

HYMNODY AND BELONGING

PART 1: THE WORDS OF HYMNODY

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Hymns are expressions of our belonging, emphasizing our common Christian identity, calling, and hope. Their effectiveness depends largely upon their authors' ability to find the right words to articulate our immortal longings, and also upon their being set appropriately to music that captures the public's imagination.

Both words and music are very powerful means of communication. In this article I shall concentrate on examining the words we sing.

1. THE USE OF HOLY SCRIPTURE

The principal source of inspiration for hymnody is Holy Scripture but the relationship between the words of 'hymns of Man's device' (Arnold, 1995:2) and 'the pure Worde of God only' (*ibid.*) has not been without its problems. It is arguable, for instance, that the practice of versifying large sections of Scripture – particularly from the Psalter – helped to stifle theological development, to stunt spiritual growth, and to hamper the process of creative imagination for several centuries.

For one thing, restricting hymnody to the Psalter imprisoned the creative poetic spirit within the mind-set of the Old Testament, and made it possible to sing of the great Christian themes of the Incarnation, the Resurrection, and the Ascension (unless one can interpret the psalms Messianically); and it is perhaps a rather weak defence to say that the New Testament is fundamentally less lyrical than the Old.

The tyranny imposed by too rigid an adherence to biblical language is one from which hymnody has only recently begun to break free. Historically, the exclusive use of metrical psalms in worship made an indelible mark on the life of the Church. But now the pendulum seems to have swung to the other extreme. In contemporary Scottish worship, for example, it can no longer be taken for granted that a metrical psalm will always be the opening act of praise. Nor is it unusual to share in a service where no place whatever is given to the singing of the psalms. But as Millar Patrick commented (1949:229): 'It is not the verdict of conservatism only, that psychologically and religiously that is a mistake.'

Of course, liturgical conservatism should not be identified as that negative and obstructive attitude that resists all attempts at progress, and apparently seeks to make a virtue out of 'arrested development'. There are some Christians who seem to regard the Church as *semper eadem*, and who resolutely refuse to countenance the possibility of any change in its 'canon' of hymns, psalms, and spiritual songs. But we would do well to remember Bernard Manning's observation that 'the business of a hymn is to strengthen the faith of today, and not to present a historical record of the faith, the day before yesterday'.

The Language of Holy Scripture

Language, like theology, is not static. We need, for instance, to take account of the proliferation of new translations of Holy Scripture which have made the Authorized Version now seem very archaic and remote. Yet although the problem may be perceived as a linguistic one, the issues go much deeper. It is a cultural matter as well; and we must recognize that contemporary culture is far removed not only from that of biblical times, but also from that of quite recent times. We cannot assume that God stopped speaking to his Church after the canon of Holy Scripture was closed, but we *can* assume that he has not since restricted himself to the linguistic customs or the cultural conventions of the past. All the same, the Bible is still a valuable devotional book, which has provided, and should continue to provide, rich inspiration for hymnody.

Other Sources of Inspiration

The title of one of Erik Routley's books, *Hymns and Human Life*, seems particularly apposite. Hymns must deal with human issues, emotions, sentiments, beliefs, and even barriers to belief, and be true to everyday experiences.

The hymn-writer needs to recognize also that 'the truth of the Faith is something that is felt rather than thought by many deeply committed Christian people' (Pitt-Watson, 1976:49); and the sensitive author may well see his or her poetic art 'a means of expressing emotion, a vehicle for imparting and hopefully articulating the great moments of existence, love and death, times which are harmonious, satisfying, or simply final' (MacDougall, 1997:17).

Ian Pitt-Watson had a favourite expression which he used to emphasize the need for a balanced and disciplined approach to sermon preparation: the exegesis of a biblical text ought to be balanced by an equally responsible and sound 'exegesis of life'. This, I think, is also true of writing hymns. If they don't begin with Holy Scripture, they must begin with where the people *are*; and that should activate serious theological reflection upon the significance of human experience, which can then be illuminated by the insights of Holy Scripture.

It is not surprising to find that not all hymns were inspired by the reading of Scripture. For example, 'The Church's one foundation' – a statement of orthodox (Anglican) incarnational ecclesiology – was sparked off by a significant event in the life of the Church, the Colenso-Grey controversy. But the biblical pedigree of the text is indisputable.

The line 'When other helpers fail and comforts flee' in the hymn 'Abide with me' (suggested by a biblical text) is often thought to be a rather thinly veiled reference to a distressing occurrence in Lyte's ministry when a number of his choir members defected from the Parish Church to worship with the Plymouth Brethren.

Fred Kaan applies prophetic vision (and often anger) to social problems. He writes abrasively in, for example, 'Sing we a song of high revolt'; but applies the imagery of the Magnificat to the contemporary situation. Less obviously biblical, but not less successful, are his 'Father, who in Jesus found us' (AMNS 358), 'For the healing of the nations' (AMNS 361), which is a charter of human rights, the unrhymed 'Lord, as we rise to leave this shell of worship' (AMNS 385) and 'Now let us from this table rise' (AMNS 403), which speak of the Christian commitment of the Church in the world.

Fred Pratt Green in 'When the church of Jesus' (BPW 614) and Doris Gill in 'Come, let us remember the joys of the town' (CH3:384) can legitimately write

about traffic (though the images they use will date quickly). Richard Jones's once popular 'God of concrete, God of steel' (*AMNS* 366) has been criticized on the grounds that it could be misunderstood as implying that God is *made* of these substances, rather than spirit – a hint of idolatry (?).

Erik Routley (1966:93) provides an interesting analysis of Chesterton's 'O God of earth and altar'; and while we could not now agree with his description of it as a good 'modern' hymn, we do heartily concur with his observation that 'it is entirely delivered from religious catch-phrases' without offending against Christian doctrine. But Chesterton was something of a militant medievalist, and his images bear little resemblance to present-day life – nor did they when the hymn was first published in 1906.

Biblical language, if not of the essence of hymn-writing, is still a very useful point of reference. But do scriptural resonances somehow 'sanctify' hymnody? I suspect not necessarily; though they may help to draw a distinction between hymns and songs. Shakespeare, in *The Merchant of Venice* (I iii 99), reminds us that even the devil can cite Scripture for his own purpose. We have to reckon too with the fact that parts of Scripture itself are theologically objectionable, such as the passages that describe the slaughter of other races to make room for Israel, the number of wives King Solomon enjoyed, and the wish to see the babies of hostile adults battered on the rocks. Not everything found in the Old and New Testaments can justifiably be described as the Word of God.

As to whether the Scriptural resonances of hymnody are a help or a hindrance, we must retain an open mind. It is good when they remind us of the centrality of the Word in worship, and offer informed commentary on the message of that Word, and of its implications for our Christian witness in contemporary society. But at their worst, they can also seriously distort our perception of what the Spirit may be saying to the Churches.

2. THE CHALLENGE OF NEW WORDS

The challenge of new words in the Church's repertoire of hymns will always present difficulties, especially when this involves the sacrifice of something that has been precious and familiar for a long time. Losing favourite hymns can for some be akin to a bereavement experience, which activates feelings of grief, disorientation, doubt, confusion, and meaninglessness.

Yet a static approach to the Church's liturgical heritage is theologically and pastorally inappropriate. People have to grow and to move on, 'leaving every day behind something which might hinder' (*RCH* 674). Donald Webster (1983:20) talks about the process of 'moving on', even as a child. He speaks of the deep impression made upon him by the sonorities of:

Crown Him the Lord of years,
The Potentate of time,
Creator of the rolling spheres,
Ineffably sublime.

which, even though not fully understood, made him want to discard 'Praise Him, praise Him, all ye little children' and 'Jesus bids us shine', which he had enjoyed when he was three years younger. He rightly observes that much of the 'hymn explosion' has resulted from a desire to expand hymnody's range of subject matter, and comments that it would be irresponsible not to recognize and respond to that fact. This need, which is expressed periodically in the process of hymnal

revision and in the publication of supplements, has been dictated by the following four factors:

Sociological

We now live in a predominantly industrial rather than predominantly agricultural society; this has made many 19th-century hymns obsolete. Images of labourers in the field and reapers gathering up the sheaves, though biblical, have largely been superseded by that of one individual at the controls of a combine harvester. Farming practices are no longer as labour-intensive as they once were, and the movement of population to the towns in search of employment has given rise to different social problems, such as overcrowding, urban decay, drug abuse and alcoholism. Though 19th-century hymnody was not entirely ignorant of such sociological factors (one needs only to look at some of the temperance hymns of the period), the images of idyllic rural life that we find in some hymns (especially harvest hymns) from a bygone generation now seem strangely remote.

Political

Hymns on the themes of social justice and human rights are probably very necessary, but they run the danger of degenerating into thinly disguised political polemics. Such hymns often seem to 'date' very quickly; some of the older 'National Hymns' seem very odd, since Britain relinquished its Empire; and while some (such as Henry Scott Holland's 'Judge eternal, throned in splendour') can be given a temporary reprieve by suitable and sensitive revisions, others are best left to rest in peace.

But Donald Webster's warning signals are valid: political propaganda is no substitute for prophetic protest, even though these are often linked. Hymns should not become 'exclusive' by being aligned with the aims and values of any one particular political party. The folk-song of protest is no substitute for action, and the constant use of such songs in order to 'strum one's frustration away' (Lehrer and Searle, 1981:96-97) can, as Donald Webster points out, be very 'dispiriting, unredemptive, and negative'.

Some of the 'missionary hymns' of the past are now regarded as displaying a superior and condescending attitude, echoing the sentiments of the worst kind of cultural and religious imperialism. Hymns on the theme 'Jewish Missions' (e.g. *RCH* 366-369) seem to be both theologically and politically incorrect; and Wesley's line about 'washing the Ethiop white' in the original penultimate stanza of 'O for a thousand tongues' (quoted in Erik Routley's *Panorama of Christian Hymnody*, 1979) has led to accusations of racism. The principle, therefore, of discarding certain hymns (or their offending stanzas) on political, as well as theological grounds, seems to be well founded.

Religious

Religious attitudes and emphases are always changing. Nowhere is this more evident than in the range of hymnody dealing with what in the twentieth century has become the great unmentionable, death.

This is now a neglected area, partly because of changing perceptions about whether death is a suitable subject to sing about, but also because of longer life expectancy and the improved social conditions that have greatly reduced infant mortality. Hymns like Mrs Alexander's 'Within the churchyard side by side' (*AMS* 575) – which met a real need when it was written, and attempted to address the difficult theological questions that children were then asking – are now almost

completely unnecessary, because the problem has largely disappeared, and because children no longer ask those questions. However, such hymns still have great popularity with elderly people, and are still occasionally requested at funeral services.

In the contemporary Church, hymn-writers have continued to respond to the challenge of writing on what were previously taboo subjects: John Bell, for example, deals sensitively with such issues as sexual abuse, unemployment, bereavement, and loneliness in his hymn 'Christ's is the world' (*Songs of God's People* 21), and, rather than offering facile answers, asks the appropriate theological questions that others may have 'religiously' avoided.

Liturgical

The whole vocabulary of liturgy and hymnody has undergone enormous changes in the last twenty years. A small, but not insignificant, minority of people are not comfortable with the less formal language of contemporary worship and feel that it has lost much of the element of mystery. In this respect, the modernizing of classical texts presents both difficulty and danger.

It is a common complaint that the pace of change is perceived as being too fast; but prejudice against change as such only partly accounts for such feelings. Too much change too soon, especially when it is badly managed, causes frustration at best, and results in alienation at worst. It makes some (traditional) worshippers feel that they no longer 'belong'.

Of course, the Church is not an antiquarian society, but it should be careful not to depart too quickly from its literary, musical, and cultural heritage. A little respect for its elderly members' spiritual landmarks – which include traditional hymns – would not go amiss.

3. POETRY AND HYMNODY

The three most obvious features of poetry are rhythm, repetition, and rhyme.

(a) *Rhythm*

Carl MacDougall writes (1997:17) about his schoolteacher who emphasized that 'every good poem has rhythm', a point that remained in his memory for years, even more so than meaning, sense, or structure. Richard Watson (1998:127) agrees: 'Rhythm is important, perhaps crucial', because it has assurance and conviction. It has an infectious quality that seems to invite participation; it enables people to sing words that they may not understand (as young children do with nursery rhymes) or even believe. Colin Morris (1975:54) comments, 'I once heard an eminent theologian, who, when asked if he could say the Apostles' Creed with absolute conviction, replied "No, but I can sing it!"' A beautiful, well-crafted line carries authority; and this is conveyed when it is confidently sung.

Watson (1998:128), however, sounds a warning signal. Too insistent a rhythm can lead to monotony and boredom.

Sometimes what makes a hymn memorable is the literary equivalent of a musical interrupted cadence, which deliberately pulls the singer up with a jolt. In Brian Wren's 'I come with joy, a child of God', the heavy caesura, as Watson points out, forces the thinking singer to reflect on his/her identity and status as a member of the worshipping community – which should not be taken for granted. The most obvious literary and poetic example that came to my mind in this respect was Milton's sonnet *On the Late Massacre in Piedmont*, which begins:

Avenge, O Lord! Thy slaughtered saints, whose bones
Lie scattered on the Alpine mountains cold,
Even them who kept Thy truth so pure of old,
When all our fathers worshipt stocks and stones,
Forget not:...

The impact is in the punctuation, and the dramatic use of enjambment; the arresting opening has remained with me since my schooldays.

The same poetic device is used to good effect in some classic, and modern hymns, such as 'Be still my soul: the Lord is on thy side', 'Beloved, let us love: love is of God', 'Go, labour on: spend and be spent', 'Jesus calls us! O'er the tumult' and 'God! As with silent hearts we bring to mind' (BBCSP 379).

Carl MacDougall (1997:17) calls attention to what might be described as a 'rhythmic reverence' in poetry, which I think may also be present in hymnody. He refers to an address given by David Hart, who

recalled a wonderful moment from Pablo Neruda's memoirs when, following a clutch of political speeches, Neruda was asked to read to a field of striking miners. When he began his opening poem, the men took off their helmets and bowed their heads.

In Plato's *Republic* there are no poets. They are perceived as corrupters who subvert the natural order, and they are therefore banned from the city. Does poetry in general, and the poetry of hymnody in particular, subvert the otherwise 'natural' order for us through a spiritually uplifting experience? As MacDougall says of the poetic art,

It is both lonely and therapeutic; it is a healing thing. Yet among those who do it professionally there is a high percentage of suicides, many manic depressives and cyclothymic personalities who know the extremes of high and low.

He therefore suggests that this might be an unhealthy thing to do continuously, and that it might be best seen as an occasional art.

There remains one final point to be made about the poetic rhythm of hymnody, namely, its relationship to the rhythm of music. It is not always easy to integrate the two. It was said of Sir John Stainer that his fine literary feeling was not matched by an ability to set texts appropriately to music (Temperley, 1980:58). The one may drive the other to excess, without taking proper account of its punctuation marks.

And congregations are notorious for singing line for line, breathing only at cadential pauses, even though the flow of the poetry demands that they carry on.

Sometimes the discipline of breathing that is necessary for singing is different from that required for clarity of the spoken word. The interrelation between sound, sense, and syntax is perhaps more complicated than is at first apparent (cf. Watson, 1998:128).

Hymn-writers may be forced by congregational convention or laziness to express their thoughts line by line; but while it may be expedient to follow that practice occasionally, it is not a good principle to be observed rigidly. It seems to compromise the observation that 'the best rhythmical practice of the best hymn-writers is highly sophisticated, for they use the stress patterns of the tune and metre to provide a strong base, on which they build in subtle and sensitive ways' (Watson, 1997:25).

(b) *Repetition*

The repetition of words, ideas, lines, refrains, and even whole verses is sometimes necessary to ensure registration by overlearning. The practice of repeating words lends itself both to wonderful and to very poor effects. Consider the final verse of the hymn 'There is a green hill far away', which begins 'O dearly, dearly has he loved'. This is effective, I think, on two counts:

(i) the repetition may be construed simply as being emphatic. It focuses the mind on a strong and powerful emotion, and heightens the feeling of intensity, underlining the author's perception of a fundamental Gospel truth;

(ii) the repetition may be a deliberate *double entendre*, indicating the costliness of the Saviour's love, as well as its affectionate nature. The reader is then left to ponder an unanswered question. Both interpretations are possible. It is difficult not to marvel at the author's delightful economy of language, which is still strong enough to bear both concepts.

Now consider the hymn 'I cannot tell why he, whom angels worship (HP 238), which contains the lines 'And so the Saviour, Saviour of the world is come/is here /is known/is King.' Here the repetition of the word 'Saviour' simply jars. It indicates a poverty of linguistic expression and mars the quality of the text.

The repetition of ideas can be quite an effective tactic as well. This can be done in either of two ways. Firstly, it can imitate the parallelism that is a recurring feature of Hebrew poetry, especially in the Psalms. As well as introducing what amounts to a further reflection on the main idea, thus helping to establish it clearly in the mind, it has the advantage of enlarging the literary vocabulary of the worshipper.

The second way is to treat the same idea differently in succeeding verses, as in such hymns as 'The right hand of God' (HP 408) and 'The Kingdom of God is...' (HP 139), where the singer is left in no doubt as to the theme under consideration throughout the entire hymn.

There is also the repetition of whole verses or refrains, which can break up a long narrative, as in many Christmas carols. Even if one cannot always remember the words of the verse, the refrain always invites participation, and intensifies one's sense of belonging.

(c) *Rhyme*

The Reformers were not slow to realize the educational and missionary value of rhyme (see, e.g. Millar Patrick, 1949:xxiii, 28). Rhymed text is always easier to memorize than prose. The use of rhyme gives a hymn security and order, as well as memorability. As Richard Watson points out (1997:30), this requires subtle verbal engineering, and often involves radical departures from the normal patterns of speech and of sentence construction. Yet, as he recognizes, it is often these marked deviations from normal speech rhythms that give poetic lines their quality of memorability. They become distinctive because they are unusual.

When the rhymer's task is well done, and sense, sound, and syntax are perfectly integrated, the results are assertive, spectacular, and memorable. But even when the rhyming appears to have been done badly, the poetry can still be good, as in Wesley's 'Earth, rejoice, our Lord is King!' (HP 811), which contrives to rhyme 'nigher' with 'fire' in its fifth verse.

Distortions of rhyme and of pronunciation can, of course, also be done with appalling results, taking unwarranted liberties with the biblical text, and with sense; and here metrical psalmody is the chief culprit. But such things happened long before the publication of the 1650 *Scottish Psalter*. If that is 'bad', then

Sternhold and Hopkins were even worse. They wrote at a time when English poetry was in its nonage, and exhibited more of the spirit of piety than they did of the spirit of poetry. Sternhold, the earlier of the two, was usually content to rhyme his common-metre stanzas *-a-a*; Hopkins contrived a more ambitious *abab* rhyme scheme, but his 'ingenuity' often produced unfortunate results:

Lord, give thy judgements to the King,
therein instruct him well.
And with his sonne, that Princely *thing*,
Lord, let thy justice dwell.

(Psalm 72:1)

and

Why dost thou draw thy hand aback
and hide it in thy lap?
Oh, pluck it out, and be not slack
To give Thy foes a *rap*.

(Psalm 74:12)

The fact is that rhyme cannot always be achieved without incurring some textual violence; it often involves unnatural inversions in the word-order, or circumlocution. Sometimes this distorts the sense. A classic example may be found in Isaac Watts's 'Our God, our help in ages past', in the lines which I believe should be punctuated thus:

They fly, forgotten as a **dream**
Dies at the opening day.

because what is actually forgotten is a dream that dies at daybreak, not the sons of time. But the placing of the word 'dream', to rhyme with 'stream' in a previous line, requires 'forgotten' to be transposed to a point in the verse that is really too early. A psychological observation is therefore obscured by a mistaken view of the significance of humanity – and it is the rhythmic flow, together with the rhyme, that is responsible.

The assurance and order conveyed by rhyme can also be deliberately challenged. Fred Pratt Green does so in his hymn 'When the Church of Jesus/shuts its outer door' (*BPW* 614). If one examines his three stanzas, one is struck by their simple structure: in the first half of each stanza, he describes the disorder in society, which he wishes to challenge and change; and in the second half he makes a powerful plea for divine intervention to restore the sense of order.

It is surely significant that when describing 'the problem' that the Church faces in the world, his rhymes are invariably imprecise: door/prayer; soars/ours; time/shame. When the Lord, who has the power to put all things right, and to bring order out of chaos, is addressed, the rhymes are exact; secure, and satisfying; aware/care; needs/deeds; give/live. (Whether that was the poet's intention is perhaps irrelevant; sometimes readers can detect a valid meaning that an author himself has missed.)

Arnold (1955:122) comments on the metrical and rhythmic variety of Wesley's metres, noting the surprising lack of iambic pentameters in his hymns, and suggesting that he saw the hymn as a form of expression that was very different from conventional poetry. J. Ernest Rattenbury (1941:41-42) describes Wesley's

use of anapaestic octosyllables with an iambic foot at the beginning of each line (88 88D) as his 'mystic metre', in which 'he could express most easily with flaming ardour his deep and tender longings for communication with God'. Similarly, there were those who considered ballad metre as quite inappropriate for church use (Arnold, 1995:125). So perhaps some authors see certain metres and rhyme schemes as appropriate for certain moods – as some composers do with certain keys and tonalities.

Rhyme does not always come naturally. It may impose an artificial symmetry on some hymns, which may then seem contrived or even forced; but the effectiveness of rhyme compared with sung prose is undeniable. In Reformed worship, prose psalms have virtually dropped out of use altogether, and, where they are still sung, they tend to be the preserve of the professional choir. Some unrhymed verse can prove remarkably memorable and even more remarkably enduring, but that is the exception rather than the rule. The most obviously successful example that springs to mind is 'O come, all ye faithful' – and possibly much of its success is due to its recurring refrain rather than to any other feature of the lyrics.

Rhymed verse generally makes more impact, is more easily committed to memory, and generally helps to intensify in the minds of singers a sense of inclusiveness and of belonging.

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