

Of colours and shades

Congregational hymn

David Wong (2026)

Analysis

Preamble

A hymn that invites anyone to respond to the God who cares so much as to give all, even to death, to save all of us.

The format is a congregational hymn.

Initial ideas

This composition began with a set of lyrics that was to focus on the Easter theme. Rather than retelling the story of Easter in any shape or form (the original narrative or contemporary interpretations), the composer wanted to emphasise more the salvation formulae embedded in the Easter story than the story itself. Doing this, he hoped to maintain focus more on the listeners/congregation/singers than the story, i.e. more on the “what’s there for me?”, not so much (again) “what’s the story?”.

Having penned the first two lines, the composer realised this might unfold into something substantial. To allow this and to set the “signature” of this piece, he thought of having six lines in each verse, rather than 4. In terms of structure, each line is a melodic set. Each set might be part of a pair, so that the first in the pair leads to a non-tonic cadence, the second ends in tonic, or something that “rounds up” the pair. This is the initial thought, which opened to a possible ternary structure of 2 lines each.

Lyrics

It's evident that each verse has a distinct theme from the rest. To ensure a high chance of setting the verses to the same melody, the composer ensured the lyrics had the same number of syllables and noted a few deviations (where "dramatic" moments might be called for).

Similar to a "chicken and egg" dilemma, the music, which comes after the lyrics, can cause various kinds of issues. One is where the accent of the words is out of place with the beat in the bar, for example, the "ful" in "graceful" should be on the strong beat, rather than "grace" on the strong beat, and full on the following weak beat. Secondly, the rise and fall of the melody and the rhythmic structure can give incorrect emphasis on the lyrics. As such, hundreds of revisions have been made to the lyrics, including reverting to earlier ones.

The first and published versions of the lyrics are included below.

Themes

Easels

This is a limited metaphor. Ideas are expressed, with varying levels of detail and degrees of directness, about what the artist intends to convey. The painter can determine in advance the speed at which a stroke is applied and revise it. The point is about the "not" - the easel here is not a metaphor where a designer applies his or her own ideas on the visual creation, where the created has no say on the matter: being created and any events following that, or utter dullness and nothingness.

What the metaphor seeks to convey is that life, represented linearly, has a beginning, an end, and many happenings in between. Life unfolding might even be shown across multiple lines, e.g., school friends, work colleagues, and running clubs.

Trowels

The metaphor of trowels is used to picture lives full of decisions, especially those that serve as stepping stones or foundations for the next step or stage of our lives. Some of those would have required a lot of hard work, preparation, or dedication; others might have demanded much of our mental strength, to such an extent that we only realised it afterwards.

This metaphor also has a limit. A trowel is used to apply additional structural material to an existing surface and then to smooth it out. This metaphor is not to be taken to infer silencing others or any necessity of domination.

Time

The lyrics carry the idea that the easel is unfinished, where we can perceive what is there so far. Looking to the future is to sense uncertainty and realise we have control over some of what will happen. It is also possible to “go back” in time, marvel at the unfolding events based on earlier ones, and wonder how the easel could portray something different if decisions and circumstances were different.

Having said that, the trowels give a picture different from the easel, where past events and circumstances leave us few choices when making a decision in the present.¹ While the easel sustains the wayward weaves and waves of lives, the trowel sees a different side of the matter where important turnings in lives are structural building blocks for the next decisions to the extent that undoing decisions will be difficult.

Successes and emptiness

Humans’ capacity to improve and influence the unfolding of our future is coined in phrases about winning and success. The line about predicting the next drop of rain and curing all incurable diseases speaks to the fine line between our role in the world as stewards (or caretakers) and creators. Of course, one day we might be able to predict rain 100% of the time at a specific point in the geography and cure all life-threatening diseases so they would not recur. It is not a kind of “winning” where we finally rule nature and its laws, but to be grateful to God that he allowed us glimpses into how nature “works” the way he designed it.

Driven by our own need to succeed for its own sake, what is secured is emptiness in our lives. The irony of life is that the more we succeed, the more we realise there is more to achieve and acquire; even if we are the best in the world, the need to maintain that position drives us to push harder and harder, to remain the best.

¹ A trivial example is that, because I had a chance to learn French and used it extensively for several years, my subsequent jobs and interests have largely been in settings where French is used to a significant degree. An opposite perspective is that my career outlook may be seen by future employers as limited to French-speaking settings.

Best medication

The line about the best medication is a counterargument to our ability to cure all diseases; it can be read in a broader context, suggesting that we think we can fix our problems and improve human strength, thought, and capabilities. However, no one has been free from ailments, pains or death. Whether at the "box" (coffin), our physical selves will eventually rest on the ground (or seabed). The easel and trowels show that everyone's hands are empty. Void of possession is one thing, emptiness in relevance and power is perhaps the bigger shock. We could no longer relate to and influence others.

Our own methods

Humans' capacity to work together for a common cause goes back to the time of Noah. In contrast to Noah, who built the Ark on his own, the Tower of Babel showed that we could summon everyone's strength when we find the correct "pitch" to stir up an idea that satisfies all our needs.

There are many more words to say about the periods of the Iron Age, Industrialisation, etc. What seemed familiar across these periods was that some "method" was applied to address an apparent "need".

The need for human survival is improved in organised farming methods and then trading standards. The need for more and better cars was met by centralisation and machinery, with familiar terms such as Just-In-Time, Waterfall, Lean, and, more recently, Agile.

These methods are good because the same formula is applied to a specific situation, irrespective of the operator or manager. Consistency, transparency and standardisation are buzzwords uttered from the board to the small room and our dreams. Conversely, these methods can be evaluated as "bad" because their success rests on the absence of other methods, i.e. control and domination.

It's easy to find organisations to assess and rule their outcomes based on the disciplined use of such methods. This has also led to the idea that successful outcomes are results of the wholesome implementation of such methods.

At some point, organisations will take a step back to reflect on their methods, as they do not fully meet the needs. However, until we get to that point, employees have little option but to go with the crowd and see the method.

The sentiment in the lyrics is that we are caught up in our own organisations, where everyone uses the chosen standardisation method. Everyone is told to "believe" in the method. Obviously, this is not about

life and death, but the trajectory of implementation sees offices change partitions, the footprint of the prayer, baby, and bike rooms increase, and the surge of work-life balance “training” provisions. These convey to the employees that the new is here to stay, it’s our methods.

Doubts

Doubt is the most potent struggle for those of us seeking meaning in our lives. Doubt in what? Well, in a broad brush, it’s doubt in not fully knowing, or knowing something but not fully certain that such knowledge is a fundamental truth. For example, opening a door to a wild storm is likely impossible, firstly, it requires our brute strength to the extent beyond that of the storm. Secondly, even if the door remains intact after we leave the building, it will slam shut due to the wind. That is a kind of fundamental truth that everyone agrees on.

The kind of doubts people suffer from extends from relationships to existence.

- Doubts about other people’s true intention, which extend to the “do they know what I know what they know...”, i.e. in the sea of attachments and links between individuals, a person’s orientation of feelings, thoughts, etc., does change and sway over time, and depending on whom they were talking to.
- Things get really confusing, especially when what seems like my own inconsequential response to a specific person can affect their well-being, even though I was completely unaware of it.

Doubts can be about, well, everything.

- Getting up in the morning, I might feel positive about the coming day, but why?
- That’s because I’m having lunch with a good friend. But should I feel this way when I know several problems at work which will unfold in some negative way over the day?

Doubts about feeling.

- Am I spending enough time with my kids?
- Doubts whether I am at the right place at the right time, should I have found more satisfaction in a different role?
- Doubts about the “systems” I am in, should I trust the government, the bank, the police, etc., but are any alternatives relevant when I cannot get out of the present systems?

The verses

Verse 1

This draws attention to “easels” and “trowels” as a way to reflect on our lives. We know our human capacity is limited; we will choose what we can do and ignore the others.

Verse 2

Attention is turned to the “baby” who (“grew” infers this is historical) led a very eventful life (his easel shows colours and shades). While his life was not entirely under his control (like the rest of us), he chose to love in obedience to God, where we have failed. Available syllables mean the “to God” has not been inserted. Many attempts at rephrasing could not fit every idea in. The rest of the verse calls on us to focus more on Jesus in the many ways he is prompting us in our lives.

Verse 3

The “fairy tale” refers to the story of baby Jesus. People sideline the essence of Jesus and choose to please themselves, but everything and all achievements bring emptiness without God. When we realise our helplessness, God offers to help in every way.

Verse 4

This verse attempts to give a “contemporary” dimension between the spirituality of the lyrics and the strain and toil of the workplace. The composer is keen to insert some examples of how anyone can follow Jesus:

- live like Mary (sister of Martha),
- check out Zacchaeus, or
- the woman who offered two coins.

Care is taken not to convey anything unintended.

- Firstly, the idea of “conversion” is yet fully developed: what we today learn as “salvation in Jesus”. These accounts did not say they “became Christians”.
- There are differing interpretations about the woman who gave two coins in her offering at the temple. There is a debate over whether it is “two” coins that scholars want to enlighten us about.

- Another debate is whether this is about her readiness to give all she had, or about the power and authority of temple laws.
- There is then a follow-up point of whether gender played a role in her approach.
- The composer's approach is to focus on the God who gives us all for our best and to save us. This idea is probably completely absent in the primary meaning of the text, perhaps a secondary idea that can be inferred from the primary.

Verse 5

This draws the main points from the above verses, with rephrased ideas such as ceasing the urge to "even", dominate and scorn. A new idea is introduced here: "shapes" which a trowel does. It is in the same line as "green lizard", which apparently is the name of a colour. Here, "grey" replaces "shades". It ends with 'No more to wait, accept his love, say "yes" to Jesus now.'

Music

The first version of the melody attempted to keep to the flow of the lyrics and sounded monotonous and chant-like. A second version began afresh with a new melody. The lyrics lend themselves to either a 4/4 or 3/4 time signature. The composer decided to experiment first with $\frac{3}{4}$ for the entire hymn; this was too restrictive and added monotony to the structure.

The next trial was to begin each line with two bars of 3/4, and then the rest in 4/4. This is a better turn and worked well in some places. Taking care in how the melody and rhythm are set, the shift between 3/4 and 4/4 can go smoothly. However, some lines could not work at all. This idea was abandoned.

The third version was in 4/4. This gives a rigid fixture, which the composer is not keen on. To add variety, the composer extended some lines, e.g., from 4 bars to 5 or 6 bars. Also, because the lyrical lines are long, the composer introduced various rests in the melody to give them some shape. This also indicates to the initiated singers that they have many more places to take breath.

Congregational hymn

The voices are well within SATB. The melody is kept as simple as possible to aid singing without becoming monotonous. The vocal lines are mostly intervals of a 2nd or 3rd, while some larger intervals are used to give variety. Accidentals are taken care of, so they flow well and are within the voices' reach.

Music: unifying elements

- Each verse in 6 lines
- The first and second lines have very similar musical material as the fifth and sixth.
 - This eases with singing since the tune in those lines are similar
 - It gives a structure and balance to the piece
- Simple rhythmic patterns are used. Their choices are due to word accents and to give more space to singing, not having to rush the words.
- These patterns are repeated to give familiarity, variety and balance to the piece.
- Harmonic changes are bar to bar, except at the end of the third line (bar 13), and approaching the end of the sixth line (27).
- To reinforce these unifying elements, some harmonic contrasts are used:
 - The flat 7th chord (C major in the key of D) in bar 10.
 - The 4th line begins in G (subdominant of D) and maintains the G tonality, reinforced by the A minor chord (the supertonic chord of G), using a familiar II-V-I cadence to reach G in bar 21.
 - Going back to the end of the second line, here the music modulates to the dominant A major (dominant of D). This adds colours to the lyrics – horizons, failed, emptiness, challenged and best.

Published lyrics

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A new season is come with adventures and achievements.
Renewed wish and passion, we rise up and soar the horizons.
Trails on the easels: life journeys in all kinds of colours and shades.
As if a trowel, life footsteps to wealth, power to veto and more.
We can predict next drop of rain, prevent all incurable.
To do the best and care for all: Ignore what's not to know

A baby grew. His life full of extreme shades and colours.
With trowels not his own, he loved in obedience where we have failed.
Ignore no longer: we are not a concept, avatar or myth.
Denial is futile, since he shapes our life, speaks with us in our dreams.
Ignore no longer: do you know what's the best medication?
He makes all things and cares till end; he'll cause newness in us.

A fairy tale too old, simple, fake, teary, not my type.
Best deals signed, fruits galore; heaps multiply get inane emptiness.
Winnings add success: with emptiness, both hands brimmed, halt at the box.
Cornered in darkness, now Jesus rekindles our mind, health and soul.
This season not to pass till we let him tend to all our needs.
No more to wait, accept his love; say "yes" to Jesus now.

A formula, guidance, we are owners of the method.
Wait! Jesus the way, truth, and life: live like Mary, who challenged him.
Zacchaeus, the tax chief, lived "the way": honesty to clients now and past.
Live like the lady: "the truth" in two coins shows our God who gives all.
Nothing to fear, explain or hide: he accepts you, me "as is".
The creator who loves you, me, he'll cause newness in us.

A day to week, month, year, doubts and control burn to life's end.
In Jesus, our lives fill with surprises beyond best of the best:
Jesus can help us to cease urge to even, dominate or scorn.
Grace freely given to all shapes, blue, gold, green lizard, grey and more.
From sin of doubt, disdain and debt, to perfect peace in Jesus.
No more to wait, accept his love, say "yes" to Jesus now.

First version lyrics

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A new season comes with adventures and achievements
Renewed wish and zeal, we rise and soar the horizons
Trails on the easel, life journeys of shades and colours
As if a trowel, life footsteps to wealth and veto
Predict the next drop of rain, prevent incurable
Do the best, care for all; ignore what is not to know

A baby born to a life of extreme shades and colours
Not with his trowels, his footsteps to death fulfilled God's grace
Ignore no further, life is not accident or process
Denial is futile; Jesus speaks in dreams, shapes your life
Ignore no further, assurance of grace the best medicine
Jesus, creator of life, restores wholeness of your life

A child's tale too simple, old, foolish, teary, not my type
Trophies won and fruits galore secure inane emptiness
Success adds winnings, at the box, both hands grasp emptiness
Bondage freed by grace to countless blessings, what to ponder?
This season not to pass till earnestly you ask
Here is the moment wait no more, accept Jesus

A formula or set of rules, we try to own the method
Jesus is the way, truth, and life, speak to him as Martha did
Live "the way" like Zaccheaus who turned honest collecting tax
Live "the truth" like the lady who offered two coins, all she had
No fear, no shame, no debt, Jesus accepts you and I "as is"
Jesus, creator of life, restores wholeness of your life

A day, week, month, lifelong to ponder, weighing all options
A life in Jesus is the experience beyond all things
A life in Jesus ends the urge to even or dominate
In Jesus is received grace, exhaling immeasurable
In Jesus is salvation from sin, its snare and bondage
Say "yes" to Jesus, the way, the truth and the life for you

Website

<http://allegretto.top/>