



Wedding Hymns

Short Guide No 21: Wedding Hymns

Many couples still choose to marry in church, yet the combined impact of more choice and the increasing lack of prior knowledge of hymnody has made it increasingly more difficult to accommodate their needs and desires with Christian integrity and wisdom. Tunes are the key to wedding hymns.

The current state of affairs

Notwithstanding the decline in the number of couples choosing to marry in church (or at all, for that matter), and recent developments in the legal and cultural understanding of 'marriage', many still prefer to marry in church. Increasingly since 1976, the majority have chosen to do so by civil ceremony, which means that those who marry in church are making a considered choice. The Office of National Statistics provides fascinating reading for anyone interested in these trends. Church weddings are chosen for various reasons, and not all couples are regular attenders at worship, or have deep knowledge of or sympathy for Christian worship and the teachings of Jesus Christ. This is particularly true for established Churches, but other denominations are by no means exempt from this trend.

The presenting problem

Often ministers are approached for a church wedding because the family have a connection with the building or parish; because they live within the legal boundaries; or because the building is attractive or the location convenient. These are not always the driving desires ministers would wish for, but they cannot be resisted if the request is legally permissible (and legislation in 2010 expanded the 'qualifying conditions' for Anglican parishes). So as well as having to deal with a consumer culture that can manifest itself as a couple expecting to micro-manage every aspect of their wedding (sometimes even involving a 'wedding planner' who will have opinions and a job to do), the officiating minister will often have to start at square one when it comes to explaining the legalities, liturgical aspects, historical heritage and theological understanding of Christian marriage. Furthermore, (s)he will have to assist and even temper the musical desires and expectations of a couple, so that the end result is practical, decorous, affordable and relevant to the act of worship that a wedding is. Introits, recessionals and 'music during the signing of the registers' aside, this can all land on stony ground when it comes to what the congregation will sing; and that will be hymns, in the broad sense of the word. Meanwhile, the couple may claim that they do not know (m)any, and will either ask for guidance, or will suggest two favourites from school days, such as 'Lord of the Dance', 'All things bright and beautiful', 'Make me a channel of your peace' (actually, not a bad choice!), 'Jerusalem' or 'I vow to thee, my country'. Meanwhile, some couples will have sought inspiration on the internet, where sites such as <https://www.yourchurchwedding.org/> are useful resources.

Problems are opportunities

All is not lost, however: problems are opportunities, and ministers and musicians advising couples should start where the couples are, hopefully helping them move from seeing themselves as customers to partners in creating an act of worship that speaks for them, to their friends and families, about the newly Trinitarian content of their relationship in which husband, wife and Christ journey together. Similarly, some of the popular, ill-considered choices do have an important message: 'Lord of the Dance' may not have anything to do with getting married, but it does present the passion and resurrection of Christ, while 'Guide me, O thou great redeemer' and 'Love divine' are thoroughly scriptural, and can support a sermon.

Service Sheets

No-one uses a hymn book at a wedding any more. Printed service orders are *de rigueur*, and take one of two forms: either a folded card with the running order, two or three hymns, the declarations and the Lord's Prayer printed out; or a 'complete text' service booklet with everything printed except the sermon. The former provides the bare minimum needed by a member of the congregation to get through the ceremony; it tends to be relatively cheap to produce.

A 'full' service order costs more, but provides a keepsake that contains the biblical readings, poetry and the Preface, vows and prayers, to be used on the day and kept thereafter. Note that in both cases, the words of the hymns *must* be

printed, with the normal copyright regulations applying as to any printed (or electronically projected) service order; a church CCLI licence can be used to cover these. Even more, the words are carried out of the building into the wider world, bearing the gospel contained within them (even ‘Jerusalem’ and ‘I vow to thee’!). This makes the choosing of wedding hymns even more important than it ever was.

How can hymn books help us?

Absent from the ceremony as they are, hymn books are nevertheless very useful when working with a wedding couple. Some will never have handled one. A hymn book is not only a library of texts and a handy collection to hold; it is a treasure house of poetry, biblical exposition, spiritual meditation and theological reflection. To give one to a wedding couple to explore is a very practical idea and potentially a great gift. The old tradition of giving a bride a white bible with hymns in the back had a serious purpose. These days a loan of *Ancient and Modern* or *Mission Praise* can open up all kinds of possibilities, taking the couple beyond ‘what Grandma had at her wedding’, or ‘what we sang at school’ (the former is lazy and the latter dangerous!). Loaning a book carries the double risk of perhaps never getting it back, and of spoiling a couple with too much choice, so guidance needs to be given: it is best to look in the section devoted to marriage while also perusing the ‘general’ section. Further pointers are helpful, but more specific suggestions from the minister can be made either before or after the loaning of a book.

The “bottom drawer”

Most hymn books are woefully inadequate in the matrimonial department. For example, *Common Praise* has 4 suggestions; *The New English Hymnal* has 2; the recent *Ancient and Modern* has 8; *Singing the Faith* has 5 and *Church Hymnary* 4 subsumes marriage into a greater section on family, friendship and marriage which has 18 hymns at least half of which are not marriage-specific. *Laudate* has 13 suggestions to include in a nuptial mass. *Hymns Old and New* has no ‘section’ at all, but rather an index which proposes 58 hymns, none of which are specifically about marriage, but as a list in itself it serves as an indication of ‘best hits for weddings’. In this much it sums up the current, deplorable state of affairs when it comes to the choosing of wedding hymns: open the bottom drawer and pick hymns with rousing tunes that are either well known, or which refer at some point to love, or if possible, both, in which case, ‘Bob’s your bridesmaid’!

Some concrete suggestions for wedding hymns today

There are some gems in the bottom drawer though, stashed away for the big day, hitherto unnoticed. Many books include Dorothy Gurney’s ‘O perfect love, all human thought transcending’, which goes to O STRENGTH AND STAY, but sadly this tune is not as well-known as it used to be, and the alternative HIGHWOOD has not become well-enough known, and so this is rarely chosen. Michael Perry’s ‘Lord Jesus Christ, invited guest and saviour’ invites the same tune(s) and so suffers similarly. Holst’s THAXTED is an ever popular tune, being used at national occasions associated with Diana, Princess of Wales and Baroness Thatcher, and so as a healthy alternative to ‘I vow to thee, my country’, Jill Jenkins wrote ‘We pledge to one another’. It is gaining popularity, not least through having found its way onto a popular wedding website. Shirley Erena Murray’s ‘Come to a wedding’ set to the ubiquitous BUNESSAN goes well, as does Timothy Dudley-Smith’s ‘O Christ the same, through all our story’s pages’ (the last line of each verse of which is a superb expression of marriage hopes), set to the universally known LONDONDERRY AIR / DANNY BOY. Other good choices include Fred Pratt Green’s ‘The grace of life is theirs’, using HAREWOOD or DARWALL’S 148th, and ‘As man and woman we were made’ by Brian Wren, which fits either the SUSSEX CAROL or MELITA. Christmas, or perilous sea allusions aside, the text speaks to a modern age. John Bell and Graham Maule’s ‘Lord and lover of creation’ employs WESTMINSTER ABBEY, and Michael Seward’s ‘God in whose image we are made’, LASST UNS ERFREUEN. Conversely, Dudley-Smith’s ‘Not for tongues of heaven’s angels’, based on *1 Corinthians 13* and set to Peter Cutts’ aptly named BRIDEGROOM, and Basil Bridge’s ‘Jesu, Lord, we pray’ (to ARNSTADT) may sadly be destined to sink without trace because few will know the tunes; putting these before a congregation of rare or non-attenders will lose any enthusiastic involvement in the church service that they might have brought.

Conclusion

When choosing hymns for the unchurched, the tune drives the words, and so picking the right tunes is crucial, and finding words that fit is the task through which the Christian teaching and gospel truth may be transmitted. In no other realm is this truer than with weddings.

Gordon Giles – May 2016 – © The Hymn Society of Great Britain and Ireland
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