

UNDERSTANDING HYMNS – John Barnard

A sermon preached in Gonville and Caius College Chapel
on Trinity Sunday, June 3rd 2007

*There is a green hill far away
without a city wall,
where the dear Lord was crucified
who died to save us all.*

It gets better.

*We may not know, we cannot tell
what pains he had to bear;
but we believe it was for us
he hung and suffered there.*

It is a children's hymn of course, one that people of my generation sang in school assembly, at Sunday School and in church. Many of us could probably recite it by heart.

*He died that we might be forgiven,
he died to make us good;
that we might go at last to heaven
saved by his precious blood.*

The ideal children's hymn is one that is in no way condescending and whose truths speak to us as plainly when we are adult as they did when we were young. This next verse is the crux of the matter:

*There was no other good enough
to pay the price of sin,
he only could unlock the gate
of heaven and let us in.*

Is not the meaning and the purpose of Christ's crucifixion fully if simply revealed in these verses? And if so, are they not sufficient to serve throughout our lives as part of our Passiontide worship?

A great hymn has the capacity to do that: to feed us spiritually from childhood to great old age and to offer us something that we can fall back on and dig out from the backs of our minds in times of need.

But a great hymn is not just words. It is a combination of words and music. The music must understand what the text is saying and support it, enrich it, bring it to life. What kind of tune do we think suitable for *There is a green hill far away*? Something straightforward, I suggest, something dignified. Something that reflects the seriousness of the issue at stake. Listen now as the choir sings the final verse, and consider whether you agree with me that this relatively self-effacing tune is very fine for the text.

(O dearly, dearly has he loved.)

And now I am going to ask the choir to sing the final verse of another hymn.

(O'er heathen lands afar...)

This is the tune always paired with *Thy kingdom come, O God*, the final verse of which you have just heard. The trouble is the text and tune are entirely at odds with one another. The tune is harmless and inoffensive. The text is angry.

*Thy kingdom come, O God,
thy rule, O Christ, begin;
break with thine iron rod
the tyrannies of sin.*

*Where is thy reign of peace
and purity and love?
When shall all hatred cease,
as in the realms above?*

*When comes the promised time
that war shall be no more,
and lust, oppression, crime
shall flee thy face before?*

*We pray thee, Lord, arise,
and come in thy great might;
revive our longing eyes
that languish for thy sight.*

One is reminded of the psalmist who demands in Psalm 10: 'Why, O Lord, do you stand afar off? ...Arise, Lord! Lift up your hand, O God...Break the arm of the wicked and evil man.' And much more in like vein. For this hymn an entirely different tune is needed. As it is the familiar tune robs the text of its power.

There is a further problem. Such a text seems very dated to the contemporary worshipper, and we can easily fall into the trap of wrapping up our faith in a period costume that renders it unapproachable to the world in general. That must be an argument for encouraging the writing of new hymns in dignified yet accessible language, and allowing the best of them to supplant the weaker hymns of previous generations.

Some years ago I sent a card to a friend whose husband had walked out on her in which I quoted a verse which I hoped might speak to her situation. It is the middle verse of a 3-verse hymn:

*God is love: and he enfoldeth
all the world in one embrace;
with unfailing grasp he holdeth
every child of every race.
And when human hearts are breaking
under sorrow's iron rod,
all the sorrow, all the aching,
wrings with pain the heart of God.*

That story ends happily. She prayed continually for her husband to return to her and many years later he did; but I have lost count of the number of times she has told me how she clung on to that verse in the many times of despair she experienced.

But what about a tune for this text? The first four lines are positive, but the mood darkens. Ideally the tune needs to do the same. Listen as the choir sings this verse to a tune which you will assuredly recognise, and note how the major-key self-confidence of the first half turns darker with a key change at the mid-point. It then moves into a minor key at the words 'under sorrow's iron rod' heading back home into the warmth of the major key as the text focuses on the assurance that God is sharing our pain with us.

(God is love.....)

Of course the fact that a tune might work splendidly for one verse of a hymn does not necessarily mean it will work so well for the others. We have sung my tune for 'Christ triumphant ever reigning' and you may think it easy for a composer to reflect in bold and self-confident music the words of that text. But verse 3 begins 'Suffering servant, scorned, ill-treated, victim crucified'. It is essential to take that into account, and I actually wrote my tune for verse 3 and not for verse 1 as you might have imagined.

Many years ago I had the immense privilege of meeting the late Fred Pratt Green, one of the twentieth century's most distinguished hymn-writers. After an absorbing afternoon spent in each other's company talking about hymns and tunes we gave each other a piece of homework. I gave him a song-like tune I had written which turned out to be in a highly unusual metre and needed a tailor-made text if it were ever to be used - he wrote a very fine one for it - and he gave me the following text, written for a terminally ill lady to whom he was ministering:

*Lord, in our lonely hours
and when our spirit faints
we are encouraged by your life
and by your saints.*

*If we've no breath for praise,
no thoughts to frame a prayer,
we know you need no words of ours
to prompt your care.*

*If in excess of pain,
or grief, we stammer WHY?
It comforts us that on your cross
this was your cry.*

*Yet, in serenest faith,
transforming Calvary,
you trusted in the Father's love,
and so must we.*

This is not the sort of text which one would ask a congregation to sing in a normal service of worship. It does however prove useful for services of remembrance of the departed, where the choir can sing it to people many of whom may not be regular church-goers but who are being supported in their loss by members of a church bereavement counselling team.

And if it is to be sung by a choir only, then it can be little more refined in its melody and harmony than would be practical in an ordinary hymn. Yet it must not detract from the force of the text. This is what I composed.

(Lord, in our lonely hours)

The BBC's *Songs of Praise* occasionally undertakes a survey of people's favourite hymns. Of course these will tend to be the favourite hymns of those who watch that programme and not necessarily of those who regularly worship in cathedral, church and chapel. Nonetheless it is interesting to note the enormous variety of metre represented in the top 20 choices from the latest survey, conducted in 2005. Here are some of them: *How great thou art, Dear Lord and Father of mankind, Lord of all hopefulness, Be still, for the presence of the Lord is here, Make me a channel of thy peace, Guide me O thou great redeemer, Shine, Jesus, shine, And did those feet in ancient time, Thine be the glory, Great is thy faithfulness*. None of those texts is in the same metre as any other, and many of them are in a unique metre which firmly links text and tune. You will have noticed a fair number of contemporary texts in the list, of interest because one assumes that most viewers of *Songs of Praise* are elderly and might have been expected to vote almost exclusively for older hymns. Obviously not, although hymns such as *What a friend we have in Jesus, O love that wilt not let me go* and *The day thou gavest* which also came in the top 20 were almost certainly chosen by older viewers.

But another much more interesting thing strikes me. Certain metres are so common that they have names: Short Metre, Common Metre and Long Metre. Your chapel hymn book, the New English Hymnal, offers 16 tunes in Short Metre, 78 in Common Metre, and 67 in Long Metre, a total of 161. Yet the *Songs of Praise* voting includes just one item in any of these metres – the one that came in at 20th place: *Amazing Grace*. In other words editors are filling our hymn books with hymns people don't greatly want to sing, and worse, leave out several

hymns that people do want to sing! Don't bother looking in *The New English Hymnal* for the winning choice 'How great thou art'.

The message is clear to the would-be writer of 21st century hymns: the old staid regular metres have lost popularity. Unusual even unique metres are no hindrance to the acceptance of a fine text and tune, but these must have something fresh and distinctive to say. And there is still much more that needs to be said in hymn form: we are, for instance, horribly short of hymns on the Holy Spirit that do not give the impression that it is a Spirit of gloom and death.

People sometimes ask me whether a text inspires a tune or vice versa. It can work both ways. I find it very exciting when a text I am encountering for the first time grabs my attention and when I feel a tune welling up within me straightaway. Sometimes though, particularly when a hymn has been commissioned for a special service, I have appreciated the freedom to write a tune first, leaving the writer of the text to be inspired (so I hope at least) by a beautiful melody and fine harmony.

A few words about the hymn we are about to sing. It is in 10 10 10 10 metre – ten syllables per line and from that point of view not particularly distinctive since this is a reasonably common and successful metre both for authors and composers. The long lines enable both a textual and a musical argument to be developed over a decent span. Unfortunately a lot of contemporary hymn writers have had in mind the bright and breezy tune WOODLANDS, probably best known to you as the tune for 'Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord', and are understandably not best pleased if their text is set to one of the more soporific tunes to be encountered in this metre. So one or two new tunes have been needed that have the WOODLANDS effect.

I wrote mine for the text we are to sing it to tonight. It begins with an upward leap which reappears at the start of the second line, and again at a slightly higher pitch in the fourth line where the climax of the melody falls on key words and syllables. The third line of my melody has a slightly darker feel which seems particularly appropriate for verses 2 and 3.

Originally it was written for unison singing only, but some years ago I acceded to a request from the Winchester Diocese for a harmony

version for their Diocesan Choirs Festival. I believe the choir will be singing it tonight.

I cannot end without thanking my old friend Dr. Geoffrey Webber and the chapel choir for their kind participation in this talk, and to my rather more recent friend the Rev. Dr. Cally Hammond for inviting me to address you this evening.

May all of you who worship in this chapel be blessed as you sing hymns old and new to the glory of God to whom be praise and honour, glory and power in eternity. Amen.