

THE NEW SONG

(A sermon preached in St. Michael's Church, Croydon, on 12 June, 1956, before the Hymn Society of Great Britain and Ireland, by the Rev. J. W. Poole, Rector of Merstham, Honorary Chaplain of the Royal School of Church Music, sometime Precentor of Canterbury).

I looked, and lo, a Lamb stood on the mount Zion, and with him an hundred forty and four thousand, having his Father's name written in their foreheads. And I heard a voice from heaven, as the voice of many waters, and as the voice of harpers harping with their harps: and they sung as it were a new song before the throne, and before the four beasts, and the elders: and no man could learn that song but the hundred and forty and four thousand, which were redeemed from the earth.

Rev. 14. 1-3

When christian painters and poets set themselves to delineate eternal life, they make a picture of something in the nature of a party or a festival: the picture is full of singing and dancing, of people who are happy in one another's company, happy above all in the presence of Christ.

I know not, oh I know not
What social joys are there,
What radiancy of glory,
What bliss beyond compare.

They stand, those halls of Zion,
Conjubilant with song,
And bright with many an angel
And all the martyr throng;

The Prince is ever in them,
The daylight is serene,
The pastures of the blessed
Are decked in glorious sheen.

The halls of Zion are conjubilant with song; and the song that is on the lips of the company of heaven is a new song. 'No man could learn that song but the hundred and forty and four thousand, which were redeemed from the earth.' A new song for those who in Christ the Redeemer have been made new men, new women. 'If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new': all things, not excluding the praises which rise from the lips of the people of God, whether in heaven or in earth.

We who live under the christian dispensation cannot without an effort of the imagination realise how new, how startlingly new, was the christian revelation when it burst upon the world; how it altered the whole complexion of life for those who came under its impact. The soul of a people is in its literature: and the literature of that world, the literature of Greece and Rome, is suffused with melancholy; it is the literature of a people without hope, a people sick at heart for the transience of human affairs.

Lesbia, live to love and pleasure,
Careless what the grave may say:
When each moment is a treasure
Why should lovers lose a day?

Setting suns shall rise in glory,
But when little life is o'er,
There's an end of all the story—
We shall sleep and wake no more.

That is the Roman poet Catullus, writing half a century before the birth of Jesus Christ.

But when little life is o'er,
There's an end of all the story.

There is the burden of his song; as it is also the burden of all the epitaphs in the Greek Anthology. It is a song as old as humanity. But the song that rises from christian lips is a new song: and the burden of this new song is in the gospel. 'I am the resurrection and the life. He that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live'. The new song echoes among the catacombs of Rome, where the earliest christians inscribed the names of their dead, adding a brief phrase of confidence and hope:

Mayest thou live among the saints;
Refresh thyself among the holy spirits;
Mayest thou live in God;
Peace be with thee;

or, briefest of all, the two words 'In Christ', two words in which the whole gospel is contained. The new song reverberates again in the words of one of our poets:

Even such is Time, that takes in trust
Our youth, our joys, our all we have,
And pays us but with earth and dust:
Who, in the dark and silent grave,
When we have wandered all our ways,
Shuts up the story of our days.
But from this earth, this grave, this dust
My God shall raise me up, I trust.

That is the authentic christian temper: there is the christian hope. Jesus and the resurrection was the text of the first christian sermons. Jesus and the resurrection was the new thing which burst upon the ancient world of the Mediterranean, and which set a new song ringing down the centuries, a song whose echoes are heard always in the greatest christian hymns. Dr. Routley has lately shown us, in a beautiful book,¹ how the hymns most commonly used today among christian congregations in England do in fact expound the whole christian creed: but I believe he will hold with Bernard Manning (as I certainly do) that 'the greatest hymns are christian, thoroughly and irrevocably christian; and when I say christian (writes Manning) I mean that they concern Christ, not that they are what is called christian in spirit, or indirectly or unconsciously christian'.

¹ Erik Routley, *Hymns and the Faith* (John Murray, 1955).

My heart is full of Christ, and longs
Its glorious matter to declare.
Of him I make my loftier songs

'That (he says) is the confession of the greatest hymn-writers. They go back to the New Testament, and especially to the gospels. They are not merely theistic, like the psalm paraphrases; great as some of these are, they miss the highest note.'

Even, then, 'O God our help', which is a great hymn, an indispensable hymn — even this misses the highest note; because there is in it no echo of that new song which rings always in the ears of those who in Christ have been made new men.

'Still less' (Manning goes on) 'are the greatest hymns songs of human aspiration or of human fellowship'. Indeed they are not. Then what is to be made of these verses, which appeared in the *Methodist Hymn Book* in 1904 and have since — alas! — turned up again in a book widely used in the schools of England, used sometimes even in the Church of England?

These things shall be! A loftier race
Than e'er the world hath known, shall rise
With flame of freedom in their souls
And light of science in their eyes.

They shall be gentle, brave, and strong,
To spill no drop of blood, but dare
All that may plant man's lordship firm
On earth and fire and sea and air.

Man's lordship, indeed! Put these lines alongside of holy scripture, and you see at once how remote their temper is from the temper of the christian believer, who joins with the company of heaven in celebrating not man's lordship but God's condescension: the company of heaven sing a new song (as they fall down before the Lamb) saying 'Thou art worthy — for thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by thy blood, out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation.'

So long as you fancy yourself to be master of the situation, you cannot receive the gospel. The gospel can only be received by those who are conscious of their need, conscious that they are frail and wayward children. I recall a remark made to me, many years ago now, by one who was then among my superior officers. 'Remember, Joseph', he said to me with great emphasis, 'remember that if ever it falls to you to arrange my funeral service, you are to put in *all* the penitential psalms.'

And if a hymn expresses tolerably well these two themes — the need of men and the condescension of God — then I for my part

will not too squeamishly exclude it from public worship. The other day an acquaintance of mine (a don of my own college) was expressing to me his dislike of the hymn 'Lead us, heavenly Father, lead us': he dislikes in particular the line referring to our Lord,

Lone and dreary, faint and weary.

We ought not, he argues, to address our Lord as dreary. The fact is, the word dreary has changed its complexion since this hymn was first published in 1821. A century ago a dreary man was simply a sad man, a melancholy man: and if our Lord was 'a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief', then to describe him as 'lone and dreary' is one way of saying so. I own I prefer the biblical phrase to the phrase of the hymn: but my own preference is neither here nor there, when I recall how often this hymn is chosen by those who present themselves to be married at the altars of the National Church. They come seldom to church, many of them; they understand very dimly what christianity is: but one thing they understand clearly enough. As they stand on the threshold of married life they are conscious that they are not masters of the situation: they are aware of their need as frail and wayward children. And when they ask for a hymn which expresses their own need, and the condescension of God to their need, — why then my pastoral care urges me to allow and to use a hymn which on purely aesthetic grounds I might reject. John Newton was right when he pointed out, two hundred years ago, that hymns 'should be hymns, not Odes, if designed for public worship and for the use of plain people'. The people of God consists, for the most part, of plain people. 'Ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called.' This is as true now as it ever was: and for plain people, plain hymns are best. I do not mean by this to encourage doggerel verse or doggerel music: I do mean that those hymns are best which avoid what is fanciful or subtle or erudite, and which say plainly in the ears of plain people what most needs to be said. Those hymns above all are best, which drive clearly towards the central affirmation of our faith; that God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself. For this is the burden of that new song which none can learn but those that have been redeemed from the earth,

That undisturbèd Song of pure content,
Ay sung before the sapphire-coloured throne
To him that sits thereon
With saintly shout, and solemn Jubily

The song of them that triumph,
The shout of them that feast

in the kingdom of God.