom and they do not hear the blackbirds whistling their cheeky songs ... (Steffensky 2020, my translation)

The year 2020 will be remembered as the year in which people were stuck at home, church services were suspended and singing in worship fell silent for months. When lockdown came, due to Covid-19, church leaders, ministers and lay people worldwide turned to social platforms such as Facebook and YouTube for online services and to deliver messages to people. Musicians performed in their homes or alone in churches or concert halls and later also made recordings with other musicians, while keeping a safe distance, or streamed music live. Members of choirs sang in their homes, while recording themselves and then choral performances were put together digitally and streamed online. These activities were indeed proof of the possibilities of technology to keep music and worship “alive”, meet people in their homes, and make them feel connected to others through music, singing, and online worship. However, it also meant that the “real thing” of singing together communally was lost. A vision statement of the Hymn Society in the United States and Canada (of which I am a member) says that we believe that singing together in worship is something holy: “The holy act of singing together shapes faith, heals brokenness, transforms lives, and renews peace.”¹

Communal singing has an emotional influence on people (Kaiser 2017:101; Cliff *et al.* 2010:1-25; Juslin & Sloboda 2001). It makes them feel connected with other people (Kreutz 2014:137-142); it strengthens and comforts them; it drives out loneliness and makes them feel part of something bigger, part of a body; it gives them worth; it gives them space to participate sacramentally in the body of Christ and to use their gifts in service of others. During the lockdown, however, the sacred act of communal, congregational singing was lost. Could the void be filled by other means than digital worship? Could there be something different “out there” that could function sacramentally, even if not always consciously observed? Could there be music and other forms of art that influence people emotionally and give them hope? In this article, the gaze is directed outwards and narratives from the public sphere in various countries are analysed to determine how unobtrusive and seemingly insignificant fragments of the sacred can function in the public sphere, and how they could sustain people sacramentally in times of uncertainty, fear, loneliness, and loss. From an autoethnographic perspective (Ellis & Bochner 2000), I also describe personal experiences of the sacred, reflect upon and interpret them within a broader cultural context.

1 It is usually reflected as a footnote in the correspondence of the Executive Director, J. Michael McMahon (McMahon 2020).

2. A JOURNEY WITH HYMNS: NOW THANK WE ALL OUR GOD/NUN DANKET ALLE GOTT/KOM DANK NOU ALMAL GOD

The year started on a high note for me with my inaugural lecture on 27 February 2020. The theme was about the way in which people live their religion in the (secular) public and political sphere by singing sacred songs and hymns (Kloppers 2020a; 2020b). I set the scene by using the metaphor of a journey, showing how the hymn, *Now thank we all our God*, has travelled with me through my life. Giving a few examples of how the specific hymn could communicate in various circumstances in the public sphere, I first referred to a conference in England a few years ago where we sang the hymn at a hymn festival. While it was being sung in the more “sacred” space of the church, it resonated outside the walls of the church building and could be heard by passers-by. The stained-glass windows depicting this hymn communicated the message visually, not only to those who were singing inside, but also to those in the public square outside. The fragments of glass and lead worked together as a whole to proclaim God’s good deeds. The hymn, a small work of art, consisting of a text and a tune, was given sound on various levels as it was sung by human voices joined by organ accompaniment. It was, however, also depicted visually. In synchronised time, all these elements worked together to function as an encompassing work of art – a *Gesamtkunstwerk* – and to speak on a diversity of levels, reflecting gratitude and trust in the giver of gifts.

After the conference, at a busy terminal of Heathrow airport, someone in the dense crowd unexpectedly whistled the same hymn aloud. It soared out above the people. It may have echoed in the hearts of people who knew it from their childhood, even if they were not conscious of hearing it or absorbing it at that moment. As a well-known hymn sung worldwide in many languages, it could have spoken to people, irrespective of the language they speak. For me, this fragment sacralised the very secular public space for a moment. It became a sacramental moment, as it brought back the whole journey I just had, the conference, the people I met, the enriching discussions, the music I experienced, the hymns we sang, and God’s presence in all these moments. By bringing back memories of singing the hymn, this fragment also connected me to the past – my childhood. A specific phrase in the hymn, “who from our mothers’ arms” (*van vroeg, van kindsbeen af ...*; original in German: *der uns von Mutterleib und Kindesbeinen an*) is connected to memories of singing hymns from an early age. I vividly remember worship as a small child, especially singing with the organ. Surrounded by the bigger sound, I was welcome to sing with the adults, together *voicing our faith and voicing our hope*. I was only four years old and I already heard my future calling.

2.1 *Nun danket alle Gott*: Text and translations

The text of the hymn, *Nun danket alle Gott*, by Martin Rinckart (1586-1649) appeared without a melody under the rubric, a “Tisch-Gebetlein” (a “small table grace”) in Rinckart’s hymnbook *Jesu Hertz-Büchlein* in 1636 (Herbst 2001). It was first published with the current melody in *Praxis Pietatis Melica* (1647) of Johann Crüger (1598-1662) who was also responsible for the melody (Fischer 2007). The text was translated into English by Catherine Winkworth (1827-1878) and published in *Lyra Germanica* II (1858) under the title “The chorus of God’s thankful creatures”. It also appeared in the first edition of *Hymns Ancient and Modern* (1861) and was soon well-known in the English-speaking world. In both books, it was associated with the tune, NUN DANKET, by Johann Crüger (“Now thank we all our God”, Watson & Hornby 2013). The Afrikaans translation is by Johannes Baumbach, published in *Cantate* (1934) and adapted by Izak de Villiers, to be included for the first time in an official hymnal of the Dutch Reformed Churches, *Psalm- en Gesangboek* (NGK & NHKA 1978, as *Gesang* 5), the second official hymnal of these churches. It is also included in the third official hymnal, *Liedboek van die Kerk* (NGK & NHKA 2001:188). It immediately became one of the most popular hymns sung in Afrikaans. With its fanfare-like incipit – six notes on the dominant and submediant (5 5 5 6 6 5_) – there is no doubt that the jubilant melody has contributed much to the popularity of the hymn sung across the boundaries of confessions and churches worldwide.

The text has three verses, reflecting the Trinity. The first verse has an exhortative character. All people are called to thank God and to use their full bodies – their hearts, voices, and hands. This also refers to the diaconal aspect of hearts and hands and voices. Thus, not only praising God with words and with singing, but also by reaching out in acts of love during the week, continuing worship on the Sunday in the worship of life during the week. The reason for thanking God is that God has done great things to us from childhood to this day and to the outer corners of the world: *der große Dinge tut an uns und allen Enden ... der uns von Mutterleib und Kindesbeinen an/who from our mothers’ arms has blessed us on our way indicates the anamnestic function of remembering God’s blessing over us already while in the care of our mothers and continuing to this day: unzählig viel zugut bis hierher hat getan./with countless gifts of love, and still is ours today.*

Bubmann’s (2017a:150) reference to the anamnestic-sacramental dimension of hymns of thanksgiving is very relevant, specifically to this hymn. Remembering God’s presence and the good deeds done in our lives and in the world in the past, the singers experience a sense of gratefulness and God is thanked for the grace experienced. From this evidence, the singers then assure themselves and others of God’s ongoing protection worldwide. When

the hymn is sung in the present, the sense of thanksgiving is made present and given body and form. The first word of the hymn “Nun”/“Now” is very important, as it calls us to praise God now. However, the closing verse makes it clear that our human “now” is taken up in God’s beginning, presence, and future: “When I sing and hear the first small word, *now*, I know God is here and that God hears” (Schwier 2020). When people thank God communally, they also speak for those who may find it difficult to sing or to voice gratitude at that moment, because of difficult circumstances. In concretely realising God’s presence in and through the singing, people share the redemptive and comforting power also with others. The singing thus receives a sacramental character.

In the second verse, thanksgiving is changed to petition and prayer: God is asked to give us, the singers of the hymn, a happy heart and “noble peace” throughout our lives; also that we will be kept in God’s grace and saved from all peril in the present and in the future – in the *jenseits* (“*dort*”). When realising that this hymn was written during the 30 years’ war, one fully understands the depth of the prayer when referring to “peril”. In the English translation, the wish is formulated slightly more strongly: *Oh, may this bounteous God through all our life be near us*. In the Afrikaans text, God is addressed directly with the plea for that which is not a given in our lives; for emotions of the heart for which we need to pray: joy, happiness and peace: *O God, so ryk en goed, gee ons solank ons lewe altyd ’n blye hart; as dit u wil is: vrede*. Psychologists and other scientists argue that there appears to be a link between gratefulness and happiness and that gratefulness seems to be an essential source for a life of happiness (Emmons & McCullough 2004). The call to thank God in the first verse is thus linked to the prayer for happiness in the second verse. In the Afrikaans text, the second verse does not end with the eschatological perspective of “this world and the next”; it closes with the petition: “Protect us from danger and from stumbling in dark hours”: *Laat u genade ons beveilig teen gevaar, in donker ure ons van struikeling bewaar*. This could be interpreted as “protect us from doing sin”. In times of uncertainty, it might be even more relevant to sing “protect us from losing faith”: *Laat u genade ons beveilig teen gevaar, in donker ure ons van kleingeloof bewaar*.

The third verse is a doxology, *Gloria Patri*, in which the triune God is praised. The German text refers only to the highest throne in heaven (*höchsten Himmelsthron*). In the English translation, praise and thanks are given to God “*who reigns in highest heaven*”, *the Father and the Son and Spirit*, but there is also a reference to “earth”: “the one, eternal God, whom earth and heaven adore”:

All praise and thanks to God who reigns in highest heaven
the Father and the Son and Spirit, now be given,

the one, eternal God, whom earth and heaven adore;
for thus it was, is now, and shall be evermore.

2.2 The reception history of *Nun danket alle Gott* (*Wirkungsgeschichte*)

My experience with *Nun danket* in the public sphere does not end with hearing it whistled in the terminal at Heathrow airport. In October 2019, I had another unexpected experience when early one morning after a day and night of endless flight and train connections, I arrived in Danzig, Poland, to spend a few hours in the inner city, before taking another flight in the afternoon. Very grateful that all has worked out thus far, I sat down on a bench with a mug of coffee, taking a deep breath and there, voicing my thoughts, the bells of the carillon in the tower of the city halls started to sound, over the square and over the city: *Now thank we all our God!* After the bells had faded away, I sat motionless, hearing the echo in my mind. After a while, I stood up and another song started playing in my head:

Ring the bells that still can ring / Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack, a crack in everything / That's how the light gets in ...
(Anthem, written and sung by Leonard Cohen).

Ring the bells that still can ring ... What a special experience as so many church bells in South Africa and worldwide had fallen silent. I was deeply touched. Only later, I started to wonder about a hymn sounded by the bells of a city hall (*Rathaus*), a building usually not associated with anything religious or spiritual. Bells playing hymns in the tower of a city hall, the seat of socio-political power, certainly would require a hermeneutic of suspicion. I found the information that a carillon consisting of 14 bells was installed in the tower of the *Rathaus* in Danzig post-1560. Each of the bells was decorated with the coats of arms of the royals of Prussia, Danzig, and Poland. With the help of a rotating cylinder, the carillon could be programmed with different melodies on certain occasions. To welcome the Polish king, for example, *Te Deum Laudamus* ("We praise you God") was played (Woyno 2020). It clearly reflects a time when there was a strong link between religion and the ruling powers of a city or region.

Nun danket alle Gott was used for a multitude of purposes in a variety of contexts, where singing and public religion coincided seamlessly. Originally a hymn of thanksgiving and a prayer to be blessed and closing with a doxological verse (*Lob, Ehr und Preis sei Gott, dem Vater und dem Sohne* ...), it later became a kind of "*deutsch-nationalen Gratias-Hymne*", used not only in worship and in homes, but also in times of war and at prominent political events (Bubmann 2017a:151-153). The hymn is connected strongly to the myth of King Friedrich II, a "protestant" hero who, after the siege of the battle

of Leuthen against the Austrians on 5 December 1757, would have sung the hymn that evening with roughly 25,000 Prussian soldiers who survived the battle, bringing seven years of war to an end (Keil 2009:34). The hymn was sung in 1871 at the proclamation of the Kaiser in Versailles and later also at the “enthronisation” of Adolf Hitler on the “Tag von Potsdam”, 21 March 1933 (Fischer 2007). The hymn served as a solemn national memory of victories and experiences of God’s protection, but it was (and is) also sung in times of severe loss and suffering. Schwier (2020) describes the return of the last German prisoners of war from the Soviet Union to Lager Friedland (reception camp) in Lower Saxony, in October 1955, more than ten years after the ending of the war (*Nun danket alle Gott* – video-link on YouTube),² as one of the most touching examples of singing this hymn after much suffering:

Ausgemergelte Gestalten, suchende Gesichter, tränenüberströmt in der Rückschau auf das Elend von Krieg und Gefangenschaft, aber auch vor Glück ... Und da singt man nicht: *Deutschland, Deutschland über alles* ... da wurde gesungen: *Nun danket alle Gott, der große Dinge tut ... und uns aus aller Not erlösen hier und dort* (Schwier 2020, in a *Liedpredigt* on *Nun danket*).

Even if one can be critical of a hymn being misused in political circumstances, it speaks for a hymn when it is versatile enough to communicate in very diverse situations, also in the public sphere, and can transmit comfort to people finding themselves in extremely difficult situations. “With ‘God’ a hope breaks in, that is more open, more spacious, than all political ideas” (Lehnert 2019:74).

After all, the hymn was written during a devastating war that lasted thirty years. The text writer, Martin Rinckart, was a minister in the city of Eilenburg during the Thirty Years War. Lives were lost not only in battles, but also due to diseases spreading through impoverished cities. During an epidemic in 1637, he officiated at over four thousand funerals, sometimes more than fifty a day. In the midst of these horrors, it is difficult to imagine maintaining faith and praising God, and yet, that is exactly what he did, urging also others to thank God with all that they have.

3. BELLS AND CARILLONS – FRAGMENTS OF HYMNS AND SONGS

In the cultural and medial public sphere, there are sounds and symbolic images that stand for religion as a whole and that leave their mark in the collective consciousness, even stronger than all discursive explanations

2 Nun danket alle Gott! [Online.] Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SOCJwvrDnUA> [6 September 2020].

of religious issues. For faith to be communicated, the original forms of articulation are a necessity, especially that of singing and giving voice to faith so that it becomes audible (Bubmann 2017a:152). However, from the preceding section, it is evident that “faith” and “hope” could also be articulated through the “symbolic sounds” of bells and carillons. A prominent use for bells has been to invite people to celebrate worship; thus, a call to people to physically and psychologically bring themselves to motion (Neufeld 2020). Contributing to the structuring of time, bells have traditionally been used to set signs that have meaning for the daily life of people. They could tell of an event that was happening or going to happen. They could mark the history of a place. They could indicate looming danger, a coming storm, the closing of the city gates, or when an execution would take place (often indicated by the “*Armesünderglocke*”, of which there is one in a small Renaissance tower of the city hall in Danzig and also in towers in Breslau, Graz and other cities).

The sound of a bell can be understood as a sign to pause and “come to your senses”. It could indicate the spiritual depth of each moment of the day and the connectedness with God. It indicates the possibility of a ritual and provides the possibility to accomplish it. Neufeld (2020) relates a story of how it was customary to pause and say a prayer every time the bell was rung many years ago in a small rural community in Hesse – the children were also urged to do so. Neufeld views this as a moment of mindfulness (*Achtsamkeit*) amid the rush of the everyday and is convinced that it could still be possible nowadays with the sound of the bell offering the opportunity to pause and reflect on the moment; to concentrate on life; to cultivate gratitude for a moment, and to focus on what is essential:

Die Glocken, ihr Klang, sind raumzeitliche Wegmarken, Zeichen zur Achtsamkeit. Sie weisen hin auf die Möglichkeit eines Rituals. Wer darauf hört, beginnt bereits es zu vollziehen: auf den Moment zu hören, das eigene und fremde Leben bewusst wahrzunehmen, dem Alltag mit Achtsamkeit zu begegnen, sich auf das Wesentliche zu besinnen. (Neufeld 2020).

During a research visit to Erlangen in November 2019, I noticed how abundantly church bells were ringing from various church towers. Prof. Konrad Klek (Head of the Institute for Church Music, where I worked) then told the story of Mikhail Gorbachev, the President of the Soviet Union (1991-1994), who on an official visit to Germany apparently also noticed the ubiquitous ringing of church bells on Sunday and mentioned how touched he was by hearing them. Church bells are indeed a symbol of the enduring and pervasive presence of religion in the secular public sphere; even more so when they explicitly sound the tunes of hymns, such as *Nun Danket* (in the example above) or the *Te Deum*. Early in the developments surrounding Covid-19, Klek wrote

an e-mail (17 March 2020), complaining that the government of Bavaria had decided to suspend services in churches. While asking wherefore there are churches and services if these could be suspended so easily, the bells in the Huguenots' Church in Erlangen suddenly started ringing right in the middle of the day. Immediately asking if it could be a subversive act, he responded by saying that he was contemplating ringing all bells at the University Church at 15.00 on Good Friday and playing the organ majestically with the church doors open so that people could hear it from a distance. These thoughts did not come to fruition, but it certainly would have been a subversive act, as the church normally observes silence on Good Friday. In a time when the church itself was silenced, however, "the church" could speak in other ways. It might have been in line with what Steffensky (2020) suggests – not only to overlook the danger, but also to contest the ultimate right of fear to have control over trust.

Playing their instruments continuously for over 500 years, the carillonneurs in the Low Countries had been sitting high above in the towers of churches and other buildings, their playing often not noticed explicitly. When public life had come to a standstill during the lockdown, due to the pandemic, and music was nowhere to be heard in public spaces, their playing was suddenly noticed more pertinently. People could open a window and without leaving their homes, listen to the latest "live music in times of crisis":

Because of the corona crisis, all other celebrations have been cancelled, only we can continue. To hear the carillon properly, you have to keep your distance: that is our strength now. ... Nothing is closer to God than the carillon. That is why psalms are often played on it (Leo Samama, secretary of the Royal Dutch Carillon Association, in Stapel 2020).

That these fragments of hymns and psalms can have a comforting "*Ausstrahlung*" can be deduced from the remark of Heleen van der Weel, for almost 40 years the city carillonneur of The Hague:

You are used to not seeing anyone, but you know that people listen. Someone once said to me: everything seems happier when the carillon sounds (Van der Weel, in Stapel 2020).

The year 2020 also marked the anniversary of 75 years of being freed from the "*bessetting*" by Germany in 1945. This anniversary was marked by a trail of carillon-playing in various places, reminding the people not only of being set free 75 years ago, but also that, in the past, difficult times had come to an end and that situations of lockdown, hunger, and death were overcome. The sounds of the carillons thus carried a message of hope that could sustain people in lonely and uncertain times.

At various times during the pandemic, church bells were rung throughout Europe to spread a message of encouragement, hope, and comfort amid the fear and uncertainties. It later proved to be the reason for the bells ringing in the Huguenots' Church in Erlangen (see above). In a striking piece on the "bells of hope", Wierenga (2020) describes how he joined the bell-ringer (*klokkenuider*) of the Oude Kerk in Amsterdam one evening and how they rang the bells together – bells with names: *Hope, Faith, Love, and Freedom*. The city, robbed of her sin(!) by the virus, remained behind in the depth:

De stad, door het virus van haar zonden beroofd, bleef in de diepte achter. Op de luidzolder hingen vier klokkentouwen, de klokken heetten Hoop, Geloof, Liefde en Vrijheid. De toren en de luidklokken werden gedragen door zware eiken balken, al eeuwenlang krasten werklieden hun hartstochten in het hout. Door een stofbeslagen raampje viel laat, groezelig zonlicht op het plankier. Klokke zeven hingen we in de touwen, ik luidde de Liefde. Een schitterend kabaal barstte boven onze hoofden los (Wierenga 2020).

The streets were deserted, except for a few people in the red-light district. Nobody below knew that the sounding bells were the bells *of hope*. Nobody realised that the bells were ringing for them. How different from the ages past when the bells were the messengers of the city, as described in Huizinga's *Herfstij der Middeleeuwen* (1919):

The bells in daily life were like good spirits, warning people, and with a well-known voice announcing mourning, then joy, then rest, then trouble; now evoking, then admonishing. ... People knew the meaning of valves or trumpets. Despite the abundant ringing of bells, they were not blunted for the sound (in Wierenga 2020, my translation). ... For fifteen minutes we pulled the ropes – the bells sometimes produced wonderful harmonies and sometimes they went their own way. The whole body was permeated; the bronze voices echoed in us as in the tower. When the quarter of an hour was over, we let go of the ropes. As if they were obeying the flute playing of a snake charmer, they still went up and down for a while, moved by the wheel of the clock, and the clock swinging out. With regret we heard the sounds fading away slowly.

After the sounds faded away, they climbed further into the tower on narrow wooden steps to see the city from a greater height. Through a low door they entered the space where the bells of the carillon hung, some still cast by the Hemony brothers, others by the royal Eijsbouts in Asten, with the proud inscription on the edge: "EIJSBOUTS GOOT MIJ VOOR DE OUDE KERK".

De hemel was helder als op de eerste dag, we konden kijken zover we wilden. Vreemde, nieuwe wereld. Ze ruiste minder. Amsterdam in de diepte; de stille doodsheid van een decor (Wierenga 2020).

Ringling the bells in this situation can be regarded as an example of “*Ritendiakonie*” for the community – a form of “*diaconia through rites*” done for others in the public sphere, similar to the worship services held in communities after major catastrophes. “Entscheidend ist, dass eine ‘*Ritendiakonie*’ geleistet wird, die in symbolischer Form das Zusammenstehen der Gesellschaft ermöglicht” (Kranemann 2018). Gestures of *diaconia through rites* could serve individuals and could also express a symbolic sense of community, binding people together consciously or unconsciously in times of uncertainty and trouble.

In stark contrast to these bells of hope, were the bells in a place such as Nembro, east of Bergamo, Italy. At the epicentre of the coronavirus pandemic, the bells were tolling for the dead so constantly, announcing the death of one person after another, that they were later silenced (Calabresi 2020). The bells no longer represented hope – hope itself fell silent. And yet, amid it all, a spark of hope, a fragment remained and still remains. It is illustrated vividly in the song *Anthem* (quoted above) that speaks of hope amid the hopelessness of bells ringing; amid the silence caused by the pandemic – amid “*de stille doodsheid*” and amid the stillness of death:

Ring the bells that still can ring / Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack, a crack in everything / That’s how the light gets in ...

Church bells, offerings and light are images that have a strong association with the Christian faith in the public sphere; with that which is still left of religion, despite the cracks – and thus with things that could still give hope. Tischer (2017:311) describes *Anthem* as a song with “spiritual depth”, mentioning that brokenness is a prominent theme in Cohen’s songs – confirmed by the reference to “cracks” in this song. However, brokenness and cracks could also open possibilities. Wind and music in the cracks can bring down walls and fences, as illustrated by the singing that contributed to the cracks in the Berlin Wall and its subsequent fall; songs filling the cracks of trenches, that could bring reconciliation, such as *Silent Night* sung on both sides during the Great War 1914-1918 (Kloppers 2020a). Truth and possibilities for truth can be observed through the cracks. Cracks can open the space for art, faith, love, and hope – and for renewal, transformation, and growth. Cracks can open space for the *Creator Spirit* to move in and create a new space for breathing and inspiring people. Cracks can open space for the light to come in, even in the dark times of a pandemic.

Rozema (2020a) brings together what is said above regarding the (often inconspicuous) impact of carillons and church bells and how they can remind people of the fragments of faith, despite the dire situation in many churches and communities. He starts with the concrete situation, describing the sound

of the bells in the small town where they are camping for the weekend as “timid”, as if they know their place(!). With their heavy beats, they indicate time with precision. Day in, day out, across the ages; the only sound or rumour still coming from the Middle Ages on a daily base. But, in the sound, there is no invitation involved, as there is no longer any celebration – only once in three weeks, there might be a service. Could that be the reason why they sound so timid? Rozema mentions that they could have followed a Pentecost service digitally, but being among the beautiful trees of the orchard, he could not imagine connecting themselves to the extension cord(!) of the internet:

Ik wil liever zijn waar ik ben.³ Nu, hier, op dit stukje met lentezon overstraalde, goede aarde. Onder de gedempte dwarrel van bronzen klokken. In een roerloos, verkeersluw dorpje waar de pleegkinderen van onze vrienden de krant bezorgen met de skelter. Waar onze tent wordt beschaduwd door appelbomen van zo 'n honderd jaar oud.

Kolossaal staat die kerk daar. Alle huisjes passen erin, lijkt het. In optocht gaan we erheen, een van de kinderen voorop, gewapend met een reusachtige oude, smeedijzeren sleutel. In de consistorie ruikt het naar onbruik en stilstaande lucht. ...

We hebben de klok horen luiden en willen nu weten waar de klepel hangt. We wringen ons omhoog, door de torentrap, een smalle kurkentrekker van oude, ongelijke stapstenen. Dat tilt ons uit het platte vlak. Ineens ligt de wereld onder ons in samenhang. Dorpen en kerktorens in een groots verband.

We zijn hier op gierzwaluwhoogte. Over de rand recht omlaag kijken: niet doen. Houd liever de horizon, net als op een schip. Zo is deze kerk: als een schip aan de ketting, een oceaanstomer buiten gebruik, de machtige dieselmotor van de liturgie, met haar gestage kracht, verstomd. Alleen die goede klok, die is nog in functie. ...

Maar het is Pinksteren geweest! Het lopend vuur dat in Jeruzalem begon, is als een gloed verneveld over de wereld, als de roodverschuiving van een ster: een licht dat lang gereisd heeft om ons te bereiken, een plant die zich uitzaait, tot hier aan toe, tot achter de slaperdijken die de dorpen omarmen. ... (Rozema 2020)

3 The poetic sense of the essay, with words and idioms carefully chosen for their meaning and for their sounds, makes it difficult to translate. Most of it is thus left in the original Dutch – only slightly shortened. I then give my interpretation in the part that follows.

Pentecost happened. Despite the church (so colossal that it seems all the houses can fit into it!) being closed; despite being like a ship on a chain, an ocean steamer not in use; despite the stuffiness of the consistory, smelling of disuse and stagnant air; despite the mighty diesel engine of the liturgy with her steady power being silenced; despite the timid ringing of the bells (the only thing still functioning), Pentecost came. The wonder realised, despite the cracks in the landscape of faith. The running fire that started in Jerusalem travelled throughout the world, like the glow of a star, to reach them there behind the sleeper dikes that embrace the villages. The light came through the cracks; the light broke through; Pentecost broke through in the fragments of faith. Maybe something was beginning to break through on the level of the swallows high in the tower, while keeping an eye on the horizon, then breaking through finally when looking down from that height to see the world below, suddenly lying in cohesion. High in the tower, the villages and the other church towers could be seen embedded *in a much greater context*. It was also high up in the church tower from where they could see the city from a greater height, that heaven (*de hemel*) was experienced being “as bright as on the first day”.

4. EMBEDDED IN A GREATER CONTEXT: COMMUNAL PARTICIPATION

Amid uncertain times, we are also sustained by nature – often more than by worshipping online, as Rozema so beautifully illustrates. We are embedded in a greater context, but our ecology, our environment, is under severe pressure. Through texts and songs and through our singing, awareness of the cracks in our ecology can be opened (Kloppers 2014). Influencing every aspect of our lives, the ecology forms a link between singing in worship, on the one hand, where we confess our responsibility for God’s creation, and singing in the public sphere, on the other, to demonstrate against injustice and to make people aware of the plight of the earth. According to Bubmann (2017b:148), there are two specific areas where songs can create an ethical consciousness: prophetic songs protesting against injustice in the world, and songs in which we pray for peace and the protection of creation. At the end of my inaugural lecture, I asked that we close with *Mayenziwe ’ntando yakho*, a short song that functions in worship and the more “general” public sphere. It is a fragment from the Lord’s Prayer in which we give the earth into God’s hands and confess our dependence on God: *Your will be done on earth, O Lord*. We had to sing it together – for what would an inaugural paper presented in the public sphere be, if those present did not also unite in song?

In contrast to speaking, singing takes hold of us in much greater breadth and depth: the whole body is a space for resonance, the physical presence becomes tangible. Those who sing, become physically more intensely aware of their own being; those who sing with others, share space and time with them – at the same time coming to an increased own, as well as shared presence (Marti 2016:8, my translation).

Much is made of the “new opportunities” presented by digital media with money pumped into research on the use of these media, and to determine how these activities can be promoted on a more permanent level. The profoundly negative influence that a medium such as television already had on all spheres of social life and not the least on the active *communal participation* in the ritual of worship is apparently forgotten, as Forrester (1996:181) observed, “Multitudes of people ‘switched channels’ from church to the television set at home”. Watching television or participating in worship online means that a certain personal or individual need could be fulfilled, but what responsibility is taken for other people or for the community? One cannot help but wonder how much could realise of worship being “the offering of our bodies as living sacrifices to God” that could be seen as the primary ethical act, preceding all ethical conduct and making it possible, as Barth (1968:431) maintains. Albert Schweitzer mentioned that only those are happy who have discovered how they can be of service to others. To me, the most *authentic* expressions of faith lived in public were not necessarily those services constructed for the internet. The actions that involved people reaching out to their communities were even more striking – such as when a vicar of the Church of England played Judy Collins’ powerful rendition of *Amazing Grace* at a busy road junction in London and extraordinary things happened in one of the most cosmopolitan cities of the world.

Faces appeared behind glass, windows opened and people leaned out. Residents came on to balconies. Some held up small children to see. A woman aided by a walking frame shuffled on to a path. A couple of older men in vests stood with their arms crossed; women in hijabs came out of their homes; a man wearing a kippah stopped to listen. *Amazing Grace* faded and Allerton took up his microphone. As he began the *Lord’s Prayer*, some people bowed their heads, some put their hands together, some mouthed words taught many years before. A few wept. No one laughed or jeered or heckled. In the middle of one of the most cosmopolitan cities on earth, this was a *communal moment of spirituality* (Sherwood & Levene 2020, my emphasis).

The widespread *communal* singing of hymns at certain places and people making music from their balconies and windows, together with their neighbours *in support of their communities*, made a deep impression. At certain places in South Africa, the national anthem, *Nkosi Sikelel’ iAfrika*, originally a hymn

sung in churches, was sung outdoors at eight in the evening. A striking video was that of a mother in Germany holding her baby while singing *Der Mond ist aufgegangen* on the balcony. Memorable especially was the excitement with which the child kicked when hearing also the voices of the neighbours – a child, enclosed in its mother’s arms, but also entrusted to God: ... *der uns von Mutterleib und Kindesbeinen an / who from our mothers’ arms has blessed us on our way ...*

Singing together in public is all about the *shared presence* (Marti 2016, above) and the *shared* public sphere. Steffensky (2020) describes these singing events as moments of “spontaneous playing” that are important as moments of creating beauty that sustains people. It is, however, important to remember that the singing of well-known hymns in public was (and is) possible, because there are people who still have hymns engraved in their collective cultural, religious, and musical memory. For years now, children have been kept busy in other ways during the service. Could it be that, with a few exceptions, I may be part of the last generation with the memory of the ritual of worship and of singing hymns in worship, going back to a stage when I was four years old? Could we be entering the final stage of the individuality of the digital era, with communal worship, the spirit of community, the warmth of being together and with the connecting power of singing together, coming to an end? Have we reached a stage where people walk and stare past one another in “unshared lonelineses” – “in ongedeelde *eenzaamheden*?” (Rozema 2020b). Could it be that, at this stage, we may be finally losing the arsenal of collective hymns and psalms embedded in our memory, known from the *communal* ritual of worship and that could also be recognised in the public sphere? What about our communal singing on behalf of others who may find it hard to sing – thus singing as an ethical act?

Hymn singing is a religious and cultural force that connects people to one another and connects people to God. As such, it is a sacred act. Singing the fragment from the *Lord’s Prayer* together at the end of my lecture was meant to connect people from various contexts and backgrounds – people who speak a diversity of languages and who sing hymns and songs from various traditions. Requesting the people to sing, I focused on perceiving one another, on opening up for one another, and on being united also physically in hearing the voices of the others. I asked that we should sing *as if we have lived for this moment to sing*. It became a sacramental moment, a moment of reconciliation and transformation in many ways. Very little had we realised that it would also be one of the last opportunities to sing together for months to come. Amid the silence of Covid-19, we now realise how much more we should have made of it – of the rare opportunity to sing together in communion, the sacramental moment leaving a sacred memory sustaining us through the dark months.

5. FRAGMENTS OF FAITH TRANSFORMING THE EVERYDAY

We seldom notice how each day is a holy place
 where the eucharist of the ordinary happens,
 transforming our broken fragments
 into an eternal continuity that keeps us (O'Donohue 2020).

Hymn singing and other fragments of faith connect not only people, but also the “sacred” and the “profane”, while moving between times past, present and future. It encompasses what can be called the *anamnetic* dimension (the memory of the past, the past made present by remembering), the *proleptic* dimension (looking to the future), and the *transformative* dimension of faith. Experiencing beauty in symbols of faith is about connecting to the Christian tradition, to one another, and to God – about experiencing the presence of God and finding meaning. Through singing, space for the presence of God is opened up performatively; singing receives “sacramental character” (Bubmann 2017a:149). Blackwell (1999) argues that all kinds of music have the possibility to be sacramental. The music, the words, and the arts, in general, do not *describe* God, they *embody* God. Those participating in arts and music or observing through arts and texts and music can only wait for the unexpected to happen. Hearing a fragment of the hymn *Nun danket alle Gott* unexpectedly at daybreak one morning on a cold and bare square in a strange city was a profound experience – it *embodied* God’s presence and connected me with a long tradition of faith. The fragments of religion that remain in the public sphere, the moments of beauty, are the fragments that transform moments of the everyday into sacramental moments that sustain and keep us through difficult times.

The fragments of faith, the hymns and songs, the carillons and bells, the church buildings, stained-glass windows and the landscape in which they are embedded remind us that things do not begin and end here with us. We have a history behind us, we have seen God’s grace in our lives and in the lives of people worldwide. We see God’s hand in the beauty of creation. How often the sky could seem as new as on the first day – amid a pandemic. We see ourselves embedded in a bigger whole. We can voice our thankfulness, despite the cracks. By breathing through the fragments and singing in the cracks, a new day can break open; the light can come in. By opening up beauty, we can give hope. Let us not be fainthearted; let us sing with hearts and hands and voices – and let us sing *now*. By sounding the sacred amid the silence and the brokenness, the world that is yet to come is made present *now*. Let us sing the songs we still can sing. Let us ring the bells that still can ring.

There are fragments that are significant over the centuries, because their completion can only be a divine matter (Bonhoeffer [1944] 1998:336 – my translation).

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<i>Keywords</i>	<i>Trefwoorde</i>
Hymns	Gesange
Bells	Klokke
Sacred songs	Gewyde liederere
Covid pandemic	Covid-pandemie