

## THE HYMN TODAY

Under this title a symposium was presented at the Society's conference at Norwich last year. Here we print the substance of what each speaker said on that occasion (or, more accurately, what he would have said had time allowed).

### I – THE CHALLENGE OF THE WORDS

BRIAN WREN

When people first started talking about 'modern hymns' in the late 1950s they usually meant that they had found a 1930s ballroom number for 'Holy, holy, holy' or a 1940s pantomime tune for 'The Church's one foundation'. There were few new texts to challenge the standard, and most of the 'modern' tunes were ephemeral.

Today, less than twenty years later, we look back on an almost

extravagant springtime of hymnody which shows no sign of ending. To paraphrase Fred Kaan's harvest hymn, we can give thanks 'for the joy and abundance of crops' in both words and music. I want to suggest two ways in which the new words challenge us, taking examples from *New Church Praise*.

### *Giving faith a re-spray*

New words challenge us, first of all, to look at fundamental beliefs in a new light. At its humblest, this is achieved by words which stay close to traditional imagery or to the biblical narrative. Here is Fred Pratt Green:

Christ is the world's Light, he and none other;  
born in our darkness, he became our Brother.  
If we have seen him, we have seen the Father:  
glory to God on high.

(NCP 10)

J. K. Gregory, similarly, stays close to John 20: 1-18 in his Easter carol, 'Early morning'. Note the suitably Johannine double meaning in his third line:

Peter racing, early morning,  
to the tomb and rushing in;  
seeing shrouds of death dispensed with,  
finding new-born faith begin.

(NCP 19 v.3)

Here too is John Geyer, using a traditional image of the Holy Spirit in an unmistakably contemporary way:

Fire is lighting torch and lamp at night,  
fire outbursts into power and light.  
Come, O God, Creator, Spirit, now,  
fill all our lives with your fire.

(NCP 23)

Yet many contemporary hymns go further than this, with a simplicity which expresses profound changes in theology. The generation whose understanding was radically altered by *Honest to God* needs to be able to sing that new understanding – yet to sing it from the heart, almost unawares, not in any polemical or self-conscious way. Most worshippers who sing Alan Luff's translation (or is it paraphrase?) of the *Te Deum* will not be in the least startled by its second verse:

To you *all orders of being*,  
every power that is,  
those who wait closest upon you  
raise their endless cry ...

(NCP 21)

Yet the words are recognisably post-Tillich, just as the phrase in verse 3, 'all time and space beyond, reflect your kingly glory', is post-Einstein. Why should congregations sing new theology unawares? Well, in fact not everyone does sing unawares. Although I have not conducted a census I'm willing to bet that more people in today's congregations think about the words they sing – and visibly keep silent when asked to sing nonsense or ideas they no longer accept. However, singing new theology, even unawares, expands our horizons and our knowledge of God, and gives us a new vocabulary to express and proclaim our faith.

A quick look at five hymns on the life of Christ will show how simplicity can be steeped in profundity. Here is Caryl Micklem, linking

the wonder of every birth with the wonder of the birth of Jesus. The first verse reminds us how every newborn child is a breathtaking wonder, 'glory shut in sleeping eyes', and how the bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh is also a new person, unknown even to those whose genes have made it:

Intimate stranger seems to be  
the child upon a mother's knee.

True, yet totally humanistic', you might say — until you realise that a Christian understanding of the incarnation must begin with the acceptance of Christ's full and *complete* humanity, born under the same conditions and by the same processes which produce every other newborn child. Anything less than this is unsound doctrine and empty gospel, however disturbing its implications may be. It is precisely the ordinary yet wondrous experience that his birth has in common with every birth which enables him to be God with us, the full expression of his Father's love:

Under the skylight of a star  
Mary regards her little son;  
precious to her as gift from far  
this marvel of a life begun,  
while in God's future lies unknown  
the secret of that life laid down. (NCP 101 v.2)

From a similar theological understanding of Christ's full humanity, Alan Gaunt rejects the still popular picture of Jesus as superman yet not quite human, and links the helplessness of Jesus the infant with the offering of the young prince of glory on the cross:

Once helpless in your mother's arms,  
dependent on her mercy then,  
you made yourself again, by choice,  
as helpless in the hands of men:  
and, at their mercy crucified,  
you claimed your victory and died. (NCP 56 v.2)

And Michael Hewlett suggests that our knowledge of God is of the beyond in the midst of life, the extraordinary seen in and through ordinary experience, in this verse on the transfiguration:

Once on a mountain-top  
there stood three startled men  
who saw the veil of nature drop  
and heaven shine in.  
Their friend of every day,  
the face they knew for his,  
they saw for one half-hour the way  
he always is. (NCP 75)

I shall end this section by referring to two hymns of my own. Most Assiontide hymns announce the cross as a victory, as deliverance from the twin anxieties of death-and-extinction and guilt-and-condemnation. Yet the pervading and dominant experience of modern life is almost certainly neither of these (although they are present) but rather a sense of emptiness and futility. 'Christ is risen' shouted to one who sits in the

darkness of emptiness and meaninglessness is as incapable of being good news as an invitation to a neighbour overwhelmed with depression to join the party next door. The good news to such a person is not – or at least, not at first – news of victory and hope, but rather of the Christ who goes into darkness, without foreknowledge of the future, and for us dies desolate and alone – ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ So the first verse of my Good Friday hymn states in modern terms the ‘sheer folly’ of the cross (1 Cor. 1: 18-31) – folly today, as it was to the Greeks of Corinth, in the sense of something that is (not seems) without sense, laughable, and absurd:

Here hangs a man discarded,  
a scarecrow hoisted high,  
a nonsense pointing nowhere  
to all who hurry by.

The good news of the suffering One comes in verses 4 and 5:

Life emptied of all meaning,  
drained out in bleak distress,  
*can share in broken silence  
my deepest emptiness;*

and love that freely entered  
the pit of life’s despair  
can name our hidden darkness  
and suffer with us there.

(NCP 40)

Of course, he can share our emptiness only if he is not dead but alive. But in his risen life he still shares our emptiness, and suffers with us.

The other hymn is probably more accessible to most congregations, although equally based on a contemporary understanding of resurrection and ascension. The image of Christ seated at the right hand of God originally suggested both power and *sovereignty* – of the king who rules over his subjects because he knows them and is present with them. It is *because* Christ has ascended on high into the heavenly realms that the gifts of his ever-present Spirit have been poured out on the Church (Eph., ch. 1 and 4), and we keep our thoughts fixed on the realm above not as an escape from this world but in order to put on, here and now, the garments of the new personality that the Spirit of Christ gives to us (Col. 3:1-17). Today, however, such imagery has the opposite effect. It suggests that Christ is in a world above, remote from our own. The hymn therefore restates the traditional imagery in plain words:

he comes to claim the here and now  
and conquer every place and time.

Then it pictures Christ’s reign not as ‘above’ but as at the centre of life in the modern world, with its racial hatreds, economic injustice, arms race and abuse of power:

Not throned above, remotely high,  
untouched, unmoved by human pains,  
but daily, in the midst of life,  
our Saviour with the Father reigns.

In every insult, rift and war  
where colour, scorn or wealth divide  
he suffers still, yet loves the more,  
and lives, though ever crucified.

(NCP 9)

### *Bringing the world to church*

As this quotation suggests, the second challenge of contemporary words is to bring the world to church with us. Some critics mistake this for a call merely to sing *about* the modern world, and abandon all that is distinctive in our faith – ‘I don’t see why we should sing about concrete, steel and formica. I’d rather sing about Jesus Christ.’ Not only is this a false antithesis, but it also conceals, I suspect, a nostalgia for an illusory past in which birds, bees and waterfalls reigned supreme, and the hard realities of oppression, poverty and racism could be forgotten or ignored.

The challenge of contemporary words is, however, quite different. It is to sing *to* the Lord *from* the real world in which we live. It is to seek peace and assurance, not by escaping to church on Sunday, but by standing back from the pressures and the pain of life at the same time as we bring them to the Lord. Jesus does not give us peace as the world takes it, but in and through our openness to the twentieth century. The explosion in hymn-writing has come about because the majority of worshippers want to be able to bring their fears and hopes about the world to the Lord. Once again, many will do so unawares, not because the scenery of twentieth-century Britain jumps off the printed page and hits them on the nose, but because the best new words allow them to bring their present-day experience unobtrusively into the centre of their prayer and praise.

A good example is Albert Bayly’s hymn, ‘Lord of the boundless curves of space’. Although it is written in classic style and metre, with literary elegance and simplicity, a careful glance shows that the ideas are startlingly new, and could not have appeared before the present century:

Lord of the *boundless curves of space*  
*and time’s* deep mystery,  
to your creative might we trace  
all nature’s *energy*.

Your mind conceived the *galaxy*,  
each *atom’s* secret planned,  
and every age of history  
your purpose, Lord, has spanned.

Your spirit gave *the living cell*  
its hidden, vital force:  
*the instincts which all life impel*  
derive from you, their source.

(NCP 60, vv.1-3)

Such words beguile the traditionalist yet allow the O-level physicist or Sunday-supplement reader to sing about creation and evolution with precision and integrity.

Creation hymns have always used imagery to *create* a sense of wonder, not simply to express it. Since beauty is partly in the eye of the beholder, a good hymn can open our eyes to see (and our ears to hear) the loveliness and excitement of **unexpected everyday things**:

gay vans and bright buses that roar up and down,  
shop-windows and playgrounds and swings in the park,  
and street-lamps that twinkle in rows after dark.

Yet the same hymn is neither sentimental nor naïve, and does not ask us to forget the slums and stress of urban life:

O may we not rest until all that we see  
in towns and in cities is pleasing to thee. (Doris Gill, *NCP* 12)

The 'strain with living interwoven' in modern city life is well captured in Fred Kaan's 'Lord, as we rise to leave this shell of worship', where the shell is that of an egg rather than a crab, out of which we break as, 'called to the risk of unprotected living ... we ask for courage'. The third verse of the hymn illustrates another challenge offered by many of the best new words:

Give us an eye for openings to serve you;  
make us alert when calm is interrupted,  
ready and wise to use the unexpected:  
sharpen our insight.

(*NCP* 53)

Most of us, when we look back on a week, can recall occasions when calm was interrupted or the unexpected disrupted our plans, and the memories are often a cause for confession. By placing these words in a hymn, Fred Kaan invites us to anticipate these occasions, and perhaps better prepare for them. Few of us could think such thoughts as clearly if we had not been helped by the words of the hymn.

One of my own hymns about service to the neighbour may have, perhaps, a similar effect. Most hymns of service assume that it is quite easy for one person to help another and that the 'aid relationship' is simple and straightforward: I give without pride, you receive with gratitude. I suspect this is because most of us, and most hymn-writers, occupy a position in society from which we rarely have to depend on others for help. Moreover, we make the comfortable assumption that we can help others without endangering our privileged position. The reality of poverty and oppression is different. If the following words do their job, they should gently demolish such complacency, yet in a way that leads us to prayer:

Lord Jesus, if I love and serve my neighbour  
out of my knowledge, leisure, power or wealth,  
open my eyes to understand his anger  
if from his helplessness he hates my help.

When I have met my brother's need with kindness  
and prayed that he could waken from despair,  
open my ears if, crying now for justice,  
he struggles for the changes that I fear.

(*NCP* 58)

One of the most important functions of good hymn-writing, old or

new. is, then, to 'open our eyes' to God and to the world around us.  
Here is Fred Kaan again, writing about harvest:

But also of need and starvation  
we sing with concern and despair —  
of skills that are used for destruction,  
of land that is burnt and laid bare.

We cry for the plight of the hungry  
while harvests are left on the field,  
for orchards neglected and wasting,  
for produce from markets withheld. (NCP 71)

Though not written in technical jargon, these lines show an acute awareness of market economics and the causes of the world food crisis. They do not preach at the singer, but rather invite him or her to share their awareness and, out of that new awareness, to worship God at the best time in a more honest and praying way. The following verse expresses the idea of harvest thanksgiving, and breaks open the old word with new insights:

The song grows in depth and in wideness:  
the earth and its people are one.  
*There can be no thanks without giving,*  
no words without deeds that are done.

It is, of course, entirely possible to sing about economic justice in traditional biblical terms:

For is not this  
the fast that I have chosen  
(the prophet spoke)  
to shatter every yoke,  
of wickedness  
the grievous bands to loosen,  
oppression put to flight ... (NCP 72 v.3)

Yet biblical language is not sufficient on its own. The language of Isaiah 58, from which Percy Dearmer's words are taken, is relevant in a general way to the 1976 U.N. Conference on Trade and Development and the activities of War on Want or Christian Aid. But the *particular* force of Fred Kaan's words is an essential addition. Similarly, one could perhaps argue that traditional hymns give us plenty of room to sing about the damage we are doing to our physical environment, and our need to care for planet earth. Yet the tradition speaks more of dominion than caring, and no traditional text has the simplicity, directness and precision of Ian Fraser:

Lord, bring the day to pass  
when forest, rock and hill,  
the beasts, the birds, the grass,

will know your finished will:  
when man attains his destiny  
and nature its lost unity.

Forgive our careless use  
of water, ore and soil —  
the plenty we abuse  
supplied by others' toil:  
save us from making self our creed,  
turn us towards our brother's need.

And in the closing verse the contemporary awareness of ecology is closely welded with the biblical language of Romans 8:

Creation groans, travails,  
futile its present plight,  
bound — till the hour it hails  
the newfound sons of light  
who enter on their true estate.

Come, Lord: new heavens and earth create.

(NCP 54)

### *Routley, Mao and Doggerel*

I shall sum up this discussion with two quotations and a piece of instant doggerel. In November 1960 I wrote to Erik Routley, asking his advice on how to write words for new hymns, and enclosing a first shot in pentameters(!) which has thankfully remained unpublished and unsung. He wrote a masterful letter which was a decisive influence in helping me to understand what hymn-writing is about, and which I'm glad to acknowledge. One of his epigrammatic sayings was that 'the great glory of God and the contemporary need of man need to be made to collide in modern verse, just as they collided in people like George Herbert — only there the need was not social but personal'. The best modern texts foster precisely that sort of collision, and we are the better for them.

My second quotation is from Mao Tse-Tung, who said of revolutionary leadership that 'we must give back to the people clearly what we have received from them confusedly'. These words aptly apply to the relationship between the hymn-writer (or hymn-chooser) and his or her congregation. When I write a hymn I am not going on an ego-trip of poetic imagery, but trying to express clearly what others already know confusedly. Yet I am not seeking a lowest common denominator but trying to give a lead in showing what that clear knowledge is.

Thus, when people sing what we have written or chosen, we have done our duty if they can say inwardly words to this effect (and here comes the doggerel):

Yes!

that's what I mean, though I couldn't have said it;  
that's what I believe, though I couldn't express it;  
that's how I feel, though I couldn't explain it;  
that's true for me, though it wasn't till I read it.