

CONTEMPORARY HYMNODY

Within the past 25 years, there has been an extravagant spring-time of contemporary hymn-writing which shows no sign of fading. By contemporary hymn, I do not mean wedding a 1930's ballroom number to 'Holy, Holy, Holy', or a 1940's pantomime number to 'The Church's one foundation', or updated Sankey. By contemporary hymn, I mean hymns fresh from the pen of imaginative writers seeking to express the eternal truths of the Gospel, and using contemporary images and thought-forms to do so - by contemporary hymns I mean hymns rooted and earthed in the times in which we live.

There are those, however, who see the influx of new, contemporary hymns as a threat to the great classics of hymnody. They are fearful lest the tried and tested old faithfuls become eclipsed by the brash, modern upstarts. Such fears, in my opinion, are unfounded, for the great classics like 'When I survey the wonderous Cross', or 'The head that once was crowned with thorns' will never be eclipsed. 'They shall not grow old. Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn'. Such hymns are timeless, but not because they are divorced from the present: they are timeless because they are permanently contemporary: they will continue to retain an ever-green freshness and vibrancy in every age and generation.

Be that as it may, it cannot be denied that, alongside the classics, are hymns that need pensioning off, hymns that have become dated and threadbare. hymns that reflect the weary and worn images and thought-forms of a bygone age, the theologies and social conditions of yesteryear. Among the victims of such a radical spring-clean, I would include hymns which contain images of a 'sweet', 'meek and mild', milksop Jesus leading his 'frail and trembling sheep' to a land of 'white robes and carbuncles'. Among the disposable I would include hymns which reflected the social conditions of a bygone age. The class consciousness of Mrs Alexander's lines has long since become intolerable:

The rich man in his castle,
the poor man at his gate,
God made them, high or lowly,
and ordered their estate.

Likewise, those hymns which urged the poor and heavy-laden to bear their earthly load meekly and to 'murmur not' at earthly injustice. I would proscribe those pietistic hymns reflecting the world-denying Victorian concept of life as a 'vale of tears to be got through as unscathed as possible on the way to heaven'- the 'pie in the sky when you die' emphasis.

Likewise - those old-fashioned missionary hymns, dripping with condescending paternalism in their reference to 'rude barbarians' and 'sin-darkened creatures', and at times exhibiting what can only be described as a xenophobic racial or national superiority. It is ironic, is it not, that

the former 'sending countries' have now become mission-fields themselves. Then there would be a radical purging of children's hymns, in particular, those that depict children as 'weak', 'simple' and 'helpless', and those that reveal a morbid preoccupation with death and singing among the angels, typified, for instance, by 'There is a happy land, far, far away'. Finally there would be a severe pruning of hymns couched in agricultural images and military images, hymns couched in blood images which refer to the bathing in Christ's blood and crawling into his wounds.

To a large extent, with the appearance of the Third Edition of the Church Hymnary, this process of spring-cleaning has taken place. Those hymns that are now embarrassingly dated and threadbare have been quietly pensioned off. However, if CH3 is undeniably strong in its emphasis on the timeless, it is, I'm sorry to say, woefully weak in its emphasis on the contemporary. Where are the hymns that are rooted and earthed in the times in which we live; where are the hymns that are a vibrant, contemporary expression of the eternal truths of the Gospel? Alas, few and far between, as far as CH3 is concerned.

At this point, allow me to quote these words of Bernard Manning: "The business of a hymn is to strengthen the faith of today, not to present a historical record of the faith of the day before yesterday." Every generation, then, has a moral obligation to produce its own distinctive hymns, suited to the outlook and temper of the times. Moreover, it is rank heresy to assume that the Holy Spirit has ceased to inspire the Church to praise God out of very stuff of life as it is lived now in this present age and generation. God be praised, then, that within the last 25 years, there has been a wealth of imaginative and sensitive hymnwriters seeking to express a living, vital faith for the times in which we live.

I now want to suggest two ways in which new hymns can challenge and stimulate us and enrich our worship beyond measure. First of all, new words challenge us to look at our fundamental beliefs in a new light. New words can give the historic faith a much-needed respray. For instance, here 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.

Moreover, contemporary hymns can highlight the profound changes and differing emphases that have taken place in theology in recent years. For example, it would be true to say that most Passiontide hymns announce the cross as deliverance from the twin anxieties of death-and-extinction and guilt-and-condemnation. And yet the pervading 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 Brian Wren's Good Friday hymn states in modern terms 'the sheer folly of the cross'.

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.

Of course, Christ 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 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 to our faith - 'I don't see why we should sing about concrete, steel and formica. I'd rather sing about Jesus Christ.' I suspect this conceals 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 pain of life at the same time as we bring them to the Lord.

Albert Bayly's hymn is a good example of the fact that we are living in a space age world - its 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.

Such words beguile the traditionalist, yet allow the O-grade physicist and the Sunday colour-supplement reader to sing about creation with integrity in what is a post-Darwin, post-Einstein age.

Many new contemporary hymns emphazeze the theme of service to one's neighbour. Alas, most hymns of service assume it is quite easy for one person to help another - all simple and straight forward - I give without pride, you receive with gratitude. We tend to make the comfortable assumption, however, that we can help others without endangering our privileged position. If the words by Brian Wren I am about to quote do their job, then they should gently demolish such complacency, yet in a way that leads 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 prayer that he would waken from despair,
open my ears if, crying now for justice,
he struggles for the changes that I fear.

It was Erik Routley who wrote thus - '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 in the 17th century' .

The best modern hymns foster precisely that sort of collision, and we are the better for them. Let's ensure that such a collision becomes a chain-reaction reverberating to the greater glory of God.

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