



The Hymn Today

Treasure No 42: The Hymn Today: An article from Bulletin 138, Winter 1977

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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 1950's they usually meant that they had found a 1930's ballroom number for 'Holy, holy, holy' or a 1940's pantomime tune for 'The Church's one foundation'. There were few new texts to challenge the mind, 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 worlds 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 suitability of 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 with 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 a 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 new-born 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 free 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 passiontide hymns announce the cross as a victory, as deliverance from the twin anxieties of death-and-extinction and guilt-and-condemnation. But 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 meaningless 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 verse of my Good Friday hymn states in modern terms the 'sheer folly' of the cross (1 Corinthians 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 the resurrection and ascension. The image of Christ seated at the right hand of God originally suggests 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 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 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 does 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 naive, 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 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 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 in their awareness and, out of that new awareness, to worship God at harvest time in a more honest and praying way. The following verse takes 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 or 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 calling to care for planet earth. Yet the tradition speaks more of dominance than caring, and no traditional text has the simplicity, correctness 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.

II - The Challenge of the Music - John Wilson

[Note. Those present at the conference were able to hear or sing many of the contemporary tunes mentioned below. In print only references can be given—chiefly to numbers in recent denominational supplements—so that readers may look up the tunes and try them over.]

I take my brief to be 'The Musical Challenge in Recent Hymnody', so far as it concerns what average congregations may reasonably attempt.

In his talk to this conference the Dean of Norwich took us back to first principles and spoke about the very nature of Worship. In considering congregational music I would like to start from some equally searching words by the Society's first President, Archbishop William Temple, who in the 1930's and 40's was proclaiming the very issues that appeal so strongly to hymn-writers today—the social and world-wide aspects of the Gospel, and the need for, and search for, Christian Unity. Consider, if you will, this passage about Worship, answering an inquiry as to whether God really wants us 'to come together into buildings and sing little songs about Him':

Of course it is true that God does not want us literally to come together to sing hymns about Him. What He does desire, and desires for our sakes, is that we should come and truly open our hearts to Him, acknowledge our dependence upon Him, fix our thoughts upon Him for another period in the utmost concentration we can compass...

Do we glimpse here two tests that apply to any part of Worship—to any hymn tune, old or new, solemn or light? Neither test, you will notice, is 'do the people like it?', or even 'is it beautiful?' The

first asks bluntly whether this or that tune, with its words, really does help us ‘to open our hearts to God’ and ‘to fix our thoughts upon Him’. Obviously it can’t do this if it is too difficult for the people, or if they have not been given enough chance to learn it; and I suspect that it may also fail if it is too much of a beguiling and catchy musical experience. The second test is implicit in Temple’s words ‘utmost concentration’. Does our tune demand from the congregation a worthy effort of mind and spirit as well as of voice, or is it—as in some light-music examples today—so primitive and derivative that it underestimates the musical powers of almost all who are asked to sing it?

In our new hymnody we expect to find hymn-texts that are challenging. In providing tunes we shall diminish the role of music if we think that its case is different—that the tune is no more than a vehicle for the words. A worthy tune is itself an *utterance* (think of the world’s great instrumental melodies), with a musical ‘meaning’ for mankind, and this, as well as the meaning of the words, must be evaluated. It is the two meanings together that must call for our ‘utmost concentration’ in Worship—neither of them dominating, or failing, the other.

I have put these general expressions of ‘challenge’ first, because the musician, no less than the author, must be alert to them. We must now pass to more specific demands in today’s busy scene of hymnody.

The very busy-ness, the profusion, of new congregational music has itself become a challenge, but it is one to be accepted willingly, for such activity is a welcome sign of life. And the challenge is all the greater because the ‘spectrum’ of acceptable musical material is now broader than ever—highbrow, lowbrow, and everything in between, with good and less good of every kind. Those interested in the highbrow end will have combed *The Cambridge Hymnal* and the new tunes in *The Church Hymnary, 3rd edn* (one by Kenneth Leighton is in our 1973 ‘Act of Praise’ booklet). At the opposite end, having rejected the nothingness of ‘Kum ba ya’, we can well use songs as good as ‘Sing Hosanna’ (*New Church Praise* 26), which say simple but profound things in a simple and infectious way. The middle of the spectrum has plenty of good tunes that use familiar musical resources without sounding at all Victorian or Edwardian or even folk-songy. Typical of this group are *100 Hymns for Today*, 7 and 99; *Hymns & Songs*, 21 and 74; *Praise for Today*, 21, 31, 35, 45, 93 and 99; *New Church Praise*, 22, 27, 53, 60 and 71. Some of these are in more than one of the books, and several are also in the RSCM’s *Hymns for Celebration*.

There are good things, too, in intermediate positions along the spectrum. On the highbrow side of centre we could place John Gardner’s modern-medieval ‘ILFRACOMBE’ (*HCS* 101, *H&S* 20), Michael Dawney’s moving ‘FELINFOEL’ (*New Catholic Hymnal* 209), Peter Cutts’s haunting ‘SWITHEN’ (*NCP* 108), and Richard Dirksen’s bracing ‘VINEYARD HAVEN’ (now on its way here across the Atlantic). And on the lighter side of centre there are tunes like ‘JONATHAN’ (*H&S* 85), ‘TROTting’ (*H&S* 92), ‘LITHEROP’ (*NCP* 52, and others in that book), and more than one tune by Doreen Potter in Fred Kaan’s new collection *Break not the Circle* (published in U.S.A. but obtainable from The Tavistock Bookshop, 86 Tavistock Place, London WC 1).

The biggest challenge, then, if you have not already met it, is to get acquainted with all these eligible things—to be catholic with a small ‘c’ and then, with Temple’s words in mind, Discriminating with a large ‘D’. The rest of the musical challenge is one of ways and means, which obviously takes us towards Alan Luffs ‘art of the possible’—though I would prefer to call it ‘the urgency of the possible’. An unfamiliar prayer or reading can be a stimulus and an inspiration to the worshipper, and so can a new hymn-text; but an unfamiliar tune is seen as a stumbling-block. May I say from experience that it may not be nearly as much of a stumbling-block as you might think? Musical education has made great strides, and there is now hardly anyone under 40 who did not have some acquaintance with musical notation at school. With the help of the melody-editions now regarded as

normal, the response of a congregation can be surprisingly rapid and rewarding. I mean the initial musical response: please beg them not to *judge* any new tune until they have used it in a service half a dozen times.

May I hand over with a thought that I have found helpful? Nearly everyone thinks of a hymn as ‘something in the hymnbook’—meaning *their* familiar book. Could we have a new definition and say that, with all today’s new possibilities, *a hymn is any congregational song that will enhance your Worship next week, or the week after, or in three months’ time?* If it is in your book, well and good. If it isn’t, what are you and your congregation going to do about it?

III - The Art of the Possible - Alan Luff

The words of my title are the classic description of politics. They are also true of the ordering of worship. Any responsible person experienced in the ordering of worship will know the situation where he is bound to say of a hymn ‘A fine hymn and ideally apt for this occasion, but it could not be used here today’.

As ministers and as organists we live continually in a tension between the ideal and the practicable. If you do not know this tension I would say to you ‘You have not begun to understand your job’. If you do not belong to either of these groups then your presence here means that you should be fighting on both fronts, urging the ideal on those (people, clergy, organists) who cannot raise their eyes above the practicable, the comfortable, what has always been thought enough, and interpreting the problems of the conservatively minded and the unsure to those who want ‘reformation without tarrying for any’.

The Art of the Possible in Hymns starts with the editor, and his work starts at a very superficial level with matters such as not printing tunes that lie too high; of not printing tunes in B major, with attendant E sharp and F double-sharp, that have lived happily in C major, or a new tune in G flat major. (It has happened; and made me suggest, when reviewing the music of a recent supplement, a title ‘For consenting adults in private’.)

But these are superficial points. At a deeper level the editor must know his constituency, the range of needs and accomplishment of those likely to use his book. He of course says a lot by his choice, and a comparison of the recent supplements along these lines would produce an interesting essay. Secondly, he must know what has been tried and has worked in some places and can now be commended to others. Thirdly, he must be aware of the gaps in the repertoire that most urgently need filling.

If the editor must be aware of these issues, by the same token you ministers and organists must also know your constituency, its possibilities and its needs. And by ‘knowing’ I do not mean ‘guessing’. I must admit that I am often proved wrong in this: the children in my family or in the choir or in the Sunday School often prove to be familiar with things that I think they do not know. So take pains to find out. Remember that adults also hear hymns other than those they hear in church. They hear hymn-singing programmes that are broadcast while you are at church.

You must be as fully aware as the editor of those other issues he faces. You must realize that some things that look impracticable to you have been tried successfully by others; and that your congregation is as much in need of the items that fill the gaps as are others.

You must do this because, just as politics is the response of idealism being worked out in the hard practicalities of the present, so praise has to be worked out on the same ground. We may wish that we had nothing to handle but the great classics. These are timeless, but not because they are divorced

from the present: they are timeless because they are permanently contemporary. Alongside the classics in our books are the hymns that need pensioning off, those that speak to a situation no longer contemporary. The most obvious example in *A & M Standard edn* is Mrs Alexander's

Within the churchyard, side by side,
Are many long, low graves,

which was a sincere effort to help children face death in an age when every family would have known the death of a child. But there are others less obvious. You must be ready to refuse to sing 'Hills of the north, rejoice' in its original form.

Similarly you must be ready to grapple with contemporary hymns, because they are related to our contemporary situations to which the classics can be made to relate only in the most general way, and because it is rank heresy to assume that the Holy Spirit ceased to inspire the Church to praise God out of the very stuff of life as it is lived in 1916 or 1932 or 1950—or whenever your hymn book came out.

Granted this, we may have to take a hymn and say: 'We need to say this in song: all we have is hymn X: therefore we must use it'. Yesterday some of us laughed at the mention of 'God of concrete, God of steel'. It seems to me as though someone (either the author or someone talking to him) said 'We urgently need a hymn that assumes an urban, technological society'. This hymn does that: I feel that it faces the 20th century in eyeball-to-eyeball confrontation. Can this be done more subtly? I think it can, and that it is done in the Bayly-Wren 'Lord of the boundless curves of space'. But 'God of concrete' simply names things that people know about: 'Lord of the boundless curves of space' assumes a fair amount of general science, known to my 14-year-old son in the choir but not to most of the adult worshippers in the congregation. I am pretty confident that I know my constituency in this matter. So, in order to sing a hymn that is known to be of and for the late 20th century I need 'God of concrete'. Editors know this too, and include the hymn. You should know whether you need it. You may not think it ideal, but we must have the theme. So either use it or get on and write something better. Don't just sit and laugh.

For unless you see hymnody in this kind of way, not as the Art of the Ideal, but as the Art of the Possible, you will perpetuate a terrible situation in which the most truly deprived group in our churches is the regular adult congregation, starved of much that may make their faith live.

We often think of the needs of youth, because they are clamorous. But many adults are no longer aware of their hunger; they have got beyond that and are dully chewing on a few dry scraps, unable any longer to believe in tasty foods, and having, like the physically starved, to be brought back gently into taking something more nutritious.

Most of you are in a position of power, to keep them in their deprivation. But you are also able by real sensitivity to bring them back to normal life again, in which there is a continuing healthy demand for the new.

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