



Sunday 9 November 2014
The Twenty-First Sunday after Trinity
Choral Evensong
Exodus 33 vv. 18–23
Mark 14 vv. 22–31

Strengthen for service – the place of hymns in our worship

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(sings) To sing and live Magnificat

In crowded street and Council flat Words by Fred Kaan 1971. It was popular then, but I don't reckon you could – or would *want* – to sing that these days.....

There's a friend for little children

Above the bright blue sky. No, I don't think so.....

Or from one of those 18th century semi-fugal hymns:

O for a man – O for a man – O for a mansion in the sky. Horrors....

It's texts like that that have tended to give the hymn a bad press. Second-rate poetry, shoe-horned, strait-jacketed into unsuitable metre often makes uncomfortable performance, if not guaranteed to create raised eyebrows and stifled laughter in the back row - even in the front row - of the choir stalls. What other poetry can be so bowdlerised and messed about as hymns are made more user-friendly, politically correct, and gender inclusive. Would you do it with Shakespeare or Donne? I guess the ranking of hymns in the pecking order of importance in choral foundations must be pretty low – I wonder what proportion of rehearsal time is given to hymns in the weekly schedule. Not a lot. St John's may buck the trend in this? I don't know.

And yet, hymns at their best have huge power. Think of a whole chapel in a public school with its rugby-like sound, roaring out *Judge Eternal, throned in splendour*. Or the Royal Albert Hall united in *I vow to thee, my country* or Wembley on cup final day with *Abide with me*. Whatever else we can say about hymns – and whether or not people even think about the words and their meaning - there's huge power here.

But first, the briefest 'Cook's Tour' around the subject, to get some sense of the breadth of this genre. There are hymns in the New Testament, of course – Magnificat, 'at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow', and many more.

Hymns became a staple part of the medieval church liturgy, with their timeless plainsong. At the Reformation hymns became the great standard bearer of congregational participation, along with reading the Bible in the vernacular; people roared out chorales from the pews in Lutheran Germany and sang metrical psalms in Puritan England and Calvin's Switzerland.

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Hymns provided a corner stone of the Evangelical revival – Isaac Watts, Charles Toplady, Charles Wesley – in them theology was often presented in highly coloured and emotional terms:

*There is a fountain filled with blood
Drawn from Emmanuel's veins
And sinners plunged beneath that flood
Lose all their guilty stains*

Ancient and Modern took the Victorian church by storm in 1861 – and millions of copies were sold – they were carried to church by every Victorian family – they were issued to troops in the trenches – they were lambasted by Percy Dearmer and the Arts and Crafts elite for being too sentimental. Cue 1906 – *English Hymnal* – with its hymns as vehicles of Social justice and action:

*Once to every man and nation comes the moment to decide and
O God of earth and altar* – this last, one of the great hymns from the 1906 book and ideal for Remembrance Sunday.

Hymns were now often based on the timeless and thoroughly human sentiments of the folk song – not least Vaughan Williams' re-casting of a Sussex folk song as *He who would valiant be*. People of my age were brought up with hymns in school – mainly from *Songs of Praise* 1925, which made a noble, though ultimately futile attempt to find real poetry and use this in hymns – Traherne, Shelly, Pope.

And so to today. It's true - the glory and breath of real hymnody is being eclipsed by that which isn't hymnody at all – I mean worship songs; some are excellent - many like their real hymn counterparts are ephemeral and will never last; certainly, their kinship with the popular song of the 20th century, often makes them poor vehicles for even poorer and meaner poetry.

And, it must be said - hymns have one real disadvantage in the 21st century. Whereas serious music and serious poetry and art can make real inroads into expressing the grief and sadness in so much of contemporary life, hymns rarely can- because they're always in rhyme and metre and can so easily sound banal. Some contemporary writers have made valiant and successful attempts – some of the best by Methodists like Brian Wren –

*Here hangs a man discarded
A scarecrow hoisted high
A nonsense pointing nowhere
To all who hurry by.*

So then, when we do strip away the caricatures, the poor and sentimental rhyme, the mawkish tune, what are we left with?

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Hymns are supremely capable of stirring the emotions because they can be so memorable and stick in our minds until the day of doom. When I was a curate I went each Sunday evening to Chestnut Lodge – a council-run old peoples' home. We sang, or croaked through old hymns and I thought, 'how dreary'. Next time I took the youth club and we had bright, glitzy numbers – with guitar - but I was completely wrong. What those old folk wanted - and needed - was those old hymns – *Tell me the old, old story, Nearer my God to thee*, and all that. Poor rhyme and second-rate music perhaps, but somehow they reminded them of childhood, or at least happier times - and that marriage of words and music was literally vital to them.

In this, I'd have to disagree with Vaughan Williams, inspired editor of the 1906 *English Hymnal*. He stood out against Victorian hymnody and in a purple passage from the hymnal's preface he says:

It is indeed a moral rather than a musical issue. No doubt it requires a certain effort to tune oneself to the musical atmosphere implied by a fine melody; and it is far easier to dwell in the miasma of the languishing and sentimental hymn tunes which so often disfigure our services. Such poverty of heart may not be uncommon, but at least it should not be encouraged by those who direct the services of the Church.

I'm not sure that hymnody can – or should – always live up to those noble ideals – it needs to have a much more popular approach. Vaughan Williams himself eventually recognised this, admitting into the 1933 edition of *English Hymnal* some Victorian hymns which have been dubbed his 'Chamber of Horrors'. And, by the by, I have to say I don't agree with Vaughan Williams' metronome marks – he asks for *Nun Danket alle Gott* to be *minim = 42*.

Yes, hymns provide heart and emotion and they also provide many of us with theology.

What better than *When I survey the wondrous cross*, to take us to the heart of the what the atonement means; *Thou whose almighty word* does more to unpack the Trinity than many a Greek theologian and, unbeknown to many, they will roar out, time and time again, in the next few weeks, the heart of Chalcedonian Christology - *God of God, Light of Light, Lo he abhors not the Virgin's womb*.

But for me, the real value of the hymn is found in a tiny and overlooked verse in the New Testament. It's the night of the Last Supper and Jesus has given his new ordinance to his disciples. Then the verse – 'and when they had sung a hymn they went out'.

It seems to me that the hymn, for all its faults and shortcomings is supremely able to inspire to mission.



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That's surely the litmus test of all our worship. Yes, of course we sing first and foremost to the glory of God – but we also sing to turn hearts and minds to God – our own hearts and minds and of those who worship in congregations. Our singing needs to *look out* – to inspire us – not only to become nearer to God but to become more loving, more caring, more Christ-like in our daily lives – at home, at work at school. Hymns can be a supremely *practical* aid to faith and life.

That wonderful hymn, translated from the Syriac puts it so well:

*Strengthen for service, Lord, the hands
That holy things have taken.
Let ears that now have heard they songs
To clamour never waken.*